ROMANCE SERIES Nº 4

The GIRL from MONTE CARLO

by WINSTON CARDEW

"YOU DOG!" SAID RONALD AND STRUCK AS HE SPOKE.

1/-

A WCM Publication

THE GIRL FROM MONTE CARLO

By Winston Cardew

CHAPTER I

A NIGHT AT MONTE

RONALD VANE pitied her—and wondered.

He had been watching her for some time.

Other eyes, as well as his, were upon the girl—admiring eyes, leering eyes, for she was very beautiful. But they were few—for everyone, man or woman, seated or standing at the long green table, had eyes almost wholly for the game—for the ivory ball that whizzed and danced in the revolving bowl, the piles of stakes on the yellow numbers on the green cloth, the long rakes in the hands of the croupiers, that raked in a fortune at every spin of the wheel.

Sometimes the long rakes pushed across winnings to a lucky punter. Oftener—much oftener—they raked in losses, ruthlessly, remorselessly—most ruthlessly of all, it seemed to Ronald, the stakes laid by the girl with the violet eyes.

She was standing by the table. Every seat was taken: the Casino of Monte Carlo was crowded: eager punters stood behind those who were seated: other crowded, looking for places at the table, or for an opening to toss on a stake. The girl was wedged between a fat Frenchman and a shiny Italian: both of whom had leered at her for a moment: but only for a moment, for the roulette claimed their attention. She was unconscious of them, and of all others—conscious only of the spinning wheel, the cracked voice of the man who spun it and whose words were the words of Fate—she seemed more concentrated on the game than any man or woman there—yet to Ronald's eyes she seemed utterly out of place, utterly out of keeping with her garish surroundings.

He had never seen her before that evening. More than a score of times, since he had been in Monte Carlo, he had strolled into the "Rooms"; tempted to tempt Fate, to put his fortune to the touch and win or lose it all. This very evening he had finally resolved to make the trial—to break the bank or to leave Monte Carlo a beggar. But the sight of the girl at the table arrested him. He almost forgot his own intention, as he watched her. She was a newcomer—he was sure of that: otherwise he must have seen her before, in his many visits to the Casino. This, probably, was her first visit: and from the way she was losing money, likely to be her last—unless she had the purse of Fortunatus at her command!

"Le cinq, rouge, impair, et manque!" came the drone from the man at the wheel, as it stopped, and the rocketing ball came to rest in a numbered slot. It was five, the winning number, and the girl had placed her stake on six. She played "en plein" all the time: staking on plain numbers, disdaining the lesser chances that attracted timid punters.

Her face was already a little pale. It became paler as the croupier pronounced the words of doom. But it was calm—hardly an eyelid flickered. She had nerve—if she was a fool, to throw her money away so recklessly on a losing game, she at least had the courage to take what came to her, without a sign.

But Ronald saw her draw a quick little breath, and she groped in her little natty handbag.

Ronald was standing almost at her elbow. She had not seen him—she saw nothing but the green cloth and the yellow numbers, glimmering in the shaded lights. Had she glanced at him

she might have noticed him—a clean-looking, upstanding Anglo-Saxon among so many dark, greasy Latins: she might have read the compassionate interest in his face, in his eyes. But she never saw him—she lived and breathed only for roulette.

A desperate gamester—sticking to it while fortune ran cruelly against her. Yet Ronald could have sworn that she was new to it—that the feverish excitement of roulette was a new experience to her.

Why was she there, in that crowd? She seemed to be alone. Obviously, she was English, and did not look more than twenty-two. If she showed emotion, it was only in the occasional dilation of dark violet eyes: lovely eyes under their dark, long lashes: eyes that attracted Ronald strangely when he could glimpse them. Once, indeed, when she turned a little, as the fat Frenchman at her side made a hurried movement, he caught her eyes full, and looked into them—but even then it was clear that she did not see him—her glance was unseeing. Roulette filled up her thoughts, her whole being.

The pity of it, Ronald thought. It was no place for such as she, among leering foreigners, fat profiteers, painted women, and stupid tourists. He could picture her, on her looks, in some quiet rectory at home: perhaps in some sedate business house. Had she no father, brother, to see that she did not play the fool like this?

"Faites vos jeux, messieurs!"

The girl had found what she wanted in her handbag. She staked again, with half a hundred others. This time she staked on number five. Numbers sometimes repeated—perhaps she placed a hope on that. The foolish child——

Then Ronald smiled, grimly. If the girl was a fool, so was he—for had he not come there with precisely the same intention? What reason had he to suppose that he would have better luck? He had hummed the old song about the Man who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo, as he walked to the Rooms that starlit evening—but he knew very well that no man ever did break the bank at Monte Carlo. The chances were too heavily weighted in favour of the bank for that. Yet he had planned, and intended, to tempt his fate, with the thousand pounds he had—the only thousand pounds he had in the world. This slip of a girl had as much sense as he, at all events.

The desire to play was leaving him. Strange enough it seemed to himself, but he was more interested in the girl with the violet eyes than in the game that was played so feverishly on the green cloth. Perhaps what was happening to her was an object lesson to him, unconsciously. Had she not been there, he would have pushed into the little space between the Frenchman and the Italian, and would have been staking his all on the glistening, yellow numbers. With better fortune? Perhaps—and perhaps not.

Her fortune, at all events, was consistently bad. He had seen many unlucky players, but never one so constantly and consistently unlucky. It could not go on much longer.

"Rien ne va plus!"

The placing of stakes ceased. All eyes were on the revolving wheel and the rocketing ivory ball—among them the violet eyes, fixed with intensity. Her lips were set—and had paled a little. Something seemed to tell Ronald Vane that this was her last stake—unless there was a win this time she was finished. He knew as if instinctively that she was now at the end of her resources. Yet the calm, lovely face did not quiver—she was game!

She had staked on seventeen this time. Ronald found himself longing that number seventeen would turn up on the wheel, if only to give the poor girl a chance. Then came the croak of the croupier.

"Le sept, rouge, impair, et manque."

It was seven, not seventeen. A tall lean American, who had staked on seven, grinned and nodded to a friend across the table. The girl's eyes remained fixed on seventeen—where her stake lay: till the croupier's rake drew it away. Then, for a few moments, she stood quite still. She did not grope in her handbag again: Ronald had been right: it was her last stake. She stood still, like a statue, for a moment or two. Then someone, pushing for a place at the table, jostled her—and she gave place, moving back out of the crowd She brushed past Ronald as she did so, without seeing him, and did not know that he turned to look after her.

She was going—with a graceful gait, a firm step, her head steady. Game to the last, he thought, admiringly. It was a rotten place for her—it was rotten to see her there, so intent on a rotten game: but he had to admire her pluck. He looked after her—then he glanced at the table.

"Faites vos jeux, messieurs!" came the drone from the man whose sallow hands were on the wheel. Nobody, unless Ronald, cared for a lame duck—one might retire ruined and desperate, but the game went on—regardless.

Ronald remembered why he was there. But he did not turn back to the roulette table. She was going—where? She had lost all—and her lips had been white and set as she passed him, and dark and discomforting thoughts came into his mind of what sometimes happened to desperate punters who plunged too desperately at the Rooms. He did not believe all he had heard of the Suicides' Graveyard at Monte—but it was a disturbing thought at this moment. If she had, indeed, gone too far and too deep—if she had no friends in that strange foreign place and if she needed one—— She was disappearing, distant in the moving crowd, when he made up his mind, and followed her.

CHAPTER II

A FRIEND IN NEED!

"AH, Ronald, mon ami, c'est toi!"

Ronald Vane repressed a movement of irritation.

He was standing on the terrace, in the soft glimmer of the southern moonlight, looking round him.

He had missed her.

A white dress had glimmered by a group of palms, and he had followed—but it was gone—the girl with the violet eyes was gone.

He stood with knitted brows. Had she divined that she was followed, and deliberately escaped him? Natural enough if she had—she could hardly guess that a strange man, who had never seen her before that night at Monte, wanted to be her friend, to help her if she needed help, and that she could have trusted him like a brother. How could she guess anything of the kind? If she had noticed his pursuit, she would have classed him with the leering foreigners of the Casino, to whom any woman was fair game. And she had vanished—in desperate need of help, as he was certain—and he was unable to help.

The silky, slightly sardonic voice of Count de Poncerf grated on his ear. The slim, dark, graceful Frenchman showed his white teeth in a flashing smile. They had become acquainted at Monte Carlo, and the count liked Ronald's company better than Ronald liked his. But he had found Le Comte de Poncerf an amusing acquaintance, and they had been a good deal together—at the tables, at the cafés, or whizzing on the Corniche road in de Poncerf's car.

They were friends, in a way: but Ronald did not like "toi" from de Poncerf. Why couldn't he keep to "vous"?

De Poncerf's dark, handsome face broke into a smile, as he scanned the young man in the glimmering moonlight.

"You are from the Rooms?" He smiled. "There has been bad luck—yes? Hèlas! what does one expect in the Rooms?"

"No! No! I have not played this evening. I——" Ronald broke off, as a new thought came into his mind. De Poncerf had been strolling in the gardens, smoking his cigar: possibly he had seen the girl with the violet eyes—perhaps knew the direction she had taken. "I am looking for someone, de Poncerf!" he said, quickly.

"Not for your friend Maurice?" smiled the count.

"Perhaps you have seen her——"

Maurice de Poncerf laughed.

"Cherchez la femme!" he said. "Mais oui, perhaps I have seen her, if you have lost her, mon ami. What is she like?"

"A lovely girl, with violet eyes—she had a white dress——"

"Anglaise?"

"Yes, yes, of course. A young Englishwoman——"

"But then it is perhaps Mademoiselle Wilmot that you seek!" exclaimed the count. "Five minutes ago I see her."

Ronald Vane felt something like a pang. The Frenchman, apparently, knew the unknown, and he hated the idea. He could be friendly with Maurice de Poncerf, but he knew very well how Maurice regarded women.

"You know her, then?" he muttered.

"Only by sight," said the count, and his answer was a relief. "Is she not the young companion—friend—what you will—of the old millionaire at the Hotel Splendide—have you not seen him—the old Mister Monk?"

"Nonsense!" snapped Ronald.

Certainly he had seen old "Mister Monk," the millionaire who splashed money like water from one end of the Riviera to the other. Marcus Monk was old—but not old enough to have outlived a juicy reputation. It was impossible that the girl with the violet eyes could have any connection with that old satyr. Yet—a granddaughter, perhaps——

"Where did you see her?" he added, before the count could reply.

"She paused at the fountain—perhaps is still there—but prendre garde, mon ami—if you cast—what do you call it—the sheep's eye, on Mademoiselle, there is Mister Monk, who is very rich and very jealous——"

"Confound the old fool!"

De Poncerf chuckled.

"I myself have been attracted," he said, "but I do not seek trouble with the old man of many millions. It is not, as you say, good enough. Mais——" He broke off as Ronald, with a hurried "Good-night," left him, hurrying through the glimmering tropical shrubberies in the direction of the fountain.

The count glanced after him, smiled, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Ces Anglais!" he murmured.

And he strolled on with his cigar.

Ronald Vane forgot his existence the next moment. There was a strange feeling in his heart, of mingled pain and resentment, as he hurried through the moonlit gardens. The thought of that sweet, lovely face, in connection with the dingy old millionaire, troubled him strangely. Yet she was nothing to him—a mere stranger, whom he would gladly have aided in her distress, as his own countrywoman—an English girl seemingly without friends in a foreign land.

He saw her suddenly.

Near the fountain that sprayed and glimmered under the moon, there was a wooden seat, shaded by tall dark shrubs, and in the shadow he glimpsed a white dress. He had found her again, whether she was Miss Wilmot of the Hotel Splendide or not.

But as he drew nearer he slowed, irresolute.

What would she think of him—a stranger, addressing her, and in such a place at such an hour? He hesitated.

A low sound reached his ears. It was a sigh—a deep sigh, that told of a heart heavy laden.

Ronald hesitated no longer.

He moved forward, till he could see the pale, lovely face clearly in the moonlight, and the startled, violet eyes fixed on him.

He raised his hat.

"Forgive me!" he said hurriedly, "I am a stranger to you—but you are English, as I am—I saw you in the Casino—I was almost at your elbow——"

Her glance was like cold steel.

That glance would have been enough to warn a man like Maurice de Poncerf that he was wasting his time. But Ronald Vane's motives were very different from those of a man like Maurice de Poncerf. He was glad that she looked at him like that, difficult as it made matters.

