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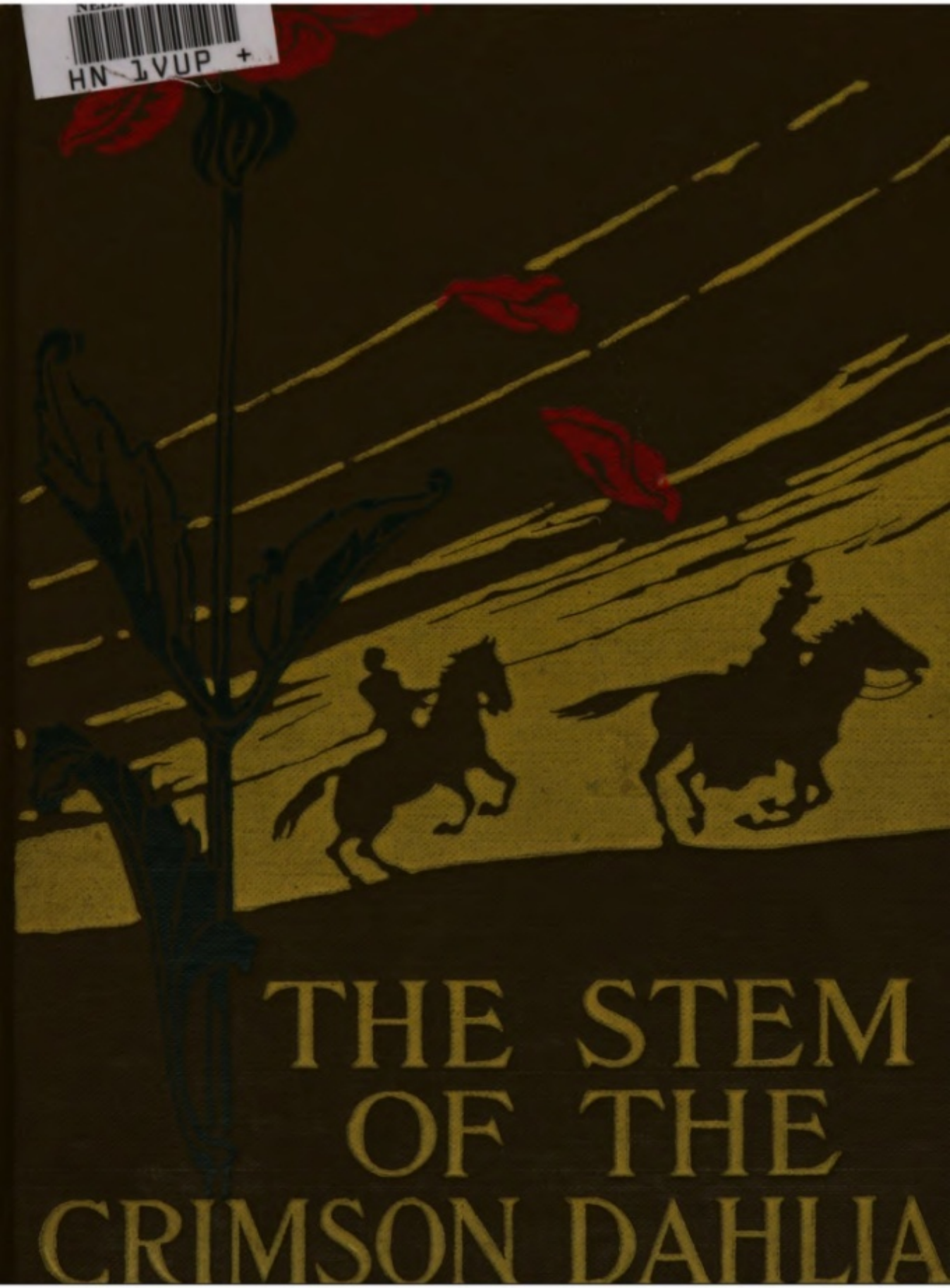

THE STEM OF THE CRIMSON DAHLIA

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" We must not be seen talking together "

(PAGE 66)

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THE STEM OF THE CRIMSON DAHLIA

JAMES LOCKE

New York
MOFFAT, YARD & COMPANY
1908

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TO

E. S. M. and R. S. Y.

"For all the story books you read;
For all the pains you comforted;
For all you pitied, all you bore."

[R. L. S.]

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CHAPTER I.

I HAD obeyed to the letter the injunctions of my brother, an experienced traveler.

"Go abroad," he had said, "and surfeit yourself with the capitals of Western Europe. Then find your way to Constantinople."

Europe had been done, at first with enthusiasm, then perfunctorily. The enthusiasm had sufficed to carry me through three months of London and two of Paris, and later had been re-awakened for a period at Rome. But, after all, I had been disappointed. I had set sail from America with visions of seeing political Europe, historical Europe; and had found instead a Europe which was not only silent as to the great movements of the Present, but dealing out its glorious Past, to the curious, at fifty centimes per head; a Europe of great hotels, and of guides stepping on one's heels with a

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persistence only the more objectionable because it was so obsequious; a Europe made easy by plans and reference books which tell one where things once were, with systematic exactness and with cold-blooded abbreviations that defy the romantic.

I had gone to Paris athirst for the atmosphere of the Faubourg St. Antoine. The Paris which I had known was that of the Revolution; of a wild, drunken mob of the Eighteenth Century, surging backward and forward under a panoply of red-glaring smoke from the pine torches, hurling its curses against the black walls of the Bastille. Find it? Or find anything that would help me to picture it? On the spot where the most stirring episode in all French history occurred, I found modern houses facing handsome boulevards. I located the exact site of the grim old prison by a hand-book which told me where "B. once stood."

That for the Old! And as for the New, show me the porter of a Berlin caravanserie, no matter how gorgeous may be his livery, who can impart to you the secret motives of his Emperor. Tell me how, by wandering up and down Piccadilly or High

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Holborn or the Thames Embankment, a man can be assisted to the extent of one iota in his understanding of England's world-dealing problems. What earthly advantage is there in craning your neck to see the back and silk hat of a Russian Ambassador, crouched down in his carriage, on his way to the Foreign office?

All over Europe it had been the same old story. I was a tourist, a tourist, a tourist, to be fed on infinitesimal crumbs, and plucked of my sixpence and twenty-pfennig pieces for the feeding.

But here, finally, with the steamer swinging slowly into her berth at the Galata docks, was definite promise of all that, elsewhere, I had sought in vain. I could understand at a glance the reason of my brother's injunction to hold Constantinople till the last. Here, I had reached a city in whose streets history, real, live history, runs riot. For the Past, that great triumphant crescent, rising high from the dome of St. Sofia, boasting to the world that it stands where once the Cross of Christ had been planted! For the Present, the sombre gray houses of Pera, where the ambassadors live, and where

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the very street dogs bark at the clatter which the driving wheels of diplomacy produce! And for the Past and Present combined, that nearby long wooden bridge over the Golden Horn, leading from Levantine Galata to Turkish Stamboul! Even from the deck of the steamer I could see the long steady lines of fezzes ceaselessly crossing it, and the gorgeous uniform of a Kavass on the carriage box of some My-Imperial-Master's representative who was scattering the crowd on his hurried way to the great Porte.

The custom house formalities were almost endless, and an hour had passed before I found myself in my room at the Grand Hotel Bretagne. It was already late in the afternoon; but the sight of that Galata Bridge had fascinated me, and there would still be time, I found, to pay a short visit to its entrance before darkness fell. The hotel officials suggested a guide, one of a number of unprepossessing Jews who were hanging about the corridors. A troublesome, servile, unsympathetic guide was just the last thing I wished to have by me. In lieu of one, I chose a jangling, rattle-

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trap one-horse street-car which ran past the door.