"You need have no uneasiness," he said, quietly, "if you tell me to go away, I will go on the instant. But let me speak. I was, as I have said, almost at your elbow, at the roulette table—I watched your play. I could not help thinking that perhaps you had pushed fortune too hard—that perhaps there might be a little spot of difficulty. If you are in need of a friend, miss, you can trust me."

Her eyes were fixed on him, and doubtless she could read the earnestness in his face, and the almost boyish chivalry and honesty there.

She smiled faintly.

"Thank you," she said. Her voice was as musical as her face was lovely. "You are very kind. But it is—nothing."

"If it is nothing, I will leave you this moment," said Ronald, "but you are in a strange land, miss, and seem to be alone. I can hardly ask you to trust a stranger. Yet if you would trust me, only to the extent of telling me whether I can help——"

Her lips parted—and closed again. Evidently she hesitated: and he knew, as well as if she had told him, that she was in deep waters: that no one had ever needed a friend more.

Again she scanned his face. Then, at length, she spoke.

"I did not see you in the Rooms."

He smiled.

"I think you did not see anything but the roulette ball and the numbers," he said. "Let me tell you this, I entered the Rooms this evening, to put all I have on the chance of the roulette wheel—double or quits. I did not play—owing to you, miss. You have saved me from making a fool of myself. I leave Monte to-morrow—not a ruined man, as I should have been. I owe you this. Cannot I do something in return?"

She did not answer.

"Am I wrong," went on Ronald, "in thinking you went to the Rooms with precisely the same intention that I had—of making a large sum or losing all?"

She sighed involuntarily.

"That is true!" she said, in a low voice.

"And you lost all?"

"Yes."

"You have other resources?"

"None!"

"You poor child," said Ronald, "thank Heaven I had that impulse to follow you. Thank Heaven I have found you here. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"May I sit down?" he asked. He had not approached the wooden bench so far.

"Please do."

He sat by her side.

"I will tell you my name," he said, "it will be strange to you, of course, but it may help you to trust me, if you know who I am. Ronald Vane—Captain Vane in the war time."

He wondered whether she would tell him her name in return. But he did not have to wonder long.

"My name is Doris Wilmot," she said.

He felt a jar. Then Maurice had been right—she was the Mademoiselle Wilmot of the Hotel Splendide. Yet if she was the "companion," as the count had phrased it, of that rich old man, how came it that she was without resources? Ronald had seen the old man at the green tables, winning and losing thousands.

"I am staying at the Hotel du Parc," he said.

"And I at the Hotel Splendide—or rather, I was!" she said, in a low voice. "I cannot return there—for certain reasons."

"But you are not alone in Monte?"

"Yes—now!" she said, her voice still low. "Alone in Monte—yes: alone in the world. I thought I had a friend—a kind and generous friend—but it was a mistake—a childish mistake. Oh, I was mad to think that I might drive Fortune to aid me—mad! Yet—I had so little—and—and——" Her voice trailed off.

He was silent.

What did it all mean?

She was Doris Wilmot, and she had travelled to Monte Carlo with that wicked old man. He knew that now. He made an effort.

"You are related to Mr. Monk?" he asked.

The colour surged into her pale face.

"No!" she answered.

"Your guardian, perhaps?"

"No."

He was silent again.

She sat looking at the spraying fountain. The colour had faded at once from her face, leaving her paler than before.

"Miss Wilmot," Ronald spoke at last, "you have told me that you have lost all, and that you have no other resources. You must let me help you."

The violet eyes turned on him.

"Why should you, a stranger, help me?"

"Never mind why, but let me do so. You need have no hesitation—this small spot of business concluded, I leave you, and you will never see me again. You need a friend—let me be for a few minutes the friend you need. You need money to return to England——"

She nodded.

"Let me lend you what you need—you shall repay it, if you like, at any time you choose. A letter to the Jermyn Club, in London, will find me, if you write." He was making it as easy for her as he could. "Miss Wilmot, you must let me be your friend now."

"Heaven knows I need one," she said, "but——"

From his pocket the young man took a wad of billets-de-banque, which, but for the girl with the violet eyes, would ere this have gone into the coffers of the Casino—probably with all the rest he had.

"That is fifty pounds in English money," he said, "will it see you through?"

"It is too much!" she exclaimed, startled.

"If it is enough, well and good," said Ronald, "put it in your handbag at once."

She hesitated, and the violet eyes scanned his face. Then, with a sudden movement, she took the notes, and crammed them into her little bag.

"God bless you," she said, in a whisper. "You do not know from what you have saved me. It was either the Hotel Splendide again—or the—the sea!" She shivered. "Oh, to be away from this

horrible place—to be safe back in England—— You have saved a life, Mr. Vane." She rose from the wooden bench. "Thanks, and thanks again, and again—I shall always bless your name. Thanks—and good-night."

She was gone the next moment.

He looked after the graceful figure—half-doubting, for a moment, whether it might not turn in the direction of the lighted Rooms—but it disappeared in the other direction.

He drew a deep, deep breath, when she was gone in the glimmer of the moonlight on the scented shrubberies.

Who was she? What was she? What the count had said, what he knew of Marcus Monk, battled with what he had seen in the girl's own face. After all, what did it matter? He would never see her again. This was merely an episode—a strange episode—of a night at Monte Carlo—and this was the end of it. He shook himself impatiently, rose and lighted a cigarette, and walked away—not to the Rooms: for that temptation had passed. A mere episode that had ended, and about which he need think no more. Yet in the days that followed, Ronald Vane found himself thinking about it—with a strange tremor at his heart as he thought of the dark violet eyes in the dusk of the moonlight.

CHAPTER III

WHERE IS DORIS WILMOT?

"MAURICE!"

"Ma cher Ronald!"

It was six months since Ronald Vane had seen Maurice de Poncerf. He hardly remembered that passing acquaintance of his days in Monte Carlo: but he recalled him at once, as the count came up, smiling and bowing—his smile with a flash of white teeth, his bow reminiscent of a dancing-master. If he had thought of meeting him again, he would not have thought of meeting him in Bond Street. But there was the count—as smiling and debonair as of old—and apparently very glad to see his English friend.

"Six mois," said de Poncerf, "it is six months that I have not seen you, mon ami. You left Monte very suddenly."

"Yes."

"So suddenly that you had not the time, n'est-ce-pas?—to say adieu to your good friend Maurice."

"I—I—the fact is——" Ronald hesitated.

"C'est ça—you have a sudden call, and you leave," said de Poncerf, easily, "it is understood. You recall the last night that I have seen you—in the gardens of the Casino? Yes? Did you find after all the lovely mademoiselle with the violet eyes?"

Ronald Vane realised at that moment, what he had dimly felt before, that he did not like Maurice de Poncerf; and that he could, if he saw him often, dislike him very much. His answer was curt.

"Yes."

"Mademoiselle Wilmot?"

"Yes."

"Très bien!" They had stopped, and the count glanced round at the passing crowd. "Mon ami, since we have so happily met, we must talk. Where in your big, dusty London, can we talk?"

"I was on my way to my club——" Ronald spoke slowly, almost unwillingly. But if Count de Poncerf noted it, he did not appear to do so.

"Bon! Allons, donc."

The count chatted lightly, gaily, as they walked, recalling incidents of those days on the Cotè d'Azur. He did not, to Ronald's relief, mention Miss Wilmot again. Yet Ronald had a

feeling that that was the uppermost subject in de Poncerf's mind—why, he could not say.

In the smoke-room at the Jermyn, they settled down into comfortable chairs, and Maurice de Poncerf lighted a cigar.

"It is a gift of fortune that I meet you," he said. "I have looked, and I have asked, for my friend Ronald, for it is several days."

"I hardly thought you'd remember me at all," said Ronald.

He had hardly remembered the Frenchman. And he was not glad to see him again. He had been a pleasant acquaintance for a few weeks in the exotic life at Monte Carlo, that was all. Neither could he believe that there was anything like real friendship on the count's side—he was to de Poncerf what de Poncerf was to him—a passing companion. Why had the man sought him out in London? Some instinct told him that it was in connection with the girl with the violet eyes. Yet why?

"But I could not forget you, ma cher," protested Maurice. "But it is not only the pleasure of seeing you again—I have another reason. That night you asked me if I had seen the charming mademoiselle—and you found her——"

"Yes."

"And you made friends with the so beautiful mademoiselle?" smiled de Poncerf, "is it not so?"

"We spoke for, perhaps, five minutes," said Ronald.

"C'est tout?"

"Yes."

"But later, when you met a second time——"

"There was no second time."

The count smiled, and knocked the ash from his cigar.

"Ah! You other English!" he said, "you keep the secrets, yes? You do not tell even a good friend of these little loves."

"There is nothing to tell, de Poncerf," said Ronald, repressing his dislike of the man with an effort, "I never saw Miss Wilmot again."

"Ah çà!" said the count.

It was quite plain that he did not believe it.

"You had fortune—good fortune—at the tables?" he asked as if changing the subject.

"No! But I gave up playing the fool in time, and came away without much damage done—more than most punters at Monte can say."

"More than I can say, mon ami," said de Poncerf. "I, I plunge—I go for the bank—I win, yes, I win, but what is the end?" He gave a peculiarly Gallic shrug of the shoulders. "Enfin, toujours la meme chose—the bank take all! In the end I am left—what you call—like the stones——"

"Stony!" said Ronald, with a smile.

"C'est ça! I, Comte de Poncerf, must consider to disappear, without paying the hotel bill!"

"As bad as that?"

"But there is a resource," said de Poncerf, "I find a friend. You shall divine who was the friend."

"How could I guess?"

"But you have heard the name," said the count, "you have seen him also—he make a large figure at Monte, and he is a millionaire."

"Not Marcus Monk?"

"Mais oui—le bon millionaire Monk. He stand my friend, but he is a business man, n'est-ce-pas? There is never in this world something for nothing. He ask me a service." The count smiled. "He tell me that Mademoiselle is fled—the same night, mon ami, that you speak to me in the gardens. From that day he sees her not! It breaks his heart, and I am sympathetic. Have I not loved many times, and shall I not feel for the aching heart?"

Ronald stared from the club window into the traffic of Piccadilly. He wondered how he could ever have been on friendly terms with Maurice de Poncerf, even for a few weeks in a foreign resort, where one is not particular. Well dressed, debonair, gay, the man jarred on every nerve in his body.

"Bref," said de Poncerf, "the good Monk is so anxious to find the missing Mademoiselle, that I offer my services. That is why I am in London."

Ronald drew a deep breath. He could guess more than the count told him. Monk's money was behind it: and the count, with all his airs of good society, was nothing more or less than a paid agent hunting for the girl who had fled from that leering old satyr, Marcus Monk, the millionaire.

"And now that I find you, my friend, you give me help," went on de Poncerf. "There is perhaps a flirtation—yes?—but nothing serious—she of the violet eyes is not a great thing to you."

"There was no flirtation," said Ronald, savagely, "I had my own reason for seeking that young lady: and it was a reason that you would not understand, or believe if I told you."

"It is not then a little love?"

"No!" growled Vane.

"Tant mieux! Now, mon ami," said de Poncerf, persuasively, "it is much to me—very much—if I find Mademoiselle. For her also it is a good thing—for she leave ce vieux unprovided—she have no money, and it is a hard world, ma cher, for those who have no money, especially when they are young and lovely like Mademoiselle Wilmot. You help me to find the charming one?"

Ronald Vane knitted his brows.

"Listen to me, Maurice de Poncerf," he said, in a low but very distinct voice, "I have told you that I have never seen Miss Wilmot since that night."

"Vraiment!" smiled the count.

"I have not the remotest idea where she is, or what she may be doing. But if I knew, I would tell you nothing."

"Et pourquoi?"

"What the link may be between her and that man, I do not know. But you have said yourself that she fled from him."

"Some little quarrel—some petty pique——"

"Whatever the reason, I would take a great deal of trouble to prevent Marcus Monk from ever seeing her again."

"And why?" smiled Maurice de Poncerf, "if it is not a little love of your own, ma cher Ronald?"

"Never mind why," snapped Ronald. "You have been looking me out, thinking that I might lead you to Miss Wilmot—you have wasted your time. I know nothing, and would tell you nothing if I knew."

"That is not friendly," said Maurice, shaking his head.

"It is as friendly as I feel," said Ronald, coolly. "Since you have told me why you are in London, Maurice de Poncerf, the less we see of one another, the better."

"Ah! You English!" murmured the count. "You are so polished—so polite! You are so charming in the manners."

"I mean what I say. I will not help you—I will put any difficulty I can in your way. Is that plain enough?"

"Quite! You will not help me of your own good will—perhaps you will help me against your good will!" Maurice de Poncerf rose. "Mon ami, I will leave you, since you find me a bore. But, perhaps, good fortune will bring us together again—perhaps in company with the charming Mademoiselle. Au revoir, ma bon Ronald."

Ronald Vane remained staring into the street, when the Frenchman was gone. His brow was dark.

De Poncerf did not believe that he knew nothing of Doris Wilmot. The fellow meant to keep track of him, believing

that he would prove a guide to the girl with the violet eyes. He shrugged his shoulders with angry impatience. The fellow was welcome to get on with it, so far as that went.

Where was Doris Wilmot?

He had never seen her a second time—he admitted to himself that he wanted to see her, that he longed to see her. But he never had. Where was she? All he knew was that she had left Monte Carlo—his aid had made that possible, and he had no doubt that she had returned to her own country—and it was probable that de Poncerf knew that for certain, since he had come to London to see her. The satyr face of Marcus Monk rose in his mind. She had fled from him—but why had she ever had need to fly?

He shook himself impatiently. What was the use of pondering such problems and dreaming of violet eyes? What was the use?

But useful or useless, he could not help it.

CHAPTER IV

MOLLY'S GOVERNESS!

MAJOR GADSBY paused in the doorway of the room that was called the school-room at the Yews, and his ruddy, white-moustached face crinkled in a smile. It was a pleasant enough scene.

Molly Gadsby, twelve years old, was seated at a desk in the wide, sunny window. Her chubby face was bright and cheerful. Not till Miss Mitford had come to the Yews as her governess, had Molly's face been bright in lesson-time. Molly was a darling and the apple of her father's eye: but even the major was aware that she was wilful, and a little lazy, and that the frequent changes of governesses at the Yews had not been wholly the fault of the governesses. But all that had altered since Miss Mitford came.

Miss Mitford had a way with children. Though, sometimes, it seemed to the old major that she was little more than a child herself, in many ways. The major had an eye—quite an innocent and respectful eye—for beauty, and he liked to see that lovely face about the house. Molly adored her. The major liked her—Mrs. Gadsby liked her. She was quiet, reserved—almost too quiet and reserved. She was Molly's governess, but her lovely face had drawn much attention from men who came to the Yews—and nothing could have been more circumspect than Miss Mitford's behaviour. She seemed unconscious of admiration: content with the school-room, fond of Molly, and very careful with her duties. A gem—a treasure of a governess—so the major had told his wife: and Mrs. Gadsby fully agreed.

"Hic, haec, hoc!" Molly was saying as she scribbled. "Bother! Hic, haec, hoc! Did you like Latin at school, Miss Mitford?"

"Not very much, perhaps, Molly." It was a sweet voice—the major liked her voice as much as he liked her looks.

"I don't like it at all."

"There are so many necessary things we don't like, Molly. We must try to like them as hard as we can."

"Latin isn't necessary," said Molly.

"But you will take Latin when you go to Sweltenham," said Miss Mitford, "and really, my dear child, it is of great value. You will understand its value more when you are older."

"Then I'd rather learn it when I'm older."

Miss Mitford smiled. She had a very attractive smile—the major liked her smile as much as he liked her face and her voice.

"But then it would be too late, Molly. Youth is the time for study."

"You speak as if you were a hundred years old," said Molly. "How old are you, Miss Mitford?"

"Twenty-three, dear."

"I wish I were twenty-three."

"You will be twenty-three all too soon, my child. But this is not Latin," said Miss Mitford, "what have you written?"

"Hic, haec, hoc," sighed Molly.

"And what is hic?"

"Masculine nominative," moaned Molly.

"And what is haec?"

"Nominative feminine."

"And what is hoc?"

"Blessed if I know!" said Molly, "Oh! Daddy!" Molly leaped up from her desk, as she sighted the portly figure in the doorway, and ran across. "Daddy! Are we going out in the car?"

Miss Mitford looked grave. It was lesson-time: and lesson-time was lesson-time!

"I apologise, Miss Mitford!" boomed the major, "I should not interrupt lessons. I know it! You have too much trouble already with Molly. I add to your trouble. My fault entirely. But——"

"Bother lessons!" said Molly.

"What? what? That won't do, Molly—I'm ashamed of you. You will make Miss Mitford tired of us, and she will go away——"

Molly shot across the room again, and threw her arms round the governess.

"You won't go away, will you, Miss Mitford?"

"No, no, my dear——"

"No, no!" repeated the major, "of course not! What should we do without Miss Mitford, eh, Molly? But you must keep to your lessons. You must do Miss Mitford credit. But just for once, Miss Mitford, it's such a lovely day, and I'm taking the car to the station to meet my nephew, and I thought it would be a nice run for Molly, and perhaps her governess would come too, eh? What, what?"

And Major Gadsby's full-moon face beamed at Miss Mitford.

"Oh, splendid!" shrieked Molly. She picked up her Latin primer, and shied it across the school-room. "There! I'm coming, Daddy, and so is Miss Mitford. You didn't tell me my cousin was coming."

"Only had his letter this morning, my darling."

"And which cousin is it?" asked Molly.

"The one you used to like—Ronald."

Molly clapped her hands.

"Oh, fine! Cousin Ronnie! Miss Mitford, you've never seen my Cousin Ronnie. He's a dear. And I haven't seen him for ages and ages—he's been abroad, and wandering about—Monte Carlo and places——"

"Monte Carlo?" repeated Miss Mitford.

"And places and places," said Molly, "and now he is coming to see us again after ages and ages. He's very good looking, Miss Mitford. And nice! He used to look in at the school-room sometimes, when Miss Sharp was my governess, and she was cross. You're never cross, besides, you will like old Ronnie."

"Molly, you're a chatterbox," said her father. "With Miss Mitford's permission, you may run and get your hat. What about it Miss Mitford? Plenty of room for four in the car, when we pick up Ronald Vane at Yewbank station——"

"Ronald Vane?"

"That is my nephew's name—one of my nephews—I've got lots. That's the one that's coming to stay a couple of days——"

"And I shall ask him whether he broke the bank at Monte Carlo!" exclaimed Molly.

The major chuckled.

"No need to ask him that, Molly—I'll guarantee that he didn't! But what about it, Miss Mitford—lovely morning for a

run in Surrey lanes, what, what?" He looked at her curiously. "Is anything the matter, Miss Mitford?"

"No! No."

"I thought you looked a little pale all of a sudden. Has Molly made you tired? Trust Molly to make her governess tired."

"Have I, Miss Mitford?" asked Molly.

"No, no, no, my dear! But—I have a slight headache this morning," stammered the governess, "pray take Molly in the car, Major Gadsby, and we will make up for lost time later. But if you will excuse me, I will take a little rest while Molly is gone—— "

"You never told me you had a headache," said Molly, reproachfully. "I'd have been ever so much better this morning if I'd known you had a headache."

"It is nothing, my dear," said Miss Mitford, "but I will take a little rest in my room while you are gone."

"You must take care of yourself, Miss Mitford," boomed the major, "you are always so fit—fit as a fiddle. Come, Molly, you have your governess's permission—run and get your hat—we must not bother Miss Mitford any more, as she has a headache!"

Miss Mitford remained alone in the school-room, as the major's heavy tread and Molly's happy voice died away.

She stood looking from the window, into the old-world garden, with its bright flowers—wallflowers, Canterbury bells, beds of bright tulips, backed by the wall of old yews from which the house took its name. She loved that garden—so quiet, so peaceful, so different from the brilliant, garish scenes in a more southerly clime that she remembered, and did not wish to remember.

How happy she had been at the Yews—what a haven of rest it was, after storm-tossed years. Happy and peaceful—a refuge from the world, a refuge from thought and from memory. And now—to remind her of all she longed to forget, to cloud her happiness and peace, to make an end indeed of both, he was coming—Ronald Vane, the man of Monte Carlo!

Her lips parted in a sigh.

She had not forgotten him, or his earnest, chivalrous kindness to a stranger who was down and out. She would have liked to meet him again—had matters been different. But matters were as they were!

If he came—and he was coming—she must go! Kind as he was, chivalrous as he was, could he keep silent, when he found the girl from Monte Carlo, whom he had met as Doris Wilmot, whom he had seen playing desperate roulette in the Rooms, passing as a governess under a name that was not her own?

What could he think? What could he do? And what would the Gadsbys think—except that they had been taken in by an adventuress? Her cheeks became scarlet.

The world was very small, after all—she had never dreamed that he, seen for brief minutes in a far-off southern country, could have any connection with the little Surrey hamlet of Yewbank. And he was, all the time, a nephew of Major Gadsby—and he was coming to stay with his uncle and aunt. There was absolutely nothing surprising in it: yet it came to her as a stunning shock.

If she could go before he came—and avoid, at least, letting the Gadsbys believe that she had deceived them; and yet—it was for only two days that he was coming—and perhaps he would go abroad again—he seemed to be something of a rolling stone. Must he see her?

Instinctively she had put off the meeting: had not the major mentioned his nephew's name, she would have gone in the car with him and Molly, and then—she shivered at the thought. But she had been put on her guard—and she had till the car came

back from the station to think it out. If she could avoid being seen by him for a couple of days—— Why not?

Mrs. Gadsby came into the school-room. She was large and plump and kindly, but with shrewd eyes. The first sight of Miss Mitford, months ago, had not wholly pleased the major's wife—she had doubted whether so lovely a girl was exactly suited to the post of governess for Molly. But she had been reassured since. Yet it had sometimes occurred to her—as it never had to the major—that the quiet, calm-eyed girl had known experiences to which she never referred in talk. Mrs. Gadsby knew little of her except that she was the niece of old Mr. Mitford, a prim, penurious old gentleman who lived in Bayswater, and whom the major knew slightly. Miss Mitford never talked about herself.

"Molly tells me that you have a headache, my dear," said Mrs. Gadsby. "I have brought you my smelling-salts."

"Thank you," said Miss Mitford. "You will not mind if I go to my room for a time, and if I do not come down to lunch."

"Please yourself, my child!" said Mrs. Gadsby. "I will have some lunch sent up if you still feel out of sorts."

How kind they were to her, the girl thought, as she went into her room, and shut the door. How kind—and how trusting—they must never know what Ronald Vane must tell them if he saw her at the Yews.

There was a little wooden balcony outside her window, overlooking the garden, the yew trees, the meadows beyond, and the white road that led to the village and the station. She opened the french window, and sat in a deck-chair on the balcony, looking, not at the garden, but at the winding white road beyond. He would come by that road—and he must not see her when he came—he would not see her there, half hidden by the red roses that clambered over the rails.

Would he look the same, with that kind, earnest face—the face that had bent over her, so kind and friendly, in the moonlight in the Casino garden at Monte? She would be glad to see him—if he did not see her.

There was a whirr of a car on the road—her eyes fixed on it. The major was driving—Molly was with the passenger inside—a young man. Miss Mitford's eyes fixed on him. He was laughing—at something Molly was saying—a very different expression from the one she remembered. But it was the same face—handsome, kind, boyishly attractive.

For a long minute she watched it, as the car came. Then, as she saw that he was looking towards the house, she withdrew hurriedly into her room, her heart beating quickly.

CHAPTER V

THE SPY!

"AND where," said Ronald Vane, "is this wonderful Miss Mitford?"

He stood in the dusky oak hall of the Yews, smiling.

"But do you know Miss Mitford?" asked Mrs. Gadsby.

Ronald laughed.

"Not the least bit in the world. I had never heard of her half an hour ago. But during that half-hour I have learned enough from Molly to make me terribly curious to see the paragon. Molly says she is lovely——"

"She is quite good-looking," said Mrs. Gadsby, primly.

"And her eyes are—let me see—brown—or did you say pink, Molly——"

"No, I didn't say pink," exclaimed Molly, indignantly, "and I didn't say brown, either, and I don't believe you forget what I did say, Ronnie. She has a sort of shade of violet——"

"Violet eyes are charming," said Robert, with a momentary thought of violet eyes amid the moonlit palms. "A wonderful young lady, from Molly's description—but most wonderful of all in getting on so well with Molly—I hear that Molly's governess has not been changed for weeks and weeks——"

"Months and months!" hooted Molly.