Oh, that Bridge of Galata! I know Constantinople fairly well by this time; but never do I go back there without making this spot my first objective. Nor, though subsequent events have brought me in close touch with the Drama of the Near East and I can better understand its crowds than once I did, have those crowds one whit lost their fascination to me. I experience to-day the same feeling, not of curiosity but of awe, with which, just before sunset on that September afternoon, I paid the bridge-keeper his funny little Turkish coin and stepped out upon the rough planking. And what wonder? Where else in the world can one see such a sight? It is not alone a question of diversity in nationalities, of diversity in costume; though you find Turk and Jew and Greek, Bulgarian, Servian, Armenian, Persian, Kurd, in indiscriminate procession. It is the fact that every mother's son of them is a conspirator; a man of tragedy, a man in whom there lies, innate, some futile race hatred, some futile patriotism; a man

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the gratifying of whose secret aspirations would involve Europe in a general war, and change the map of a continent.

That fellow, there — I can still recall, item for item, the figures of my first visit, and, knowing now the different costumes, can place them—that fellow was a dealer in brass, the owner of a little shop and fifty dollars worth of stock. To clear two hundred per cent. was his daily endeavor; his ambition, to see the ancient empire of Lydia rise again under the name of Armenia. That Kurdish porter, struggling along under a bale of hay; how willingly would he bend his back to the load if only every Armenian on earth could be blotted from existence!

And that dapper little Turk, affecting European dress — Alas! poor Egypt, poor Bosnia; alas, poor Islam! But sooner or later, surely, Allah would rise in his wrath and smite these wretched foreigners, these Infidels whose clothes and customs he, as a diplomatic clerk, was forced to imitate.

Even that poor old beggar, leaning like myself against the parapet of the bridge, surely concealed beneath his bosom some longing far greater

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than that with which he stretched out his trembling hand to the passers-by. He was a great character, that beggar, one to be singled out even in a Constantinople crowd. Age and suffering obliterate the lines of race in a man's face, and I could not determine his nationality; and besides, all his lower features were covered by a long, heavy beard of dirty white. That he was a subject of the Sultan I could see, for he wore upon the back of his head a dilapidated fez, from which the black tassel had long since been torn away. His body was entirely shrouded in a long brown cloak, out at elbow, covered with patches of many hues, and edged, in a fragmentary way, with a band of cheap, badly moth-eaten fur.

He seemed a very discriminating beggar; studying the passers-by as they approached from one side or the other; letting many go whom one less experienced in his vocation would address. But once having hobbled out into the roadway to accost a victim, he rarely returned without clutching in his trembling hand a coin. I made up my mind that he was playing upon racial sympathies;

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though the sympathies of which race I could not guess. Certainly his patrons were of all possible grades of life.

One of them was a young girl, a European girl, obviously demi-mondaine. She came walking-slowly along, close to the rail, and I think my mendicant friend and I noted her at the same moment; he, because she seemed a most promising victim; and I, because a European woman, unattended, is a rare sight on the Galata Bridge. Such as one does meet are usually of the Levant; dark, narrow of face, with great black eyes and treacherous thin lips. But this particular girl was short and stout, with almost yellow hair, and cheeks, the artificial pink and white of which appeared almost ghastly by contrast with the swarthy complexions of her fellow pedestrians. Her dress, on the other hand, was inconspicuous. The skirt was made of some plain dark gray material. The waist was of a lighter shade, and over her shoulders she had thrown a cheap wrap. Had it not been for a single huge dark red dahlia which she wore at her belt, I would have noticed only her face.

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She was almost upon the beggar before she saw him. He placed himself directly across her path and stretched out his palsied hand. The girl took a coin from her purse and, giving it to him, was about to pass on, when the old fellow again restrained her. He pointed to the flower at her waist, and said something in his native tongue. She smiled, but apparently did not understand. Then the beggar, to my surprise, addressed her in broken German. I was near enough to them to hear the conversation.

"Does the Fraülein know German, perhaps? Good. Will the Fraülein not give me that flower in her belt? I have a little granddaughter at home; such a sweet little girl. She is sick. I buy her always a flower before I return; and if the sweet Fraülein will only give me that one, it will save me much money. And I will tell my granddaughter that it was sent by one of the grand ladies of Pera. Not so?"

The girl laughingly pulled out the dahlia and gave it to him.

"Take it, you old rogue," she answered, gaily.

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"There are many more where that one came from. And when you present it to the granddaughter, you can tell her that it came from an ambassador's wife."

Giggling at the idea, she went her way, to be swallowed up in the crowd beyond. The beggar resumed his position against the bridge railing, and his seeking for prey.

Although so near, he had evidently found in my appearance something either forbidding or uncharitable, for as yet he had not deigned even a look in my direction. But here might be a guide after my own heart. I corrected his impression by approaching and offering him the munificent gift of a ten-piaster piece. He grasped the coin eagerly, with bows and scrapes and benedictions, and dropped it into the leather bag at his side.

"How comes it," I asked, in the little of the language of the Fatherland that I could master, "that you understand German?"

He looked at me with suspicious eyes.

"I am a Bosnian," he answered, briefly. "I was born just across the Austrian frontier."

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"You know Constantinople very well?"

"Very well."

"Do you wish to earn another silver piece? If you do, stand here and tell me what some of these costumes mean. What is that man, for instance?"

"A Kurd."

"And that one?"

"That is a man of Erzeroum."

He was hardly what you would call talkative, and seemed more anxious to be rid of me than to earn my money, no matter how easily it might be done. But he nevertheless remained on the outlook for coins of the natives, searching the marching crowd with experienced eye. Had I not studied his previous actions, I should have thought him waiting for some special person. He kept edging away from me, too, and his answers to my pursuing questions became more and more curt; and his nervous, trembling fingers picked at one another.

Glancing down at his hands, I laughed.

"I fear I must help you purchase another flower for your granddaughter. See what you have done to that one."

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The old fellow raised his hand, and gave a little cry of consternation. The dahlia had been half plucked of its pętals.

"Oh, what have I done? But no, I will make it this way. See, I have the petals, here. I will take them home; and my granddaughter, with a little flour and water, will paste them upon paper, that the blossom may always keep and remind her of the beautiful lady. I must hurry to her now, lest the little leaves lose their color; not so?"

He hobbled off in the direction of Stamboul. His thoughtfulness for the sick granddaughter, however, must have been very ephemeral. A few minutes later I caught a glimpse of him at the far end of the bridge, begging as energetically as before.

And then occurred, in rapid succession, a series of very strange coincidences.

The first one came with the return of the dapper little Turk in European clothes whom I had noticed earlier in the afternoon. He walked jauntily along, his fez cocked to one side, his cigarette held, with most ridiculous affectation,

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between two fingers of his raised and extended hand. Without stopping, he crowded between me and the bridge rail, and pursued his way into Galata. The peculiar thing was this. After he had gone, I chanced to look down at my feet. There, close to the rail, lay the remnant of a dahlia; the remnant, as I could see by the few remaining petals, of a dark red dahlia. There could not be two such remnants on that bridge at the same moment. And yet, what could possibly be the reason of such a thing? What earthly motive could that dandy have had in taking a wrecked flower from the hand of a dirty old beggar?

I stooped and picked it up. My curiosity was aroused. No, there could be no doubt of its being the same one, for there on the injured centre were the identical marks and bruises which I had seen when it was in the possession of my quondam guide.

Incident number two followed closely upon the heels of its predecessor. A carriage came rapidly across the bridge. It contained an elderly lady, whose appearance did not especially attract my

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attention at the time; an elderly gentleman, presumably an American; and a young girl, American without doubt; the prettiest American girl that I have ever set eyes upon.

They were apparently tourists, returning late from the Stamboul bazaar. When directly opposite me, the carriage, at the gentleman's signal, stopped. He opened the door and the young girl descended. As she did so, I heard her exclaim in answer to some protest of the elder woman:

"No, I really must get out. I won't have that view spoiled by such a hideous foreground as this bridge."

I had been so engrossed with the human scenes before me that up to that moment I had failed to notice what Nature was doing, beyond. At the girl's words I turned my eyes in the other direction. Well might she be jealous of anything that interfered with the glory of that twilight; of the great dull red sky bank in the west, its edge cut and cut again by shadowy minarets, rounded and hollowed out by the huge silhouetted domes of the Stamboul mosques; the glory of the gray, faintly

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tinted sky in the east, framing the heights of Pera, whose shadows had already lost their identity; and between, of the black and silver waters of the Golden Horn, their rumpled surface glistening under the bows of scurrying little caïques, lapping lazily against the sides of a cluster of lateen-rigged fisher-boats, and swirling in mysterious eddies against the buttresses below us.

The girl came close to my side, and, with her arms resting on the rail, drank in the wonderful scene. But she seemed to be looking for something else as well; searching with furtive glances the ground at her feet. Once, from the motion of her eyes, I thought she was counting the number of railposts between the end of the bridge and the spot where we were standing. Then she caught sight of the dahlia stem which I was still holding, twirling it carelessly between my thumb and finger. She again resumed the study of the black water; but now her face bore distinct signs of trouble and perplexity.

The anxious look suddenly vanished. She turned to me, her eyes dancing.

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"You are an American, are you not?"

"I certainly am," I answered. "There is no necessity of asking you the same question."

She laughed.

"I suppose you mean that if I were not an American girl I would not have dared to do such a thing as speak to you. But then, if we can do it at table d'hôte, I don't see why it should not be proper on the Galata Bridge. Do you? For my part, I am patriotic enough to feel inclined, over here, to actually throw my arms about every countryman I meet. You are sure to get that way, you know, after you have been away from home for three years."

"Your inclination is of a most charitable nature," I responded. "Of course, if the impulse should become uncontrollable, I——"

"Oh, it won't, never fear. I always manage to master it."

Her eyes wandered away to the scene beyond.

"Have you traveled enough to realize that that view"—she moved her little hand toward the patterned shadow of Stamboul—"cannot be

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equaled in all the world? Can you not imagine yourself a Saladin, kneeling with his spoils of war before his lady-love? Not that the Turks are supposed to treat their women in that way; but then, they might have, once. We should live up to our surroundings; don't you think so? They are too grand for the conventional present. Play that that flower in your hand represents the spoils, and give it to me. Never mind the kneeling, though."

I laughingly held the dahlia's remnant to my nostrils.

"I'm afraid the 'spoils' are self-evident: now, if this were only a rose ——"

"Oh, but it would be dark before you could get a rose. We shall have to get on with this poor thing."

She reached forth her hand, most regally; and, with a low bow, I placed the dilapidated stem, with its few forlorn petals, in her fingers.

"'And his lady-love vanished from his sight; and thenceforth, for all his years, he wandered over the earth in search of her, but found her not

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again,'" laughed the girl; and before I could answer in kind, she had stepped back to the waiting carriage.

The rumble of its wheels had hardly died away before incident number three occurred. A Greek priest, with a heavy black beard — Athens had shown me many of his brethren — came slowly across the bridge. In his long black cassock and high hat his thin figure appeared almost snake-like. When within four or five posts distance of my position, he stopped and bent nearly double, in a vain groping for something in the shadows. At each succeeding post these tactics were repeated, until he was well beyond the spot where I was standing. Twice he went over the whole ground, and then was apparently about to give up his search as futile when he noted my presence. He stepped politely forward and addressed me in very good French.

"Pardon, Monsieur; but may I ask whether Monsieur has long been here?"

"On this spot, do you mean? Half an hour or so."

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"And did Monsieur happen to see an old beggar standing near him?"

"I did. He left almost ten minutes ago. I don't know what all this mystery means; but if you are looking for that dahlia stem," I added, "a young girl has it."

He started visibly, but at once recovered himself.

"Ah! Ah-h! A young girl? Monsieur did not perhaps notice whether the young lady to whom he gave it had blond hair?"

"No, she did not. She was an American girl; one of a party of tourists. You can probably find her at one of the large hotels. And you are wrong in another point. The beggar did not give it to her. I did so myself."

"Monsieur?" He was clearly at a loss. "But how long ago was this, Monsieur?"

"Some thirty seconds before you came on the bridge. She was in a carriage going back to Pera."

"The fool!" he muttered to himself. "He did not tell me that!"

Without thanking me, the priest turned on his

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heel and strode off at a rapid gait, in the direction which my momentary lady-love had taken.

And after a moment's hesitation, but without a warning thought as to whither interference in a mystery of Constantinople might lead me, I strode after him.

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CHAPTER II

PLAYING DON QUIXOTE

LOOKING back upon that pursuit, I realize that to undertake it was probably the most foolhardy act of my life. I was alone. I knew not one street of Constantinople from another, except as I had read of them in the guide-books and noted on plans the location of the most conspicuous buildings. I was unknown. The steamer, with such few friends as I had made during the four days' trip from Brindisi, was probably already steaming through the Bosphorus on its way to the Black Sea ports. I had put myself in touch with neither our Legation nor Consulate. It might even be doubted whether the porter at the Grand Bretagne would again recognize me. And last but not least, my passport, surrendered on disembarking, had not yet been returned by the police.

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But I was young and venturesome. In my ignorance of the East, I could not know, of course, whether beggars who speak German and Greek priests who speak French are every day sights or unusual. But I reasoned that, when they are linked together by a succession of blondines, Turkish dandies and American girls, all eager for the same worthless dahlia stem, something must be stirring. I had come ashore ready for adventure; thirsty for it, in fact; and whether this was a conspiracy, a criminal plot or a love affair, its ingredients certainly indicated excitement. Besides, I had not liked the look of that priest as he strode off, in probable pursuit of my countrywoman. If harm or discomfort was threatening her, I owed it to chivalry to stand by for her protection. The little tingle which still remained from that incipient flirtation carried with it certain responsibilities, and I did not propose to shirk them.

The fellow, though having only a few seconds start of me, was lost to sight by the time I made up my mind to go after him; and it was only by swift walking that I caught him again, in a side

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street just beyond the bridge. He turned into the entrance of the funicular railroad tunnel, and soon we were both ascending the steep incline to Pera, in different compartments of the same car. Issuing from the station at the top, he turned to the right and plunged into a dark, narrow, roughly paved alley, empty of all save the yellow curs that were just beginning their nightly prowls for food.

The alley opened upon a wider street which, from the comparatively large number of its lamp-posts, seemed to be one of the principal thoroughfares of Pera. Diagonally across from the corner was a huge black building which, to my surprise, I recognized as my own hotel. I did not dare to enter and ask whether my passport had been returned, for fear of losing my man; and it was well that I resisted the temptation. He paused for a moment at the corner in apparent indecision; then, as a street-car came toiling up the hill from Galata, jumped on board and went inside. Under the light from the great lamp at the hotel entrance, I looked up in my guide-book the street railroad system of Constantinople and found that this

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particular line led to some villages well beyond the limits of the city. It seemed, therefore, that my chase might easily be a long one. I signaled a cab-driver at the curb and explained my wishes by pantomime.

Whether cab-drivers of the Orient are in the habit of driving passengers in secret pursuit of street-cars, I do not know; but as soon as we started I found this one to be a past master in the art. The car was soon overtaken, and my driver slowed down to a very gentle trot. Between cross-streets he fell back, but only to such a perfectly measured distance that if the car stopped anywhere to let off a passenger, we were never more than ten feet behind when it came to a standstill; and on each such occasion he sharply turned the carriage and so gave me a good view of the person alighting, without making myself conspicuous.