"Still more marvellous!" said Ronald, laughing, and patting his little cousin's flaxen mop of hair.

"Wait till you see her!" pouted Molly.

"I am all eagerness——"

"You're not really," said Molly, "but you'll love her when you do see her, won't he, Mummy?"

"I hope Ronald will like her, at least," said Mrs. Gadsby, smiling. "Everyone likes Miss Mitford. But Ronald will not see her yet, as she has a headache and is keeping her room to-day."

"Alas!" sighed Ronald, with comic dismay. "How can I wait, after all Molly has told me? But one must be patient."

"Lunch in ten minutes," boomed the major, and he marched Ronald off to his room, where, in point of fact, Ronald Vane forgot the existence of the wonderful Miss Mitford in about ten seconds.

Having forgotten her existence, he did not miss her when he came down to lunch with the major and Mrs. Gadsby and Molly. Neither would he have remembered that a Miss Mitford was an inmate of the Yews, had not Molly announced, after lunch, that she was going up to see how Miss Mitford was.

"Don't forget we've got a date this afternoon, Molly," said Ronald, laughing, "you're going to show me all the old walks of years ago, when we were both young!"

"Ha, ha!" boomed the major.

"It's just beastly for Miss Mitford to have a bad head to-day," said Molly, peevishly. "Still, if she can't come down, there will be nothing doing in the school-room—there's that!"

Somewhat consoled by that reflection, Molly went. She found Ronald smoking a cigarette with her father in the hall when she came down.

"How is the patient, Molly?" asked Ronald, smiling.

"Not too good," said Molly, "headache as before! I told her it would clear off if she came for a walk with us. She won't!"

"Perhaps a rest will be better for her, my dear," said the major.

"I put her deck-chair out on the balcony, so that she could sit in the open air," said Molly, "but she won't do that, either. Sitting inside the window! And she's always so keen on fresh air and long walks! I offered to stay with her all the afternoon——"

"That was heroic!" said Ronald, gravely.

"Well, it would have been rather tough, sticking indoors," admitted Molly, "and I should have had to turn you down, Ronnie. But Miss Mitford wouldn't hear of it, so that's that. Now, Daddy, you can have your nap, while I take Ronnie for a walk."

"My military training comes in useful, Ronald," said the major, "I have learned to jump to orders. Take care of him, Molly, and mind he doesn't lose himself."

Ronald Vane strolled down the path to the road, with Molly dancing by his side, in a cheery mood. He rather expected to hear a great deal more from Molly on the subject of the wonderful Miss Mitford, and was prepared to display keen interest as a smoke-screen for boredom. But Molly, instead, asked him about Monte Carlo, and whether he had broken the bank: and plied him with endless questions as they walked in the shady lanes and woodland paths.

"The London train's in," remarked Molly, as they passed the little station an hour later, "but hardly anybody ever gets out at Yewbank. I say, Ronnie, do you know that man?"

"Eh! what man?" asked Ronald, glancing round.

"That foreign-looking man! He must have come by the train," said Molly. "Miss Mitford says I mustn't point—he's over there, by the gate—he's staring at you as if he knows you, Ronnie."

Ronald looked in the direction indicated, and gave a start, and his brows knitted with anger.

Maurice de Poncerf smiled, and raised his hat.

"By gad!" muttered Ronald.

His eyes glinted at the Frenchman. That the Count de Poncerf could have any business in an out-of-the-way village like Yewbank was hardly possible. Ronald did not need telling why he was there. His deepest anger was roused by the thought that the count was watching him.

"You do know him!" exclaimed Molly, "and you don't like him! I don't, either! I think he's a horrid man, Ronnie. Who is he?"

"A man I happened to meet on the Continent, Molly," said Ronald. "I did not expect to see him here. Will you sit on that stile for a few minutes, dear, while I speak to him!"

"O.K.," said Molly. Then she laughed. "Miss Mitford doesn't let me say O.K., Ronnie. But I shall say it to you. Carry on, Ronnie."

Molly sat on the stile, and disinterred a chocolate from her little bag. Ronald Vane strode across to the Frenchman. The count smiled with a gleam of white teeth.

"How happy to see you once more, mon ami!" he said. "It is two weeks since I see you in Londres—what a happy chance!"

"You may as well come clean, de Poncerf," said Ronald Vane, with undisguised contempt, "you have followed me here."

"Mais pourquoi?" The count shrugged his shoulders. "What a suspicion! You have strange fancies, ma cher Ronald."

"You did not believe that I knew nothing of Miss Wilmot," said Ronald, his voice trembling with anger. "You have watched me since, or you would not have known that I was coming here to-day. You have followed me. You fancy that by shadowing me you will learn something of Miss Wilmot."

"Who knows!" murmured the count. "One does not believe all that one is told, ma cher!"

"You are on the wrong track, de Poncerf. I repeat that I know nothing whatever of Miss Wilmot."

"It is not for a meeting with the so charming mademoiselle that you leave town and bury yourself in this rural spot?" asked de Poncerf, ironically. "No?"

"I am here to visit relations, with whom I am staying for a couple of days."

"And in the neighbourhood is a charming friend from Monte Carlo, n'est-ce-pas?"

Ronald set his lips.

"I suppose that you cannot help judging others by yourself, de Poncerf," he said, quietly.

"C'est vrai—are we not all the same?" smiled the count. "Your friends, with whom you stay, they have perhaps a spare room for another guest—a friend of yours, ma bon Ronald?"

Ronald Vane answered that only with a look.

"Non?" smiled de Poncerf. "Non! But there is an inn—yes, I am told that there is an inn—a Red Lion, I think——"

"You intend to hang on in this village?"

"The so beautiful scenery charms me," said the count. "Your English countryside, is it not charming, especially to a foreigner?"

"And you think that I will stand for it?" breathed Ronald, "you think that I will submit to be followed and watched?"

"But I do not admit that I follow and watch," said de Poncerf, smiling. "And even so, how will you prevent anyone from staying for a few days at a hospitable inn, in this so charming village?"

Ronald clenched his hand.

"Take care, de Poncerf," he said. "You fancy that you can learn something by watching me—to serve your turn—to help you to hand over the girl who fled from the scoundrel who is your paymaster! You have sold yourself to Marcus Monk, to do his dirty work."

The mocking smile faded from Count de Poncerf's face, and it hardened, and a glint came into his black eyes.

"Prendre garde, mon ami," he said. "In France I should call upon you to follow up such words with pistols at twelve paces."

Ronald laughed contemptuously.

"In France I should be happy to oblige you," he said. "In England we have no use for your theatricals. But we have our own methods. I shall carry a walking-cane next time I take a walk, Maurice de Poncerf, and if I find you dogging my steps, I shall use it. Let that be a warning."

Without waiting for the count to reply, he turned on his heel and walked away. He rejoined Molly, and they resumed their walk: and he did not glance again in the direction of the count.

But at dinner that evening, Major Gadsby mentioned, among other items of local gossip, that a French nobleman had put up at the village inn—a Count Somebody-or-Other.

Evidently Maurice de Poncerf, as he had said, did not believe all that was told him. He believed, and had no doubt, that by keeping track of Ronald Vane he would pick up the trail of the girl from Monte Carlo. And Ronald, with set lips, resolved not to forget to borrow the major's malacca, and put it under his arm, the next time he took a walk abroad.

CHAPTER VI

GONE?

BUZZZZZZ!

Major Gadsby grunted.

The telephone was in the lounge hall at the Yews. After dinner that evening, Ronald and the major were taking their ease in extremely easy chairs, with the summer sunset streaming in at the wide-open door, Ronald smoking a cigarette, the major a Havana. Molly was gone to bed: her mother was with Miss Mitford in her room, and the two men were smoking and chatting, when the telephone bell rang.

With a grunt, Major Gadsby heaved himself out of his chair. Since his Army days, George Gadsby had accumulated weight, which he was not eager to lift after a good dinner. Neither did he like to be disturbed. But the telephone, like time and tide, waits for no man: and the major heaved himself up, and rolled across to the instrument to take the call.

"Yes! This is the Yews! Yes, he is staying here. Do you want him?"

Ronald glanced round at that. It sounded as if some friend of his had rung up to inquire.

"What?" went on the major. "No! No such name known here! What? Yes, I tell you Mr. Vane is staying here—yes! No one named Wilmot! Who are you, and what do you want?" The major's voice was testy.

Ronald Vane sat bolt upright.

"No, I don't know Miss Wilmot," went on the major, into the transmitter. "Never heard the name. Certainly she is not

staying here, whoever she is. Who are you? What the dickens are you asking for?"

He slammed down the receiver, and came back to his chair, into which he dropped with an irritated grunt.

"Some fool of a foreigner!" he said. "Couldn't take no for an answer, and I cut him off. Somebody who knows you, apparently, Ronald—he asked first if you were staying here—then for a Miss Wilmot."

Ronald's teeth shut hard.

He could guess easily enough who the "fool of a foreigner" was. Count de Poncerf had learned that he was staying at the Yews, and had rung up to make sure. He knew now for certain, for what that was worth to him. And then he had asked for "Miss Wilmot." Plainly enough, he believed that Doris Wilmot was there, and that that was why Ronald was there!

The bitter anger that came into Vane's heart made his face almost pale. At that moment he could have laid the major's malacca round Maurice de Poncerf's shoulders with savage pleasure.

"Know the name, Ronald?" asked Major Gadsby.

"Eh? What name?" asked Ronald.

"Wilmot!"

"Oh, Wilmot." He spoke as carelessly as he could. "It is not a very uncommon name. I've met Wilmots."

"The fellow seemed to think she might be here, whoever she is, because you were here," grunted the major. "Dashed foreigner—I wish now I'd told him what I thought of him. Pah!"

Major Gadsby resumed his cigar, frowning. However, his ill-humour passed in a few minutes, and he forgot that irritating telephone-call.

"So your travels are over, Ronald," he said, taking up the interrupted subject. "No more wandering—and no more breaking the bank at Monte Carlo—eh?"

"No more!" said Ronald, with a smile. "One must settle down to work, Uncle George—and I have had a pretty good post offered me in the City, and I've decided that getting rich quick is not in my line."

"Was that the game at Monte Carlo?" grinned the major.

"Sort of! I fancied a system—and I went to the Rooms one evening to win or lose all——"

"Great Gad!" ejaculated the major. "And how did it turn out?"

"I was warned off—by seeing someone else at the same game," said Ronald. "So I came off undamaged, Uncle."

"That was luck," commented the major. "Whoever it was that gave you that lesson had to pay dearly for it, I dare say."

"Yes—down and out!" said Ronald. He was thinking of the girl with the violet eyes, and there was a strange ache in his heart as he thought of her.

How glad he would have been had Count de Poncerf's suspicion been well founded—if he knew where she was. But he would never see her again. One faint hope lingered—she might write to Jermyn's, to repay him—he knew that she would repay the money if she could.

He longed to see her, to hear her voice, and yet—he was not sure that he would have gone to her, even had he known where she was. With the violet eyes that haunted him, there came always a vision of Marcus Monk's satyr face.

"So you're settling down, Ronald," Major Gadsby was going on. "And you'll be taking a wife next, I shouldn't wonder."

"Not likely," said Vane.

"Nobody yet?" asked his uncle.

Ronald shook his head.

"Well, then, look out for yourself when you meet Miss Mitford!" chuckled the major. "That's a girl that might turn any young fellow's head."

Ronald laughed. No girl was likely to turn his head, or even to draw a second glance from him, while those violet eyes haunted his memory.

"Laugh, my boy, but wait till you see her!" chuckled the major.

"I'm getting quite curious," said Ronald. "Too bad that Miss Mitford should be on the sick list while I am here."

"Not exactly on the sick list. She's not ill, my wife tells me—in fact, she's never ill—never saw a girl so fit. Spot of headache or something—the summer heat perhaps. But you'll see her to-morrow, my boy. Prepare to lose your heart first shot—if it's really disengaged."

Ronald laughed again.

"I'll guard with my left," he said. "Must be quite nice, I think, for Molly to be so fond of her. She was not here when I came last."

"No! Miss Sharp at that time, wasn't it—poor lady, Molly tired her out. A lively little card, Molly. Miss Mitford has been with us—let me see—four or five months. It was a spot of luck. I called on old Mitford in London, and saw his niece—I'd heard he had a niece, but had never seen her or even heard her name—but she happened to be there: and when I heard that she was looking for a governess's job, did I jump at the chance? I knew she'd get on all right with Molly—and so she does. Your aunt thought she was a little too good-looking—but she's got used to that. But you'll see her to-morrow."