The pursuit took us first through the Grand rue de Pera, already ablaze with smoky lights and swarming with its nightly outpourings of thin-faced, treacherous-eyed Levantines. Thence we passed into the open spaces surrounding what I

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have since identified as the artillery barracks. At the further end of the series of buildings which comprise these there is a little garden, surrounding a café. Here the car halted, and I saw the priest step from its platform. I rapped upon the window, and the driver, though giving no sign that he had heard me, promptly turned into the next street and halted in the shadow. I descended, gave him a gold piece, and he proceeded on in the same direction, leaving me standing there in the darkness by the side of a large tree.

I crept cautiously back to the corner and beheld my man, not fifty feet away, in energetic conversation with a man much smaller than himself. They were too far off, of course, for me to hear anything of what was said, but this did not much matter; it was hardly probable that they were using a language which I could understand, anyway.

The conference lasted about five minutes; the priest doing most of the talking. Then, without troubling himself to make any adieus, he suddenly turned about and strode away, coming in my

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direction. I dodged back to my tree and hid behind it. He passed me, not five feet away, walking rapidly and resolutely; and as soon as sufficient distance had been laid between us, I followed. There were no lights along the road and, so far as sight was concerned, I might have been in pursuit of a phantom. But I could hear his energetic footsteps, rapid and steady in the distance; and regulated my pace by them, letting their sound grow neither louder nor fainter and concealing the noise of my own progress by walking with my heels free of the ground.

The road was hemmed in on both sides by walls, eight or ten feet high, behind which, to judge from the trees which overhung them, lay either open country or villas situated well back from the street. I had lost track of our direction, almost at the start, and now I knew not whether we were traveling north or east or west. Another thing began to trouble me. I had undertaken the pursuit largely in the thought that if I had unwittingly involved a countrywoman in trouble, I should be on hand to protect her when

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it fell. But all localities where an American girl could possibly be found were now being left behind us; and my conscience told me that knight-errantry had given way to foolish curiosity. But I kept on, silently dogging the footsteps in the distance, refusing to back down from I knew not what.

We had been going for at least half an hour before I was able to ascertain our direction. Then the moon came up, full and round, in front of us and a little to the right. We were accordingly traveling northeast. The added light introduced a new complication; for to avoid it, I had to keep well against the wall on my right, where the walking was by no means so good. Several times I struck forcibly against loose bricks and cobblestones, making what seemed an unconscionable noise. Then, too, my legs began to pain. I was striding along at four and a half miles an hour, virtually on tiptoe, and the tension of the muscles grew almost unbearable. Twice I had to stop for rest, and make up the lost distance by subsequent running. The path was very uneven,

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leading first up hill, then down, with many turns though few cross roads. I judged from this that we were on some road which ran along the face of the hills lining the Bosphorus. This opinion was confirmed, a few minutes later, when the wall on our right was for the moment discontinued. For, below me I could see a long double row of shadowy black roof tops; beyond them, a mosque, ablaze with lights for the evening service; and in the distance the dark abysmal spaces where lay the Bosphorus. Here and there, glinting faintly upon its smooth surface, twinkled the signal lamps of merchantmen at anchor before the Golden Horn, and the single lanterns of belated caïques sweeping swiftly homeward in the rapid current. And beyond the Bosphorus, again, shone the lights of Scutari, on the Asiatic shore; its mosques and minarets brilliantly outlined, bridging the waters between two continents with bright dancing shafts of gold.

The strange romance of the view would alone have made me pause. But beside that, the moon, in the absence of a shielding wall, struck full upon

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the road, and I was obliged to let the priest obtain a good lead before venturing to cross the open space before me. As I stood waiting, I saw below, in the road which ran along the shore of the Bosphorus, the lights of a carriage, rapidly moving northward; away, that is, from the city. I followed them with my eye as they passed, and until they were perhaps a quarter of a mile beyond me. There they stopped; and then, strangely enough, first one of them, then the other, vanished from sight. Under ordinary circumstances the incident would have passed unnoticed. But I was feverish with the mystery of the Orient that night, and prone to attach undue significance to any and all things. It struck me as most curious that the occupants of the carriage should find it necessary, in that forsaken road, to extinguish its lamps; and yet someone had obviously felt the need of such precaution. In the meantime, my priest was rapidly increasing the distance between us. I could no longer hear his footsteps. By dint of hurrying, however, I brought them within earshot at last, and found that he had turned into a dark

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side road, and was plunging at a great rate down the hill to the lines of houses below us.

When he reached the road which I had seen from above, he again turned northward. The fellow's energy seemed to have no end. I was gradually sickening of my foolish adventure. After all, he would probably turn into one of the many gateways, which I could see cut into the walls lining the road, and disappear. The doors were solid and, if once my quarry managed to put himself behind one of them, the game would clearly be over; its only outcome, to me, a long and very anticlimactic trudge back to town. But, as Fate would have it, I had delayed my withdrawal from the pursuit just a whit too long. We had about reached the point where, as nearly as I could judge, I had seen that carriage halt, when from the darkness ahead there came a sudden rush of feet, muttered oaths, and then the sound of a sharp scuffle. Without thinking, I dashed forward.

My priest was in the thick of it. Somewhere along the road he had picked up a stout cudgel, the size of a walking stick. He was backed against

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the wall, full in the moonlight; laying heavily about him with his weapon, ably defending himself against the onslaughts of four shadowy figures. He had evidently been down at least once; perhaps in the first sudden attack; for one side of his flying cassock was white with dust. His face, too, was covered with blood. But in some way he had managed to get upon his feet again, and now, in spite of the odds, was fairly holding his own; darting out, first upon one of his assailants, then upon another, then back to his wall again; thrusting, slashing, guarding, with his club, ready on all sides at once. Sympathy makes strange shifts of front at times. It was enough that with the odds of four to one against him he was putting up a most gallant fight, and deserved victory. At any rate, let that be my excuse. I do not know how I got within the circle, without being turned upon before I reached him. But I did, and the next instant, the priest and I were back to back, staving off an attack redoubled in its energy.

The incidents of the fight after I joined it have

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remained only vaguely in my mind. It lasted but a moment or two. I remember the sheen of a revolver, and that the hand which held it was struck up, with the cry, in French: "None of that. We want him alive or not at all!" I remember meeting one assailant with a straight thrust of my stick which caught him in the mouth, and that I felt the give as the ferrule broke through his teeth and jammed against the back of his mouth. Whether that thrust cost me my guard I do not know. But the next instant I was down. I indistinctly recall being trampled on, and that with each kick my head ached the more. And, very vaguely indeed, I recall the falling of another body across my own, and then the uncomfortable jolting of a carriage. But that is all.

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CHAPTER III

PERSONA NON GRATA

I AWOKE to strange surroundings. At first I was conscious only of the fact that I was in bed and that my head was aching. No; aching is not the word. It was bursting. Putting my hand to my temple, I encountered heavy bandages. I did not know how they came there, nor why; nor, for the matter of that, did I care. My one longing, for the time being, was that I might sleep. Gradually, however, this feeling wore off, and I mustered the strength to look about the room. It was dark; but I saw that the darkness was artificial, and that the sun was shining outside; for through the small *fleur-de-lis* shaped opening in the solid shutter of the window came a single dust-sparkling beam of light, casting upon the floor a strange caricature of its pattern. From the angle at which it fell, I judged that the hour

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was either about ten in the morning, or three in the afternoon.

Gradually my eyes became accustomed to the shadows, and I began to make out the objects in the room. It was such as one might expect to find in a pension or second-class hotel in Germany. On the pine floor, which was painted brown, lay a small cheap rug. The walls, except for a round mirror, were bare, but stained or painted gray. The furniture consisted of two chairs, one of them upholstered, a table with rickety legs and cheap slate top, a washstand, a clothes-press, and a little table at the head of my bed.