Ronald nodded rather absently.

Through the wide-open doorway, across the garden and a bank of tall hollyhocks, he could see the road—and a figure on the road, slowly sauntering past the gate. His eyes glinted at Maurice de Poncerf, for the moment that the man remained visible.

Evidently the cynical adventurer believed no more what he had been told on the telephone than what Ronald Vane had told him. He was giving the Yews the once-over, quite unconvinced that Doris Wilmot was not there. Ronald thought of the major's malacca, and of the count's slim shoulders writhing under it. It would come to that, if the spy carried on with this game.

When he went to his room that night, Ronald Vane stood at the open window, looking out into the light summer night. The thought of Maurice de Poncerf was in his mind—and the thought of the man watching the house, spying upon all who came and went, filled him with a passionate anger that made him grit his teeth.

Even more bitter was his anger and scorn at the man's errand—the base service he was seeking to render for the millionaire's money. Yet to deal with him as he deserved would cause distinct unpleasantness—gossip in the village, talk that would reach the Yews and its inmates.

A figure passed in the dimness, and he caught the red glow of a cigar. It was gone—and he was not sure that it was the count—but he was almost sure. He made a step towards the door—and stopped.

"To-morrow!" he muttered.

He looked out a time-table. There was an early up-train from Yewbank at six-thirty. Ronald made up his mind that Count de Poncerf should catch that train. Having come to that decision he went to bed, and slept soundly.

But he was up in the earliest gleam of the summer dawn. The house was very silent—no one else would be up for a long time yet. Ronald intended to carry out what he had to do, and to return before the household awakened—by which time, if Maurice de Poncerf valued his bones, he would be gone. He did not go down the stairs: he dropped quietly from the balcony

under his window, and walked across the dewy grass to the road.

A quarter of an hour later he was at the Red Lion, in Yewbank, where only a sleepy ostler was up. His plans were cut and dried—if Maurice de Poncerf listened to reason, he would breakfast with him, see him pack his bag, and see him off on the London train at six-thirty. If he did not, he would thrash him within an inch of his life—after which the count would scarcely care to hang about Yewbank. That purpose was fixed in his mind. He did not want to knock up the sleeping inn at that early hour, and he called to the ostler.

"There is a foreign gentleman staying here," he said. "I must see him at once—and——"

"He's gone, sir."

"Gone!"

"Yessir! He never stayed the night," said the man. "He was out rather late last night, sir, and when he came in he packed his bag and went."

"He is not coming back, then?"

"Not as I knows of, sir."

Ronald walked back to the Yews somewhat relieved in his mind. He had been prepared for drastic measures—as drastic as might be needed—but it was a relief that the count had gone without waiting for trouble. After all, he had been more or less friendly with Maurice at Monte—he was content, if the fellow kept clear of him. Perhaps he had realised by this time that his spying would bring him nothing—anyhow, he was gone, and that was that.

CHAPTER VII

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING!

"DORIS WILMOT!"

Miss Mitford caught her breath.

Her eyes dilated, as she stared round her at that unexpected voice. She had never dreamed of this.

It was not yet six o'clock. The dew was thick on the grass in the lane, the sun coming up over the Surrey hills. It was the lovely dawn of a summer's day—but there was no one about, in lanes and fields, to enjoy it, save the girl herself. And she was enjoying it to the full, until that startling voice fell on her ears.

For a day she had kept to her room. She had to keep to it, so long as the major's nephew remained at the Yews. No one doubted the genuineness of that headache—everyone was kind and considerate. It was, after all, easy—Ronald Vane had come, but he would go, knowing nothing. His visits to the Gadsbys were few and far between—and if he came again she would manage somehow to avoid seeing him—a holiday—a run up to town to see her uncle—anything—in the meantime, she was safe, so long as she kept to her room.

But it was irksome, and likely to turn her headache into the real thing, if she did not get at least a spot of the fresh air and exercise to which she was used. And it was easy to slip quietly out of the house before anyone was up, and to return while all were yet sleeping. The oak stair did not creak as she tiptoed down—a door on the garden opened noiselessly—and now she was in the lane, a quarter of a mile from the house, the wind of the dawn on her face, its freshness in her cheeks, her eyes sparkling—and then, suddenly, came that voice in astonished tones: speaking her name, her real name.

"Oh!" breathed the girl, as she saw him. He was coming from the direction of the village—what, in the name of wonder, could have taken him to Yewbank at that unearthly hour? She

had not doubted that he was sleeping as soundly as the rest when she tiptoed down the oak stair.

She stood with thumping heart. He broke, almost unconsciously, into a run, and came up a little breathless. His eyes seemed to devour her face. In the freshness of the early morning, with the colour in her cheeks, the sparkle in her eyes, she looked even lovelier than he had seen her in the moonlight at Monte.

"Miss Wilmot! You are here!"

"Mr. Vane!" she breathed.

"I never dreamed that we should meet again." His face was bright, his eyes sparkled like her own. "I am so glad."

"Indeed."

His bright face clouded.

"You are not glad to see me, then?" he asked.

"You—you startled me——"

"I'm sorry! I—I've often thought about you. I—I suppose I'm rather a fool. You don't want to be reminded of Monte Carlo?"

"No!"

"No! I—I suppose not!" The brightness faded out of his face, the light from his eyes. "That's natural enough, of course."

She felt a pang: He had been so kind, that mad night at Monte: and now he looked so downcast, as if she had struck him a blow. Did he want to see her again so much, then?

"But—but I am glad to see you, Mr. Vane," she said timidly. "I—I was startled. Do you think I shall ever forget your kindness that night? Do you think I should forget——" She smiled —"That I owe you fifty pounds?"

He made a gesture.

"No need to speak of that——"

"But I must speak of it, now that we have met," she said. "In a few months more I should have written to you, Mr. Vane, at the address you gave me—for by that time I shall have saved the money to repay you. Only the money—your kindness I can never repay. That must remain a debt."

"Then you had not forgotten me?"

"No! No! One does not meet a kind and generous friend so often that one can forget so easily. I should always have remembered you, if I had never met you again."

She was composed again now. But while she talked her thoughts were hammering.

She had met him—he had, after all, seen her—but not as Miss Mitford—never a suspicion crossed his mind that she was an inmate of the same house.

Somehow, she must contrive to return unobserved by him —and all would be well. And if only her secret was kept, she was glad to have met him again—glad and happy to see that boyish, handsome face, and to hear his kind and friendly voice.

"That is very pleasant to hear, Miss Wilmot," he said. "May we not be friends? Monte, I suppose, has disagreeable associations—but am I one of them?"

"No! No!"

"One of the agreeable ones, perhaps?" he suggested.

She laughed.

"I am staying near here," he said. "My uncle, Major Gadsby, lives at the Yews, further up the lane. You have heard of him, perhaps."

"I—I think—yes——"

"You live in this neighbourhood?"

"I—I have been here some—some time. I belong to London,"

"On a holiday, then?"

"Not exactly."

He was silent, looking at her. How lovely she looked, fresh and sweet as the summer dawn itself. She was as sweet, and as

good, as her looks told—he was certain of that. He drove the satyr face of Marcus Monk from his mind.

He would gladly have asked her more—but if she did not care to tell him more, he could not press her.

"You are an early riser," she said, breaking a silence.

"Not always," he smiled "I had some particular business in Yewbank at an early hour, that was all."

He must have left earlier than she had done. She might have met him on the stairs, as she tiptoed down. How was she to get back—unknown to him? The colour wavered a little in her face, as her thoughts raced.

"But you," he said, "do you always take such early morning walks, Miss Wilmot?"

"Not always," she answered, repeating his word.

"I am glad you did so this morning, at least."

"And I am glad, too," she said, simply. "Now I can thank you once more, for what you did—for the help you gave me that mad night. But what you must have thought—you had seen me at the tables—a desperate gamester—a roulette addict—alone in that hateful place——" Her colour faded, and her face clouded.

"Not in the least," said Ronald, smiling. "I guessed that it was your first visit to the green tables."

"That is true."

"And that some urgent need of money—more than you possessed at the time—urged you on to try your luck?"

"True again."

"Yes, I guessed all that," he said.

"A very penetrating young man, indeed!" She smiled again. "Yes, that was how it was—I had to have money, to get away—never mind why—I had to get away—to get away—and I had not enough money. It was madness to think that I could win at the Casino—indeed, I did not think so—I only hoped—for it was that or nothing. I had to escape——"

"Escape?" he repeated.

She crimsoned.

"I had to get away from Monte Carlo," she said, hastily. "It was mad—but it was the only hope of getting what I needed—and it failed. Do you know, I was left with hardly a single franc in my possession—I was in despair when you found me by that fountain in the gardens—oh!" She caught her breath. "And—and when you spoke to me, I—I thought——"

"I can guess what," he said, moodily.

"But that was only for a moment," she said. "Then I knew that I could trust you, Mr. Vane. I think Heaven sent you to me that night. Oh, I shall always remember it. How could I forget?"

"And now we have met again," said Ronnie, softly, "we can be friends."

"Oh! No! No! No!"

"But why——"

Her face was crimson again.

How gladly she would have answered, yes, yes, yes! But it could not be. If he had seen "Miss Mitford" at the Yews, he would have known that it could not be.

"Why not?" he repeated. "Why not? You don't dislike me, do you?"

"Can you ask that?"

"You might even like me a little—just a little bit! Surely, Miss Wilmot, we can be friends, at least," he exclaimed, eagerly.

She shook her head.

"I'm sorry! We cannot meet again, Mr. Vane. It is impossible! After all, you know nothing of me—nothing at all."

"I know enough!" he said quietly. "You were at Monte Carlo in strange circumstances, Miss Wilmot. I know that. You were in bad hands. I will not pretend not to know that. How it came about I dont know, neither is it my business to inquire. But you

must surely know that I honour and respect you, even though I cannot understand how you could ever have been associated in any way with a man like Marcus Monk. You say I know nothing of you. I know enough to want to be your friend, if you will let me."

She set her lips.

"Would others be as charitable in their judgments?" she asked, in a low, bitter voice. "If my story were known where—where I am now employed, I should be shown the door. They are good, kind people, but they would not and could not judge kindly and charitably as you do—God bless you for it!"

"You cannot think that I would utter a word——"

"No! No! But—you do not understand. And I cannot explain. Mr. Vane, please say no more—this is our second, and our last, meeting."

"You will not even tell me where you live?"

"I can tell you nothing, Mr. Vane. I can never see you again." Her voice was shaken and agitated. "Mr. Vane, I shall always be your debtor—I shall remember you always with gratitude, and with friendship. But this is our last meeting—nothing else is possible. Now I must go."

He stood silent—perplexed—troubled. He had no conception of the problem hammering in the girl's mind—to get back to the Yews unseen by him. She knew that he was on his way to the major's house—how was she to elude him?

"Mr. Vane! Will you do me one more service?"

"Anything," he said.

"Will you walk back to the village, leaving me here?"

He gave her a long, questioning look.

"That means," he said, quietly, "that you desire me to know nothing of you—or where you live—that you are afraid that I might see——"

"Whatever it means, will you do as I ask?"

"I will do anything you ask!" he said.

She held out her hand, timidly. He pressed it in his own, then, raising his hat, turned, and walked back in the direction of Yewbank.

She watched him as he went. He did not turn his head, and he disappeared in a few minutes in the winding, leafy lane.

Then she turned, and hurried back to the Yews. The house was still silent and sleeping: all was still, as she crept in at the garden door and regained her room. She must not take that risk again—not till he was gone. In a day or two more he would be gone, and she would be free again—yet, strangely, the knowledge that he would be gone, while it relieved her mind, made her heart as heavy as lead.

It was an hour later that Ronald Vane returned to the Yews. The door stood wide open: an early housemaid was busy with broom and brush. He little dreamed whose eyes had watched him from an upper window, as he came—whose ears listened for his step.

CHAPTER VIII

A QUARREL!

"YOU haven't seen Miss Mitford?"

"No!"

"Then you haven't fallen for her."

"Eh! No! What do you mean?"

Major Gadsby chuckled, his throaty chuckle.

Ronald had spent the day chiefly with Molly. Miss Mitford being still kept to her room, there was no lessons for Molly—which seemed, to a considerable extent, a compensation for the beloved governess's indisposition. Moreover, her cousin Ronnie's visits were few and far between, and in any case Molly would probably

have declared a strike in the school-room so long as he was at the Yews. She was fond of Miss Mitford, and would run up to her room five or six times in the day: but for the rest she appropriated Ronald, who was quite willing to be appropriated. Walking or punting or tennis with Molly made quite a pleasant day—especially for a young man whose thoughts were elsewhere, and who could make monosyllabic replies to childish prattle.

But it was evening, now: Molly was gone to bed, and the guest at the Yews was taking an after-dinner stroll with his host, in the woodland path under the red of the sunset. Monosyllabic replies, which satisfied Molly, did not quite satisfy her father, and many times the major glanced curiously at Ronald's thoughtful face, and wondered what was on his nephew's mind.

That morning's meeting with Doris Wilmot had settled the matter for Ronald Vane. He knew now why he had longed for the sight of her face, and for the murmur of her voice; why his anger had blazed up so savagely at what Maurice de Poncerf had told him at the Jermyn. His mind had cleared: and it was no longer a half-hidden consciousness: it was a plain fact to him that he loved the girl from Monte Carlo, and that his life and his whole being were bound up in his love for her. It dated, as he realised now, from that moonlit night at Monte—he had loved her then, if he had only known it. She had said that they could not meet again. But they had to meet—he had to see her—he had to tell her. What her reason was, he could not begin to guess—but whatever it was, it had to be set aside. He must and he would see her again. But where—and how?

He came out of deep thought, as the major spoke, and the colour flushed into his face. He had been thinking of Doris, and if he had answered Major Gadsby, he had answered at random. His colour deepened under the major's good-natured grin.

"I don't quite follow," he stammered. "What do you mean?"

"If you'd seen our paragon of a governess," grinned the major, "I should say that you'd fallen for her, Ronnie."

"What rot!" muttered Ronald.

"Not at all! Every young man who comes here falls for her, automatically, as a matter of course," said Major Gadsby. "It's amusin' to watch 'em. If she hadn't her head screwed on in quite the right way, she could play no end of tricks—many girls with her beauty would! But she seems to be absolutely without eyes for men."

"Does she?" said Ronald, indifferently. In point of fact, he had heard quite enough about that paragon, Miss Mitford, and the subject had begun to bore him a little.

"So much so, that my wife—you know how romantic women are—suspects that there may have been a love disappointment, or somethin', to account for it!" chuckled the major. "One life, one love—that sort of thing, you know."

"That's real enough!" said Ronald.

"Listen to the man of knowledge and experience!" grinned the old Army man. "A Daniel come to judgment—at twenty-six! What do you know about it, Ronnie?"

"Oh! Nothing."

"Which is the sum-total of knowledge at your age, my boy. What? But as I was sayin', you cannot have fallen for our Miss Mitford, as you haven't seen her—so what is it? I should say, who is it?"

"I don't follow—— "

"I'll put it in words of one syllable, suitable to the intellect of twenty-six. If you're not in love——."

"In love!" repeated Ronald, with a start.

"Exactly! If you're not in love, what's the trouble? The whole day you've been mooning and dreaming——"

"I—I wasn't aware—— "

"I was!" said Major Gadsby. "Come, come, my boy." He became more serious. "Perhaps an elderly relative can help you out. Is it that, and are there difficulties in the way?"

Ronald paused in his walk, and stood silent. For a long minute his silence lasted. Then he made the plunge.

"Yes! It's that, and there are difficulties in the way," he said. "If you can help me with advice, Uncle, there never was a fellow more in need of it. I'm bewildered—beaten—down and out."

"So bad as that? Is it someone we know?"

"No! A girl I met abroad. At Monte Carlo."

Major Gadsby's face became graver.

"I needn't go into details," said Ronald, "but there it is! She had a spot of trouble, a little thing in which I was able to help."

"You saw a lot of her?"

"I saw her only once, and then for a few minutes——"

"My dear boy!"

"I have seen her once since then," said Ronald.

"And that is all."

"That is all."

"And you think you're in love, my dear boy?"

"I know I am," said Ronald, simply.

"And she?"

"I know nothing about that. But of course it isn't the same with her. Why should it be? But—but if I could see her——"

"Can't you see her?"

"No!"

"This grows curiouser and curiouser, as Alice said in Wonderland. Where did you see her the second time?"

"Here," said Ronald, "within half a mile of the Yews. I met her in the lane, in an early morning walk, this morning."

"Then she lives in this neighbourhood?"

"I suppose so. Yes, yes, I am sure so. But she would not tell me where she lives, she would not consent to see me again—she would not even let me see what direction she took when we parted."

"She does not like you, then?"

"She does like me," said Ronald, "she does! It isn't that. I'm not fool enough, I hope, to bother a woman who does not want me. But it isn't that. She would be glad to be friends with me, at least, though I naturally couldn't expect anything more for a time."

"You've not told me her name," said the major. "I know everybody in this region, more or less, at least by name."

"Wilmot!" said Ronald. "Doris Wilmot."

Major Gadsby gave a little jump.

"That was the name that dashed foreigner mentioned on the telephone last night. Someone else is interested in your lady love, Ronald. A rival, what?"

"No! No! A designing rascal," said Ronald, his brows knitting. "Never mind that, Uncle—that doesn't concern us. You said on the telephone that you did not know the name. Have you remembered it since?"

"No! There are no Wilmots in this district. No family of that name, I mean—there may be flotsam and jetsam, of course."

"She is in some kind of employment," said Ronald. "I don't know what—companion, or teacher—anything—I don't know."

"In that case, I may have seen her a dozen times, and never heard her name, of course. What is she like?"

"Lovely and sweet and good——"

"Oh! Yes! No doubt—but not easy to recognise by that description," grinned Major Gadsby. "To sum it up—this Miss Wilmot likes you personally——"

"I am sure of that."

"But she bars you off. Does she think that you might say too much about—hem—Monte Carlo, if you happened to meet her employers?"

"It might be something like that."

"Whom was she with at Monte?"

Ronald's colour deepened to scarlet, and the major, as he observed it, looked very grim.

The doubt was already in his mind that his nephew was in the toils of an adventuress. Lovely—very likely—but sweet and good? Girls who were sweet and good did not make mysteries like this.

"Did you ever hear of a man—a war millionaire—profiteer of the deepest dye—named Marcus Monk?" asked Ronald.

"I've heard of him," said the major, drily. "He and his millions have been in the papers often enough. I heard something about him from a friend, too, a few months back—old Mr. Mitford." The major frowned. "Old Mitford's an innocent duck of a man—anyone could take him in—and though I don't know any of the particulars, I could gather that Monk played him some base trick—the old man referred to him as a 'scoundrel,' and I have no doubt that he put it mildly."

"A relative of your incomparable governess——"

"Her uncle," said the major; "I was telling you about him last night. He had contacted Monk some time or other, and that was his verdict on him. But go on, Ronald. You're not going to tell me that this Miss Wilmot was associated with Marcus Monk in any way?"

"She was in his care at Monte Carlo—somehow. In his hands, perhaps, I should say. They stayed at the Hotel Splendide."

"Ronald!"

"Keep this clear in your mind, sir—Doris Wilmot is as good a woman as walks on this earth. How she came to be with that old scoundrel, I don't know, and can't imagine. Somehow, he must have got her into his net. I have told you that I was able to help her in a spot of trouble. She was getting away from Monte—and getting away from that old Silenus—that was how I helped."

Major Gadsby did not speak, But his visage was grimmer and grimmer. Ronald looked at him, and his own face darkened.

"Well?" he said, sharply.

"For Heaven's sake, Ronald, put this out of your mind," said the elder man, earnestly. "What you have just said explains everything. This young woman dare not continue her acquaintance with you—for obvious reasons. You say she is in employment—as a teacher or something. She may have children in her charge. One word about Marcus Monk, and her association with such a man, and only one thing could possibly happen. She would be shown the door at once. If she is now trying to live a respectable life——"

"Major Gadsby!"

"You must hear me, Ronald! If that is so, she must be simply terrified to meet a man who could give her away—who might do so unintentionally, by an inadvertent word. No wonder she disclaims you—no wonder she conceals her address from you. Leave her alone, Ronald. If matters are like that, leave her alone to pull out of her past. But that is the most charitable construction—you do not know what she may be doing. In any case, Ronald, get this out of your mind, and forget her—force yourself to forget her. You cannot make her your wife—after what you have told me."

Ronald Vane stood looking at him, his face white.

"That's your counsel, is it, Major Gadsby? Listen to this, then—I will make her my wife, if she will take me, and shall be happy and proud to call her my wife. I will stand by her against all the world, if she will let me. God grant that she may give

me the right to protect her from evil tongues and evil thoughts. And now—good-bye!"

"Ronald! Where are you going?"

The young man's eyes flashed at him.

"I am going to the station! I was going to take my train for London. You can send my bags after me. I shall never see you again. That is all."

"Ronald! You're mad, my boy—I tell you—you cannot go like this—what will your aunt think—and Molly—Ronald, stop—you young madman!" roared Major Gadsby, red with wrath, as the young man tramped away through the trees, taking the most direct line for the village station.

Ronald Vane tramped on, savagely: leaving Major Gadsby staring after him, as he disappeared, with blank dismay and wrath in his face.

CHAPTER IX

"BONJOUR, MISS MITFORD!"

"RONNIE'S gone!"

Molly made that announcement, bursting into Miss Mitford's room in the sunny morning.

Miss Mitford had breakfasted in her room. Her "indisposition" puzzled Mrs. Gadsby a good deal: but she had been all kindness. Molly's governess had never been ill: she could hardly be suspected of malingering now: and puzzled as the good lady was, she was kind and sympathetic and considerate. Certainly, it was not likely to occur to her that the governess's "indisposition" was scheduled to last exactly as long as Ronald Vane stayed at the Yews!

Miss Mitford was seated in a long chair by the sunny window overlooking the garden, and Mrs. Gadsby had come in to ask her how she felt that morning, when Molly burst in with the news that "Ronnie" was gone.

The governess glanced round at her quickly.

"Gone!" she repeated.

"Yes! What a sell!" said Molly. "He was going to stay till tomorrow—but he cleared off last night——"

"Cleared off, Molly?" repeated Miss Mitford, severely.

Molly chuckled.

"I mean, he beat it," she said, "hooked it, Miss Mitford! Anyhow, he went—Daddy says he was suddenly called back to London, and caught the evening train—isn't it rotten, Miss Mitford?"

"I should not call it 'rotten,' Molly."

"No—but I do," said Molly, cheerfully. "He's never met you—and I wanted him to see my governess. I'll bet he's never seen one like you before."

"Little girls don't bet," said Miss Mitford, with a smile.

"Even in a couple of days Molly is losing the good influence of her governess," said Mrs. Gadsby, "but we must not let her bother you till you are quite well again, Miss Mitford."

Miss Mitford rose from the chair by the window.

"But I am ever so much better this morning," she said. "My headache seems quite to have passed off. Molly, lessons again this morning."

"Well, now Ronnie's gone, I don't mind," said Molly, graciously, "and I'm so glad you're well again, Miss Mitford—even if it means lessons. Honest Injun!"

"You are a dear child, Molly," said Miss Mitford, laughing. "But after you have had your writing lesson, we will take 'Telemaque' into the garden, shall we, and do our French in the summer-house. It is such a lovely morning."

"O.K.," said Molly. "I mean, very well, Miss Mitford," she added primly, and the governess laughed again.

Miss Mitford did not know whether she was glad or sorry, when she went down on her way to the school-room, Ronald Vane's sudden departure relieved her of her uneasiness, and made her no longer a prisoner in her room: yet there was something of desolation in the house from the mere knowledge that he was gone. If only it had been possible to meet him on frank and friendly terms, with no secrets to keep—no shadow of the past on her life! But it was not possible—and she had to shut that thought from her mind, with a sigh.

The major's voice was booming in the hall, when she came down the staircase.

"The young ass! Hot-headed young ass! But I must get his bags sent after him—hot-headed young idiot!"

"But, my dear——" It was Mrs. Gadsby's soothing voice.

"Mixed up with some vamping adventuress on the Riviera, by Jove!" the major boomed. "And flying off the handle at a word! By Jove, I——" He broke off, as he saw the governess descending the stairs. "Oh! Hum! Hem! Good-morning, Miss Mitford—glad to see you about again! In better trim, eh, what!"