On the latter, by the side of a water pitcher, lay a paper. I reached for it and, after something of a struggle with the weak light, made out to my surprise that it was my passport. Yes, and there in the corner was my suit-case, and there my trunk! Yet this was certainly not the room to which I had been shown in the hotel, and in which I myself had seen those articles deposited. Nor, from it's general aspect, could I believe it to be any other guest-room in that hotel. If it was, then the

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prospectuses describing the luxurious furnishings of the Grand Bretagne were even less truthful than is usually the case.

I crawled painfully from my bed and tried to walk to the window. The task was too much for my strength, at first, but I finally covered the distance by easy stages, resting at the foot of the bed and again against the table. Once at the window, I climbed upon the chair and put my eyes to the little opening in the shutter. The sun struck me full, and was answered by such a throb of my sore brain that in starting back I nearly lost my balance.

I tried again, this time more cautiously, and made out that the window opened upon a narrow alley. Directly across from me was the wall of a gray building, some fifteen feet away. A number of its windows came within the range of my vision, but there was apparently no life behind their grimy panes. From the fact that the roof was only slightly higher than my window, I concluded that my room must be on at least the third or fourth floor, and this I confirmed by craning my

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head so that I could look downward. I could make out three rows of windows in the opposite building, and just see the edge of the street below, with a steady stream of fezzed heads moving through it, and a shaggy, unkempt dog lying asleep upon the sidewalk.

This did not tell me much; but, as I made my way back to bed, I at least knew that I was still in Constantinople, and probably in Pera; and also, from the number of pedestrians in the street, that the building was probably located near one of the greater thoroughfares of the city. There was no hope of learning more until someone came into the room, and there was no bell by which that someone could be called. I thought for the moment of exploring the premises beyond the door, but decided that it would be wiser to wait until I had recruited my strength.

An hour passed before the house gave any signs of life. Then, just as I was about to doze off, I heard the soft grating of a lock in its catch. I turned my eyes and saw that the door of my room had quietly opened, and that someone was

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studying me. I recognized my visitor at once; it was the blond-haired girl who had given the beggar the dahlia.

She staid there only long enough to see that I was awake; and, without speaking, softly withdrew her head and closed the door. Once more I heard the lock turn. They were making me a prisoner, it seemed. From one point all doubt had certainly been removed. This was mystery with a vengeance.

There was nothing to do but await developments. If my gaolers were secure enough in the house to venture to lock me in, I reasoned, it would certainly be of no use to call for help. I was too weak to struggle; and I doubted, too, whether to raise a rumpus would help under any circumstances. And, on the other hand, if I was not being particularly well treated, I was also not being badly used. My head had been carefully bandaged; I had been undressed and put to bed. A protracted convalescence had apparently been expected, and anticipated by the securing of my luggage; and, if this was true, then I might expect

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to be as well looked after until my strength returned as up to the present time. If only they would bring me something to eat!

As it turned out, food was on the way. While I was ruminating on the situation, someone politely knocked and then opened the door. Leaving it ajar — I was correct, it seemed, in assuming that my captors did not fear an attempt at escape — a burly, good-natured Greek or Armenian servant entered the room with a tray of coffee, rolls and butter, and cold meats. He greeted me most jovially, asking by signs whether I wished to be served in bed or have my meal at the table. I signified the latter and, at the same time, instituted a campaign to gain some information as to my whereabouts. But we could not get together on a language. He knew, or pretended to know, no word of English, German or French; and departed, with many bows, leaving me as ignorant as before.

I breakfasted heartily, and felt the better for it. Though my head still ached beyond endurance, the food brought strength. Soon I was able to

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walk about the room on fairly steady legs. Again I tried my luck at the window, but learned nothing new except that the heavy shutter was nailed shut. I even went so far as to try the door; but that, as was to be expected, had been securely locked by the attendant when he departed. There was no other form of amusement left me except to experiment with the solitary sunbeam which entered the room through the shutter. A few minutes of observation here, showed me that the ray's angle of inclination to the floor was gradually growing greater, and hence that it was still morning.

Two or three hours passed before my solitude was again interrupted. The blond-haired girl then came in and attended to the bandages on my head. She, like the waiter, seemed jolly and care-free, laughing heartily at the size of the hen's egg on my temple and apparently having great fun at my expense. But she nevertheless refused to speak or, rather, to admit that she could understand me. Having already heard the girl talk in German, I was exasperated at my

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failure to extract anything from her. But neither cajoling nor anger affected her determination to remain silent.

Her visit was followed, as before, by that of the waiter, who brought me a really sumptuous dinner. It was after he had departed with the relics of this meal that I made the only important discovery of the day. Standing by the door, I heard the man come back along the passage but stop before he reached my room. A key was inserted in a lock, the latter snapped back, and then I distinguished the rattle of dishes and also a few low words. Someone was being fed in the next room as well; someone on whom it was necessary to turn the key, and who, therefore, was probably, like myself, a prisoner.

I waited for some time, to be sure that he was alone, and then rapped sharply on the wall which separated us. No answer. I rapped again; and again, with my ear pressed tight against the plaster. Yes, there it was; faint, but still an answering knock. There it came again. I responded; and again it came, a rapid tattoo. I called, as loudly

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as I dared, but without success and really without hope of success. Except for the rather wicked consolation to be derived from knowing that someone else was also in trouble, this was a most unsatisfactory game; and I finally gave it up. But I knew that, after the fight, the Greek priest and I had been brought to the same house.

The climax to the day's adventure came about five o'clock, when the lady of the golden hair again appeared, followed by a man whom I at first mistook for a Turkish general, so gorgeous was his uniform. The girl at once set down the lamp and departed; and the general, who turned out to be a police inspector, or whatever the corresponding official may be called in Turkey, opened fire.

"Is Monsieur ready to start?" he asked in French.

"Start? Start where?"

"For Vienna. Monsieur has only an hour in which to catch his train."

"My dear sir," I said, somewhat shortly, "I have n't the slightest idea of going to Vienna. In fact, I am very comfortable where I am."

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"Oh, Monsieur errs. It is the wish of my master that he leave at once."

"But I don't intend to go. I have only just arrived," I persisted.

"I regret very much that Monsieur should take such an attitude." His blandness nearly drove me wild. "But I am instructed to use force if he resists."

"Force? Show me your authority," I demanded.

"Gladly, Monsieur."

He pulled from his pocket a large and very formidable document and handed it to me. It was certainly an official order, stamped with the imperial seal, directing that I be placed on board the six o'clock train for the West, and escorted to the frontier.

"It 's an outrage, a damnable outrage! "I exclaimed. "What have I done? What crime have I committed that I should be deported? Why ——"

The officer deprecatingly shrugged his shoulders.

"That I cannot say. I know only the orders

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which, emanating from my master, must be enforced."

"But you can't enforce them. You have no right. I am an American citizen. I demand to be led to our Legation."

Again a shrug.

"I regret. I regret, Monsieur, that that is impossible. My orders are to allow Monsieur to hold communication with no one. We are losing much time, and it is imperative for him to dress at once."

"But ——"

"See, Monsieur, I have taken the liberty of purchasing a ticket to Vienna. My master, it seems, does not want you in Constantinople. It is best that you quietly obey."

Blind with rage though I was, I could see that nothing was to be gained by struggling. But if ever the Sultan of Turkey meets with all the trouble which I called down upon his head that night, his future life will be even more uncomfortable than his present existence. I dressed, slammed back into their place the few things which I had

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removed from the suit-case, put the passport in my pocket, and announced my readiness to proceed to any destination his miserable Government might select. But, so far as getting any satisfaction from my wrath was concerned, I might as well have belabored a stone wall. The angrier I grew, the more imperturbable and bland became my tormentor.

Arm in arm we went through a long damp corridor and down a winding stone staircase to the courtyard, where a carriage was waiting. We took our places inside; the officer pulled down the curtains; my trunk and bag were set on the box. We started for the station, and reached it, without my obtaining even an approximate idea as to where the house containing my prison-room was located.

Only once on the trip was the silence broken. I asked whether they were graciously condescending to send me away by the Orient Express, or had decreed an ordinary Turkish train. The officer gave vent to one of his everlasting regrets.

"I am very sorry, Monsieur. The Orient

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Express left at five o'clock. Monsieur's train leaves at six."

At the station we were met by a fat Turk, in European clothes, who took my passport away and had it *visèed*. This was the only formality. I was packed into a first-class compartment of the train, and the fat Turk stepped into one of the second-class, adjoining it.

My impassive friend, bowing his farewell to me, imparted a final word of advice.

"Monsieur will do well to remain in his carriage until he reaches Hungary. My friend is traveling with him and the police of Bulgaria and Servia are instructed to see that he does not descend."

He was off. And so, nearly, was I. But a wild scheme was formulating itself in my brain. It lacked but a few minutes of six o'clock, our starting time. But on the next track, just across the platform, stood another train, the huge sleeping cars attached to which rendered its character obvious. The Orient Express, which was supposed to have left an hour before, had for some reason been held back. Judging that the faster

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train would be the first to pull out, I held myself and my bag in readiness. The great ado which always precedes the departure of *trains-de-luxe* from European stations was already reaching its climax. The warning gong sounded; the Orient's wheels began to turn. I waited until the rear car was just opposite my own compartment; and then, weak as I was, I seized my bag, jumped, and ran for it. As I clambered up the steps, of the express, I saw my fat guardian dash after me, his face as red as the fez which had fallen from his head, his coat tails flying, his hands waving. He was too late. The Orient Express had quickly caught its speed, and we pulled out into the dusk without him. For the time being, at least, I was free of the Turkish Police.

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CHAPTER IV

HOW long the success of the ruse would last, I of course did not know. A telegram, sent ahead, might stop me anywhere. But there was some hope that the two officials, rather than confess their carelessness, would report that I had been safely deported; a hope rendered the more justifiable by the thought that, whatever my offense against the Turkish government, it could not have been of exceptionally heinous nature. Nevertheless, I kept well within my compartment all that night, and breathed freely again only the next morning, after the Bulgarian frontier had been crossed without hindrance.

Of course this plan that I should continue on to Vienna was all nonsense. I had come East to see Constantinople, and intended to see it. I believed that the hornet's nest which I had

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unconsciously stirred up would soon become quiet again, and made up my mind to rest for a few days in Sofia, the Capital of Bulgaria, and then quietly return to the scene of my discomfiture. I certainly needed a rest, whether in one place or the other. My head was still badly swollen and aching furiously, and I was weak. Then, too, I was temporarily a marked man. Although I had discarded the voluminous bandage, the great patch of adhesive plaster on my temple would make me a conspicuous object for some days to come.

But a good night's sleep, nevertheless, had had wonderful effects. As I walked into the dining car for breakfast, I felt almost gay. It was late, and most of the passengers had apparently already finished their meal, for the only occupant of the car, as I entered, was a young woman who sat at one of the tables in its forward end, with her face toward the engine. I was assigned a seat near the rear and, having nothing better to do, lingered long over my food; partly devoting my time to the study of the quaint, thatch-covered hamlets, the

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gorgeous, broken, sun-burned hills, the strange costumes, which made up the scenes through which we were passing; and partly amusing myself in idle perusal of my fellow-traveler's back.

She was obviously familiar with the country, for the landscapes over which I myself was so thoroughly enthused drew from her scarcely a passing glance toward the window. Then, too, I heard her speak to the waiter in one of the native languages, and from these two facts I at first judged that she was a Bulgarian. But the poise with which, in spite of her youthful appearance, she carried herself, and the rough gray traveling dress which, unless I had lost my guess, was the product of no *modiste* this side of Paris, proclaimed her a "cosmopolite." And the rich brown hair, with the little ears just peeking from it ——

I was suddenly made conscious that my fellow traveler had finished her breakfast and was rising from the table. She turned about, and our eyes met squarely. The American girl of the Galata Bridge! Her cheeks paled for an instant, and then even to those selfsame little ears, her countenance

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assumed the color of hot embers. Without a word, without another look, she swept by me.

"And he sought her over all the world, but found her not," I mused.

I realize that in attempting to renew our acquaintance regardless of her painfully burning face, I was guilty of a slight lack of delicacy. But she herself has since told me that I am forgiven. And besides, her own philosophy regarding the subject was to a certain extent a justification of my action. "If two Americans may speak to each other at table d'hôte, why not on the Galata Bridge?" she had asked. If on the Galata Bridge, thought I, why not in a railroad train? Be my excuse what it may, I paid my restaurant bill, and followed her.

But immediate success was not to be mine. By questioning the guard I located her in the rear carriage; and, as a matter of fact, in the compartment next my own. Unfortunately, however, she had made it her castle; and, with curtains down and door tight shut, apparently proposed to defend it against all comers.

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An hour had passed before I again saw her. I must have fallen into a doze in the meantime, for I remember being well startled by the opening of her door, and just catching a glimpse of her dress as she walked back past my compartment to the rear of the car. I looked out and saw her standing at the end of the corridor, watching from a rear window the receding, tower-clad hills of Philippopolis, as their lines gradually blurred in the dust-mists of the plains from which they rise. I waited a little, to avoid too obvious an appearance of pursuit, and then was about to join her when I thought I heard a step outside, followed by a slight noise in her compartment.

Under ordinary circumstance it would have been ridiculous to pay any attention to so trivial an incident. But from the moment of her appearance on the Galata Bridge, the atmosphere of this girl had been one of mystery. My sore head kept that fact well emphasized. So I investigated. I stepped quickly from my door to hers, and found inside a small, swarthy, black-bearded Slav, nervously struggling with the lock of her

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traveling-bag. I reached in and brought my hand down heavily on his shoulder.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

He jumped as if a shot had struck him; but I retained my grip.

"What is it? Robbery?" In my energetic haste I had forgotten that these people are not regularly conversant with the English tongue.

He wriggled, trying to break my hold.

"I am — If Monsieur will kindly ——"

"Oh, you speak French, do you? Well, see here. You have n't succeeded in stealing anything, as yet, apparently; so, unless the young woman to whom that satchel belongs desires it, I won't turn you over to the authorities. But you are not to try a second time. Which is your compartment?"

He fortunately recognized the fact that he was in the grasp of a man with considerably more weight and muscle than he himself could show, and sullenly yielded.

"The next one, Monsieur; on this side. But ——"

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"Then get into it quick! And remember that if you show your head again before we reach Sofia, you will be met there by a gendarme."

I slammed his door on him and walked down the corridor to the girl, who, still lost in her thoughts, had not turned round. The incident had at least provided a very tangible excuse for speaking to her.

"I trust you will pardon me," I began, grandly. "I just now found one of these thieving little natives trying to go through the luggage in your compartment. He ——"

She wheeled upon me like a flash, her face deadly pale; and simultaneously, her fingers sought the little hand-bag which she carried, feeling its contents. The safety of something valuable was thereby evidently assured; for the look of terror in her eyes suddenly gave place to one of relief.

"Oh! What a shock you gave me. A thief, you say?"

"Yes. I don't think that he managed to confiscate anything; but perhaps you had better go in and see. The man is shut up in his own

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compartment, now. He will not trouble you again."