"Very much so, thank you!" said Miss Mitford.

She passed on to the school-room. The major looked after her, looked at his wife, and grunted.

"That young fool!" he said. "Now, a girl like that—I'd have been glad to see it, if Ronnie had taken a fancy to her. The young idiot! Falling for some painted hussy of the gaming-rooms—pah!"

Miss Mitford's ears burned, as she went into the school-room—her ears having caught the major's last words. She shut the door quickly. But Molly was not, as she had expected, ready in her place: Molly had to be rounded up, and she opened the door again to seek her pupil.

The major was booming in the hall.

"I tell you, my dear, it was not my fault—the young ass went off at the deep end, at a word! By Gad! I merely said that he could not make her his wife—sound advice I think—what? what? A girl picked up among the flotsam and jetsam of the sink of the Continent! Pah! By Gad! He said he would make her his wife if she would have him—do you hear that? His actual words—this Doris Wilmot, whoever she may be—the young idiot thinks he is in love with her, and wants to claim the right, as he calls it, to protect her from evil tongues—mine, I suppose, among the rest, by Jove! And then he walked off—— "

Miss Mitford closed the school-room door again, hastily, hurriedly.

"Oh!" she breathed, pressing her hand to her heart.

She knew, now, why Ronald was gone! And he had said that he loved her—he had said that he would make her his wife, and protect her from evil tongues! He loved and trusted her, in spite of appearances—in spite of worldly wisdom in the shape of the old major.

"Oh!" she whispered, "Ronald!"

Her heart was beating so fast that she felt giddy. She went to the window, and threw it wide open, breathing in the fresh air from the Surrey hills and woods.

That was what Ronald Vane had meant, then—that was why he wanted to see her—that was why! He loved her! He believed in her and trusted her. Ronald!

"Ronald! Ronald!" she whispered.

How long she stood there, she did not know: but she was recalled to herself by the door crashing open, and Molly dancing in.

"Oh! Here you are, Miss Mitford!" trilled Molly. "Waiting for me? Here I am—better late than never! What, what? as Daddy says!"

"We are late!" said Miss Mitford, gravely. "We must lose no more time, my dear."

But Miss Mitford's thoughts wandered from lessons a good deal, and if Molly's writing was bad, and her spelling worse, the governess did not, for once, notice it. The writing lesson over, Molly threw down her pen, in a sea of blots, on the desk, and jumped up.

"Now to get out!" she said. "Shall we leave 'Telemaque' indoors, Miss Mitford?"

"Yes—no—come, come!" Miss Mitford collected her thoughts. "We must not neglect our French, Molly. We have wasted too much time lately, my dear."

And the French books were taken, as they went out of the school-room into the garden, to the summer-house under the yew hedge by the lane, where Molly often took her lessons in fine summer weather. Molly danced along the path by the yews, throwing "Telemaque" into the air and catching the book again as it fell—Miss Mitford following at a slower and graver pace. But Molly, suddenly letting "Telemaque" fall on the gravel, came running back.

"That man, Miss Mitford—he's looking over the yew hedge."

"What man, my dear?"

"That Frenchman—he knows Ronnie, and Ronnie spoke to him the day he came down here, in the village—he doesn't like him, and I don't either—what is he nosing into our garden for?"

"My dear child——" Miss Mitford broke off, and caught her breath. A dark, handsome face was looking over the garden hedge—and Maurice de Poncerf raised his hat.

She stood very still, looking at him, the colour fading from her face.

Instantly, she knew him again—the dark, handsome, cynical face, the bold penetrating eyes—she had seen him often enough in those days at Monte Carlo. The Count de Poncerf, who knew her as Doris Wilmot, of the Hotel Splendide, at Monte—and he had just heard Molly address her as "Miss Mitford." The poor girl's heart almost died in her breast, as she looked at the sardonically smiling face.

Maurice de Poncerf—what, in the name of misfortune, was he doing in that quiet, remote corner of Surrey? If he claimed her acquaintance—if he thrust himself upon her—her brain almost reeled.

"Bonjour, Miss Mitford!" said the count, with an indescribable accent of irony on the name.

The next moment he was gone, passing up the road.

Molly caught Miss Mitford's hand.

"Do you know him, as well as Ronnie?" she asked.

"I—I met him—long ago!" stammered Miss Mitford. "I hardly know him, Molly. I do not like him. Let us get to our lessons, dear."

He was gone. Some strange chance had brought him there—he had seen her by accident—he would not concern himself with her, even if he had learned, as he had, that she was using a name not her own. Why should he? A wealthy lounger of the Coté D'Azur—what had he to do with her? He was gone—and Miss Mitford tried to forget that she had seen him, and to concentrate upon the adventures of the good "Telemaque."

But the Count de Poncerf was grinning, as he walked on by the leafy lane, twirling his cane. He was not easily beaten—and it had been impossible for that young fool, Vane, to delude him. His pretended departure had done the trick—the young fool had not guessed that his departure had been as far as a wayside inn a mile away! So long as he had remained at Yewbank, the charming Mademoiselle would have been kept out of sight—not one glimpse of her had he gained, in many saunterings round and about the house where the young fool was staying. But by a simple trick he had thrown them off their guard—

and now he had seen her! They had believed him safe off the scene—and now he had seen her—in the garden——

That was how it seemed to Maurice de Poncerf. At all events, he had seen her, and he knew now where to lay his finger on the prize he sought—and by what name to inquire for her! Doris Wilmot did not know—few knew—that the once-wealthy lounger of the Riviera was now a man living by his wits—his wealth sunk in the remorseless maw of the roulette rooms. She did not know—only he knew, and Ronald Vane guessed—that he was the paid spy of Marcus Monk, the disreputable millionaire—any source of money being good enough for the man of broken fortunes, now a desperate adventurer.

The count, as he walked and twirled his stick, grinned, with a gleam of white teeth under a black moustache. Monte Carlo again—the whirling bowl, the rocketting ball—the yellow numbers on the green cloth—the drone of the croupier—and victory snatched from the jaws of defeat—oui, mais oui, once he received his bribe from Marcus Monk, and was in funds again to tempt fortune once more—at the cost of—what? Merely the sacrifice of a girl—little enough—a mere bagatelle to Maurice de Poncerf. The count was in high feather as he walked and twirled his cane!

CHAPTER X

THE COUNT'S WINNING CARD!

MRS. GADSBY was a little fluttered, as she came into the school-room, where Molly and Miss Mitford were at tea together. Mrs. Gadsby had a considerable respect for titles—even foreign titles—and the Count de Poncerf's card had impressed her. His excellent clothes and graceful manners had impressed her still further. Miss Mitford had been so quiet, so unassuming, she had never dreamed that the governess had acquaintances so distinguished.

"A gentleman has called to see you, Miss Mitford. He is in the drawing-room. A Count de Poncerf——"

Miss Mitford sat very still.

"An old acquaintance, perhaps," said Mrs. Gadsby. "He tells me that he knows Ronald—how odd that you and Ronald should have a mutual acquaintance! You would like to see him?"

"He—he asked to see me—to—to see Miss Mitford——" The poor girl could hardly articulate.

"Yes: he says that he has some news of an old friend. I will keep an eye on Molly while you are gone, Miss Mitford."

The governess left the school-room slowly. She had to keep calm. What did the man want—why had he come? He had asked to see her under the name of Mitford—did that mean that he did not intend to betray her?

She was calm, but her heart was throbbing painfully, as she entered the drawing-room. A figure rose to greet her—with the dancing-master bow she remembered so well.

"The charming Doris! How good of you to see me," said Maurice de Poncerf. "I ask for Miss Mitford—that, I think, is the name now—but, entre nous, let us use familiar names, n'est-ce-pas? More lovely than ever, Miss Wilmot."

"Why have you come here?"

"Can you ask? In the first place, to see an old friend—in the second, to deliver a message from an older friend—you have surely not forgotten the kind and generous Monsieur Monk, who was so good to you, mademoiselle?"

She caught her breath.

"You come from that—that man?"

"Mais oui! He is desolate that you go—he will welcome you with open arms if you return, mademoiselle—you will take pity on him——"

She looked at him almost wildly.

Maurice de Poncerf scanned her curiously. His opinion of women was founded upon the life he had led—it was not a high opinion: it derived from the inherent baseness of his own nature.

Why she had fled from a millionaire he could not understand. A fancy for that young fool, Vane, was the only explanation that could occur to his mind. But surely not a lasting fancy—she would see reason!

"If that is your message from Marcus Monk, take back my answer! I hate and loathe and despise him—I would sooner see a snake than see him. If that is all, Count de Poncerf, your business here is ended."

"Not wholly," smiled de Poncerf. "Allons donc! Let us talk sense, as you English say. Le bon Ronald is a charming boy, but——"

"Are you mad? Ronald Vane is nothing to me."

"Vraiment! Yet I find you here, in his house—at least in the house of his relatives, n'est-ce-pas?"

"That is sheer chance!"

"Allons! His little love is palmed off on his good, simple relatives under an assumed name—n'est-ce-pas? Mademoiselle ——" He broke off, daunted in spite of his impudence, by the scorn and loathing in her face.

"You dastard!" she breathed.

"Mademoiselle——"

She put her hand to a chair for support. The presence of the man made her almost physically sick.

A dull flush came into his face. Contempt, it is said, will pierce the shell of the tortoise. His lips hardened.

"You do not fear, then, that I tell the good relatives that 'Miss Mitford,' six months it is since, was Miss Doris Wilmot, at Monte Carlo, under the protection of the good Monk——"

"Oh, God!"

"Ah! You would not like?" smiled the count.

She sank into a chair.

"Listen to me, Count de Poncerf." Her voice came with difficulty. "I have never harmed you—why should you harm me? Why should you come here as my enemy? Why should you serve the purpose of a coward and a villain? You find me here under a different name—listen! I will tell you! And then, in heaven's name, go your way, and spare me. Listen!"

"I am curious to hear, mademoiselle."

She was silent for a minute, as if striving to collect herself. Then her voice came, low and tremulous, but clear.

"A year ago, I was with my uncle, Mr. Mitford—my mother was his sister. He had lost money—in the war—it was necessary for me to work—and I was fitted to become a companion, or governess—but—I knew very little of the world, and my poor uncle knew little more. My first experience was in an office, where Marcus Monk saw me. But I was not suited to the work—it was too much for me—I was dismissed. Then came the time of advertising, and waiting—seeking a post—and then—then came Marcus Monk."

She shuddered at the name.

"He was all kindness, or seemed so. He wanted a companion for his wife, who was an invalid on the Riviera——"

"But le bon Marcus—he has no wife!" smiled the count.

"How was I to know that?" she moaned. "He offered the engagement, and I accepted it, with my uncle's approval. A travel agency arranged my journey to the Riviera—I did not see Mr. Monk, again, till I arrived at the Hotel Splendide, where I expected to see Mrs. Monk. Even then he did not undeceive me—he pretended that his wife was ill—that the doctors forbade her to see anyone—in the meantime I was to wait I waited—and the days became weeks—and still I did not see Mrs. Monk.

It was from mocking talk I heard by chance among the waiters that I learned that there was no Mrs. Monk, and that I had been tricked by a dastardly villain into a foreign country. And then —then—he came out into the open, and I learned what it all meant—and I left the Hotel Splendide the same hour. That is the story, Count de Poncerf."

"Ah, çà!" murmured the count.

"I had had everything I wanted—except money! I had little money! I found that I had too little to carry me back to England. In desperation, I went to the Casino—in the mad hope of winning sufficient for my purpose—and—and lost what I had."

"Pauvre Mademoiselle!" murmured the count.

"It was then I met Mr. Vane—in the Casino gardens—and he gave me the help I needed!" she said. "I saw him but that once, and once since."

"Yet you are here——" smiled the count.

"Listen! I reached my home at last—I told my uncle all that had happened—it was more necessary than ever that I should find employment. But—I knew, what I had not understood before, what might be said—what might be suspected—that the name of Doris Wilmot was tainted by contact with that wicked man—it was my uncle's suggestion that I should adopt his name —as if I had been his brother's daughter instead of his sister's —Mitford is my uncle's name, and I took it as my own. I came here as governess to a child—as Miss Mitford—a name to which I have a right. Only two or three days ago I learned that Ronald Vane was the nephew of Major Gadsby, when he paid an unexpected visit here——"

"And when he saw you——"

"He did not see me. I kept to my room while he was here. One morning I met him in the lane, by chance—but he did not know me as Miss Mitford, and he did not know that the same roof sheltered me. He has gone—still not knowing."