She quickly led the way back, and I showed her where the fellow had been at work over her valise. A moment's examination of its contents satisfied her that nothing had been taken; though, honestly, so nonchalant had her manner become after that first momentary spasm of fright, that any examination at all seemed superfluous. She already knew, obviously, that the intruder's search had been for some object which was still safe in her possession.

"It is all right," said she, gaily, as I closed the valise for her. "I thought for an instant that he might have stolen my letter of credit. That is the one dread under which I labor when I am traveling alone."

I might perhaps have told her that letters of credit are not long, round, hard objects, such as I had seen outlined in her hand-bag, but thought it better to let her little fabrication pass unchallenged. So I merely indicated that, so long as the scamp was still in the same car with us, it

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would be better for her to have a protector at hand. She rather scoffed at the idea at first, but the wedge once having entered, I did not propose to lose my advantage, and insisted.

"And so, to make it perfectly proper for me to sit here with you," I concluded, with high-handed determination, "I will introduce myself. My name is Markham; John Markham, of New York. You know," I added, "we do it at table d'hôte."

She burst out laughing.

"I suppose we do. And really I ought to thank you for your solicitude. It is very foolish of me, I know; but I am nervous. I have been over this route a score of times, but I can never forget that this very train was once held up by brigands."

"Will you please tell me whether the date of this coin is odd or even," I interrupted.

"Why, what are you doing?"

"Trying to decide whether to call you Miss Smith or Miss Jones. You have n't told me your real name, you know."

"Oh, how stupid! You are very persistent, are n't you? My name is Ewing, please, my Lord."

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"Thank you," I laughed. "Now we are on a proper footing." Then, more seriously, as we sat down: "Won't you tell me something about this region? You say you know it. Ever since daylight I have done nothing but marvel over the landscapes and the people; and yet I am as ignorant about it all as a clam."

Her face at once grew serious, almost enraptured, as she glanced out at the long rolling plain and the faint distant mountain line.

"Indeed, you may well marvel! With all its backwardness, its poverty and ignorance, it is one of the grandest countries in the world. I was born here in Bulgaria, and I love every inch of it."

"Born here? Ewing is n't exactly a Bulgarian name, is it?"

"Oh, I am a thoroughbred American, of course. But Father, who is a civil engineer, spent a long time here, just after the war between Turkey and Russia, superintending the construction of some public works. We did n't go back to America until I was eight years old. And, now that Father has retired from business, love for this quaint

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country has brought us back again. He has endowed a couple of training schools here and, for the last three years, while they were being built, we have been dividing our time between Sofia and Constantinople."

"Don't you find it rather rough living?" I ventured.

"Oh, not a bit of it. In Constantinople we have our own house. And even in Sofia the better classes are cosmopolitan and talk and dress and eat just like anyone else. But it is the peasant that fascinates me. We Americans, who are so spoiled by big things, rather scoff at the backwardness and insignificance of these little Balkan States. But look out the window at the three peasants in that road, with their sheepskin coats and swaddled legs. They seem primitive enough, I admit. But just think of what those men have been through, and of what a country they are building up, with no foundation except their own untutored energy. For centuries and centuries their ancestors have been worse than slaves, without rights; robbed, persecuted. They have

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worshipped their God, even, only under fear of massacre. Twenty-five years ago they were set free from Turkish rule. Their very instincts of self-government had been smothered by their masters, and they were a race of peasants. They were given a country which, from end to end, had been ravaged and laid waste by the struggles of two foreign armies. Their cities were in ruins. And yet see what they have done. Look at their municipal government, their schools, their ——"

She paused for breath. The municipal government of Bulgarian cities, I must confess, held for the moment much less of interest for me than did her great brown eyes and the cheeks flushed with the fervor of her argument. But if only that I might enjoy the contemplation of these, I continued baiting her.

"But is it fair to ascribe all this progress to the people themselves?" I asked. "Did n't the Powers assume both the initiative and the responsibility in reforms, as well as in other things, when they appointed Alexander of Battenberg, a member of one of their own royal families,

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to govern the principality? Yes, and followed that by the selection of Prince Ferdinand as his successor?"

Miss Ewing instantly bridled.

"The Powers, indeed! What sympathy have they with the interests of Bulgaria? Alexander was simply an agent selected to further their own schemes; and Ferdinand is another. If England had the welfare of the Christians of the Balkan Peninsula at heart, there would be no Macedonian Question to trouble the conscience of Europe. But instead of assisting them, she simply ties Bulgaria's hands, and refuses to let her protect even her own people. And it is the same with Austria. The only one of the Powers that has shown any charity at all is Russia. But even after Russia herself had gone to the extent of shedding her blood to relieve the Balkans of Turkish oppression, the others intervened and sent the Macedonians back into servitude. Do you think that nations which would do that could care anything for the principles of humanity, or give Bulgaria their miserable Alexander from any

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altruistic motives? What Bulgaria needs to-day is a ruler of her own race, not a foreigner whose patriotism is made to order. If she were once given such a leader, Bulgarian troops would within a year end the Turkish massacres in Macedonia, and bring freedom to two million souls."

I cannot say that I agreed with all this. Miss Ewing's enthusiasm perhaps rendered her judgment somewhat partial; but she, herself, at any rate, was thoroughly satisfied as to the correct method of solving the problem of the near East. We discussed its *pros* and *cons* quite elaborately; and then the conversation drifted off to less weighty matters. Here I found her as witty and bright as, in her larger beliefs, she was energetic. The hours and miles were passing very quickly by and I had almost forgotten my aching head, when she suddenly spoke of it.

"What an awful bruise that is on your temple. How did you come by it?" she asked "You did n't have it when I saw you in Constantinople."

The question, or rather her naïve way of asking

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it, took my breath away. I had opined that, unless I was all wrong in attaching significance to her part in the incident of the red dahlia, she knew very well the cause, not only of that wound, but also of my subsequent captivity and deportation. Her eyes, nevertheless, gave indication only of a sympathetic interest.

"I am not quite sure as to how I did receive it," I answered; "though I am rather glad it happened. Otherwise I would n't be here. I had quite a series of adventures after meeting you. They extended all the way from assault to deportation."

She looked at me with wide opened eyes.

"Oh! How interesting. Tell me about it," she commanded.

I went over the story of my rough experience; but avoided all show of connection between it and the travels of the dahlia stem. My fingers had already been burned by that conspiracy, if conspiracy there was, and I proposed henceforth to steer clear of the rôle of the dangerous man who knows too much. I looked for some sign

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of relief, in my companion's face, at my apparent failure to put two and two together. But she was either wholly innocent or a consummate actress. I might have been talking to a sympathetic child.

"Speaking of Constantinople, by the way," I remarked, with all available lightness, "I trust you have treasured that dahlia stem."

She hesitated for just the slightest breath. It might have been only embarrassment which flushed her face with red. I hardly dared observe her closely, and could not tell.

"I — I — Was n't that the most ridiculous scene?" she exclaimed, with a laugh. "I honestly could n't help it. The setting was too romantic not to have some action in it. I was awfully forward, I know; but" — she used her eyes a bit, here — "But I think you forgave me."

"Not on the spot. Now that I have found you again, however, you are pardoned."

She laughed again, and turned the conversation. And I did not learn, from her own lips, whether the dahlia had been preserved or not.

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Late in the afternoon the train pulled into the station at Sofia, and we prepared to alight. The inquisitive gentleman whom I had found investigating Miss Ewing's valise had taken my admonition to heart; and not until we ourselves were almost at the door did he emerge from his compartment. I saw him as he came out, and turned to Miss Ewing.

"There's the chap who was trying to rob you," I whispered.

She glanced back over her shoulder. This time her naïveté did break down. She grew absolutely white, and reeled for an instant against the side of the car. Then, as I stretched out a quick hand to prevent her from falling, she braced herself to a tremendous effort for self-control, and proceeded out the door.