She was silent, panting for breath.

He looked at her, curiously, doubtingly. Maurice de Poncerf found it easy to believe evil—not so easy to believe good. Yet it was borne in upon his mind that this was true.

But if it was true—what then?

She sat, looking at him, her eyes beseeching. He did not speak—his thoughts were busy—and she spoke again.

"Now you know my story! You know what I have suffered —what I have escaped. Have pity on me. Go—and leave me in peace. A word to the people of this house will ruin me. I am doing my duty here—I am liked, respected—but if they knew my story, what would they think? What could they think—and believe?"

"What, indeed?" said de Poncerf.

"It would be ruin for me," she breathed, "I should have to go—and where else could I look? Major Gadsby knows my uncle—that is how I came to take my post here. But—driven from here, what shall I do? My uncle—he is old, and poor—I cannot burden him. I have no other relatives. I must work for my livelihood, and what chance shall I have—dismissed in disgrace—without recommendations—if you choose to ask these good people, they will tell you that I do my duty here. Go, and leave me in peace."

It was all true—he could understand that. And he could understand—what the poor girl did not realise—that in telling him all, she had placed an overpowering weapon in his hands. She had hoped to touch his compassion, his chivalry—the compassion and chivalry of a dissolute, desperate roué! And she had placed herself at his mercy; he held the winning card now!

His voice was soft and silky when he spoke.

"Then this house is your last refuge?"

"Yes, yes."

"And if you are driven forth, you are lost?"

"Yes," she breathed.

"But there will be a ready hand to help," he said, "the hand of the good Monsieur Monk. N'est-ce-pas?"

"Death, sooner," she breathed.

"Ah çà! It is easy to say so, but not so easy to die, when one is young and beautiful," smiled Maurice de Poncerf. "Mademoiselle, let me counsel you—to return to the good Monk——"

"Silence, silence."

"I, myself, will arrange all——"

"Be silent."

"You refuse, Mademoiselle?"

"A thousand times, yes."

"Soit!" said the Count de Poncerf, shrugging his shoulders. "But, perhaps, you will not refuse, when you are—in your words—dismissed in disgrace—without recommendation—down and out. N'est-ce-pas?"

"Never!"

"That is a long word," smiled de Poncerf, "Mademoiselle, take my counsel, and exchange this foggy country for a sunny land. I urge you——"

"Will you go—and leave me in peace?" she breathed.

"Mais non! That is not possible, Mademoiselle! For if you spurn my counsel, I have a duty to do here—to enlighten these good people—to put them wise, as you English say, to the true story of their so-respectable governess. And then, petite, what choice will you have?"

She started.

"Oh!" she breathed. "Oh, you villain! You dastard! Oh, you base villain, what has Marcus Monk paid you for this villainy?"

The count's sallow cheek flushed. The bitter scorn of her words and look got under even Maurice de Poncerf's skin.

"Assez!" he said. "Assez, Mademoiselle! I have a car on the road—you travel in that car, or I tell all to the good Gadsby. Take your choice!"

Miss Mitford rose to her feet. Her face was colourless, but she was calm.

"Coward!" she said. "Coward! If I were a man, I would thrash you, Count de Poncerf. Coward and scoundrel!"

She went steadily to the door, and it opened and closed. She was gone—leaving le Comte de Poncerf biting his lip till it bled, his sallow face white with rage.

"Mon Dieu!" he muttered. "Mon Dieu!"

He rang the bell. Five minutes later, with an air of regretful concern, he was telling the story of Doris Wilmot to Major Gadsby—to his infinite regret, his great pain, but feeling it his duty, for they had been deceived, and was there not a child, a little girl, in the charge of cette femme? It was his duty—a painful duty—— The count played his part well: and finally took his leave, with the certain knowledge that Doris Wilmot would leave the Gadsby's house not many hours after him. And then ——! He would be waiting—and she would listen to him then, n'est-ce-pas?

CHAPTER XII

ONLY LOVE MATTERS!

"RONNIE!" exclaimed Molly.

Ronald Vane smiled, and stooped to kiss the child's cheek.

"Where's Daddy, dear?" he asked.

Molly's face, that had brightened as he came into the hall, clouded.

"In the drawing-room—with Mummy—and Miss Mitford!" she faltered. "Oh, Ronnie, something has happened. I—I think

Daddy and Mummy are angry with Miss Mitford—since that man came—that foreign man——"

Ronald started.

"The man we saw in the village the other day, Molly? He has been here?"

"Yes. And—and he saw Miss Mitford—then Daddy—and then Mummy was called into the drawing-room—and then he went—and then Miss Mitford was sent for, and—and—and there's something wrong, Ronnie——"

The drawing-room door opened, and Mrs. Gadsby came out. Her ruddy face was a little pale, and deeply distressed.

"Ronald!——"

"I—I came to speak to Major Gadsby," said Ronald, colouring. "I—I left him rather hastily yesterday—I—I am afraid I was a—a little hasty—I thought I would run down to-day, and—and——"

"I shall leave at once, Major Gadsby." The quiet voice in the drawing-room was clearly audible in the hall.

Ronald Vane wondered whether he was dreaming. He knew that voice—he was not likely to forget it.

"Doris!" he breathed

Mrs. Gadsby hastily shut the drawing-room door. From the point of view of the Gadsbys—now that they knew Miss Mitford's real name, Ronald's call could not have been more ill-timed.

"Miss Wilmot—here——" exclaimed Ronald. He made a stride to the door of the drawing-room.

"Ronald! Stop—— "

He did not even hear her. He opened the door, and his eyes fixed, in amazement and delight, upon a lovely face—white now as the driven snow, but still lovely. The major's deep voice was booming.

"You do not deny, Miss Wilmot, that the statement made by the Count de Poncerf is true——"

"No—except that that bad man has placed everything in the worst light, Major Gadsby. There is nothing—nothing—on my conscience—but I realise that I must leave this house, and——"

She broke off, her eyes on Ronald.

"Miss Wilmot!" He almost ran to her, and caught both her hands. "I have found you again, then—and I find you here."

"Ronald!" Major Gadsby boomed.

"I came to see you, Uncle—to apologise for my hasty action yesterday—though I do not withdraw a single word I said. Uncle, this is Miss Wilmot—of whom I told you. Now that you have met her, you will understand——"

The girl tore her hands from Ronald's, and sank into her chair, covering her face with her hands. Up to that moment she had been calm, steady, her pride upholding her. But this was the final blow—that he—the man she loved—should see her in this moment of shame and humiliation.

"Ronald!" boomed the major. "It is unfortunate that you should be here at this moment—but sooner or later I must have told you. Listen! That is Miss Wilmot, the girl you knew at Monte Carlo—she is also Miss Mitford, who came here as my daughter's governess—under an assumed name, by Jove——"

"Miss Mitford!" repeated Ronald, blankly.

"Yes!—Miss Mitford! And Count de Poncerf has been here, and opened our eyes to the truth. Miss Mitford—I mean Miss Wilmot—does not deny it—that she was at Monte Carlo with that scoundrel Monk——"

"Silence!" shouted Ronald.

"I tell you——"

"Tell me nothing!" exclaimed the young man, passionately. "I will not listen to a single word against the woman I love, and hope to marry."

"Ronald, you young fool——"

"Count de Poncerf is a rascally adventurer. He has misrepresented circumstances that could be explained—to suit his own base purposes!" exclaimed Ronald. He turned to Doris. "Miss Wilmot! trust me! I at least am not fool enough to believe a slander——"

"An assumed name——" boomed the major.

"My uncle's name," faltered Doris Wilmot. "I could not use my own, after—after Monte Carlo. Mr. Vane, believe me——" Her voice broke. "But when you have heard all, what will you believe? God help me." She rose from the chair. "Oh, if only you had not come! It is too much!"

She moved unsteadily towards the door. Ronald was at her side in a moment. Major Gadsby caught him by the arm, and dragged him aside by main force.

"Ronald, my boy, you must listen to me——"

"Let me go!"

"I tell you, you must listen——"

"Let me go, I tell you."

Ronald Vane wrenched his arm loose, as the door closed behind Doris Wilmot. He tore it open, and glimpsed the girl on the stairs.

"Miss Wilmot—Doris——"

She did not look back. She disappeared from his sight, without turning her head. Mrs. Gadsby had taken Molly, crying, to the school-room: Ronald Vane stood alone in the hall. Major Gadsby's red and angry face looked out at him.

"Ronald! You must hear——"

"I will hear nothing!" snapped Ronald Vane. He caught up his hat, and strode out of the house.

He tramped savagely down the gravel path to the gate. But in the lane, in sight of the gate, he stopped and waited. He had found the girl from Monte Carlo—he was not going to lose her again.

But he had not long to wait. Hardly twenty minutes later a slim figure emerged from the gateway, and walked swiftly away towards Yewbank. Doris Wilmot had taken only a dozen steps when he was at her side.

She gave him an almost hunted look.

"Mr. Vane! Leave me—leave me alone——"

He took the little suitcase from her hand.

"I'm carrying this," he said. "You're going to the station?"

"Yes."

"And then—London?"

"To my poor uncle—I have no other home," she faltered. "Mr. Vane, you must leave me—cannot you understand——"

"There was a time when you needed a friend, and you let me be your friend," he answered. "You need a friend now and I am here, Miss Wilmot. I shall not leave you till you are at your uncle's house. And after that, I shall not lose you again."

She gave him a look and walked on in silence, but suddenly she stopped, under the branching trees.

"Mr. Vane, I am dismissed in disgrace——"

"I know."

"They are good people—good and kind—yet they believe——"

"I know! They will learn better later."

"You must leave me——"

"I shall not leave you," said Ronald Vane, coolly. "You heard what I said to Major Gadsby. I love you, and hope to make you my wife——"

"Don't—don't——"

"I've got to tell you! Doris—dearest——"

Neither of them quite knew how it happened. But the suitcase was in the grass, and Doris Wilmot was in Ronald's arms, pressed to his breast, and his kisses raining on her face.

"Doris!" he whispered. "Doris! You love me a little—just a little——"

She was sobbing.

"Of course I love you! I loved you that night at Monte Carlo—how could I help it? But—but—Ronald—oh, my dear! my dear! When I tell you——"

"You're going to tell me nothing——."

"I must tell you—how it came about—it was not as it seemed—you will believe me, because you love me—I will tell you——"

"You will not!" he said, firmly. "You will tell me nothing, Doris, till——"

"Till when?"

"Till we're married!" he said. "Only love matters now."

He picked up the suitcase, and they walked on—like two in a golden dream. At the corner of the lane, a car was standing—and beside it stood a debonair figure—waiting! Maurice de Poncerf smiled as he saw the girl from Monte Carlo—then muttered a curse under his black moustache as he recognised her companion. Then, smiling again, he raised his hat, with his dancing-master bow.

"Mon cher, Ronald——"

"You dog!" said Ronald Vane. And he struck as he spoke.

The dapper, debonair figure went spinning, to crash in the dust. Doris gave a little cry.

Ronald Vane did not heed her for the moment. He stood, with blazing eyes fixed on the sprawling adventurer.

"Get up, you cur!" he said, hoarsely.

But the Count de Poncerf, sprawling on his back in the dust, only gave him a dizzy glare of hate: and they passed on, leaving him there. When Maurice de Poncerf, at last, got into his car and drove away, he was scowling at the universe with blackened eyes, realising that his game was up, and that it was useless to return to Marcus Monk with the news he had for him—and that his chance of tempting fortune again at the green tables had dwindled to zero.

"COUSIN Ronnie—and Cousin Doris!" trilled Molly.

It was only three months later.

In that time Molly had run through three or four new governesses, since she had lost "Miss Mitford." Now she saw her old governess again—not as Miss Mitford, nor as Doris Wilmot—but as Cousin Doris, the wife of Cousin Ronnie. And she rushed to her and hugged her.

The major and Mrs. Gadsby had "come round"—the idea at first being to make the best of what could not be helped: and then they came to a clearer understanding, that a romantic young man's judgment had been surer and sounder than their own. And so Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Vane came to the Yews—for a happy visit, and Molly danced round them in delight, and Mrs. Gadsby smiled, and the old major boomed, and no one could make too much of Mrs. Ronnie—the Girl from Monte Carlo!

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