Suddenly, while deep in wonder and concern, I felt an appealing hand rest upon my arm.

"I can trust you, can I not?" She spoke eagerly, in a low, hurried tone.

"Absolutely."

"Then listen. Stop at the Hotel Macedonia.

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Three days from now, come to me. I will let you know where I am to be. But if you don't hear from me, take this to the Sveti Stefano. The Sveti Stefano; do you understand?" she whispered, rapidly and almost inaudibly. "Put it in your pocket; quick. And now, good-bye; we must not be seen talking together."

My hand mechanically closed upon a small hard object.

"But I — I—" I began.

"There is no time. Hide it," she whispered, and darted away down the step.

I thrust the thing into my inside pocket, and with my fingers still undecidedly touching it, watched her disappear into the crowd emerging upon the platform. A voice at my elbow roused me.

"Hotel Macedonia, sir?"

I nodded assent. The burly runner who had spoken gathered up my belongings, and pushed them and me into one of several omnibuses. It was not until I had been deposited at the hotel and was alone in my room that I ventured to make an examination. Then I found that the thing which

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THE SILVER VINAIGRETTE

I was to take to the Sveti Stefano, whoever or whatever that might be, was a silver vinaigrette about five inches long. And inside it was the stem of a dahlia, with a few shrunken petals clinging to its heart.

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CHAPTER V.

COMMON sense told me that under the circumstances there was only one course to be pursued. Had I followed it, I would have trampled that wretched emblem of conspiracy to unrecognizable pulp, and thrown the vinaigrette out the window. But I did not. Miss Ewing — I began to doubt whether that was really her name — had asked me whether she could trust me, and I had answered, "absolutely." Much as I should have liked to go back on my word, I could not bring myself to the point of throwing her over. It was a clear question of practical prudence versus quixotic chivalry. And yet, with the memory of that frightened face before me, even more beautiful in doubt and trouble than in repose, I deliberately chose the quixotic course. There remained, therefore, but to use all possible

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caution in the fulfilling of my task, and so far as was consistent with good faith, to keep my own hands clean.

My mind would have been more at ease, I think, had I known the nature of the dahlia's destination. For all I could guess, the Sveti Stefano might be a human being, or it might be an ice-cream parlor. My ignorance on this point made the formulation of a campaign difficult, to say the least; especially in view of the secrecy which was obviously required, and the also obvious fact that the opposing side was cognizant of the conspiracy's existence. I knew not whom to trust. Had there been an American Consul in the place, I would at once have sought his advice. But, unfortunately, the United States settles its few consular affairs, in Bulgaria, through the representative of Great Britain; and I reasoned from Miss Ewing's conversation on the train that, if I were involved in some political plot, England was certainly picked out as one of the victims. And yet to the English Consul I must needs go, with some sort of tale; for under any circumstances

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it was absolutely necessary to secure some connections or other in the city. But I resolved to put off this step until later, that I might first establish myself in the rôle of tourist.

As good fortune would have it, my sight-seeing itself gave me the first inkling as to the objective point of my mysterious mission. I spent the next morning in roaming about the city, peeking into a corner here, a corner there; at one moment thoroughly at home in such a formal, even-fronted street as one might find in any town of Western Europe; hobnobbing at the next with sheepskin-coated peasants before the dark booths of an oriental bazaar, or pausing for a glimpse through some window at which might be seen a quaint old woman weaving her granddaughter's gala-costume on an antiquated loom. I found that Sofia had much history. From the crumbling walls of the old Byzantine town, to the mosques, abandoned, turned into museums, into schools, after the Turkish emigration of twenty years ago, clear object lessons told the successive chapters of its story. One old church, or rather the ruin of what appeared to

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have been a church, especially interested me; a dilapidated round tower on a square foundation, tucked away in one of the side streets, and evidently aged beyond the ordinary, even for the capitol of a Byzantine province. I tried to find among the passers-by someone who could tell me its name. But none of them understood what I said. The third man whom I accosted, however, apparently at least comprehended my wish. He answered me in two words: "Sveti Georgi."

It was not much; but I at least knew, now, that Sveti Stefano had something to do with either a church or ruin. Georgi and Stefano were obviously proper names.

In the course of the afternoon I called upon the British Consul, offering as an excuse for my visit the question as to the advisability of complaining to the American Minister at Constantinople about my deportation. Mr. Fenn-Brook, as the Consul was called, was a very jolly, red-cheeked young man, well-bred and typical of his class; a young man of broad, practical ideas, by heritage and instinct a diplomat; and now just completing

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the course of training through which Great Britain puts the oncoming guardians of her international affairs. He listened with interest to my carefully expurgated story, and, when I had finished, burst into a roar of laughter.

"By Jove, Mr. Markham," he finally managed to exclaim, "they did hook you, did n't they? If Turkey would only devote as much attention to growing oysters on its men-of-war as to possible conspiracies, it would become the richest power on the continent. But seriously, you know, my advice is to let the matter drop — that is, if you wish ever to return to Constantinople. We find any number of cases such as yours. Some idiotic, bustling official gets an idea into his head that he is of more importance than all the Franks in Christendom; and this is always the way of showing it. The chances are that, even if you complained, your minister would be met by a denial from the Porte that anything of the kind had ever occurred. But from that moment on, you know, you would be a marked man in Constantinople. Go back there peacefully, to-morrow, on the other

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hand, and I will wager a pony that you find yourself forgotten."

"Would your advice be the same if an outraged Britisher came to you with such a story?"

He laughed.

"Oh, that's an entirely different matter, you know. You people are not mixed up in the Eastern question; but we who are have to keep our list of grievances well filled. The more we have, the better we can put the screws on."

He shifted the conversation. "Have you any engagement for the evening?"

"No."

"Come and dine with me at the club then. Pardon the informality of the invitation. We have few visitors here, you know, and you will liven us up a bit. We have a rather nice little club; and it will probably interest you to meet some of these Eastern diplomats. The Servians, and Bulgarians, and all these people, you know, take their silly relations quite to heart."

I thanked him most cordially and rose to go.

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As I reached the door, I turned, as if by an afterthought.

"By the way," I asked, "can you tell me what that old ruin near the cathedral is — I mean the little one with the round tower? I ——"

"The English chapel, as we call it? It is the Church of St. George. The old pile has rather a history, in a way. It was originally a pagan temple. Then Constantine made a church out of it, and finally the Turks changed it into a mosque. Rather interesting, that, is n't it?"

"Thanks. It certainly is. The ruin must be about the oldest building here, is n't it? I was much taken by it this afternoon. Oh, I forgot. At what time do you dine?"

"Seven. I shall call for you. You are stopping at the Macedonia, I assume."

"Yes. I 'll be waiting for you. In the meanwhile I think I shall put in a little more time at sight-seeing. One of my friends told me to be sure to visit the Church of St. Stefano before I left. I think I 'll go there now. Can you tell me where it is?"

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My diplomatic assay was of no avail.

"St. Stefano's? I know of no such place."

"Are you sure? He could hardly have been mistaken."

"It is new to me. But wait a moment. We can look it up."

He went to the bookcase and took down an official-looking volume.

"It is as I thought," he said, after a moment's search. "There is no such church in Sofia."

I cannot say that as I walked back to the hotel my task seemed any the less difficult. The arena had widened from the confines of Sofia to the whole of Bulgaria; and to locate an insignificant church in that wide range of territory, and without diligent and open inquiry, seemed almost an impossibility. My one clue was the fact that Miss Ewing had elected as a centre for her operations the city of Sofia. She had apparently intended to deliver the dahlia stem in person; therefore, I argued, its destination was in all probability a spot not so far removed from the city as to make the journey an arduous one for a woman to

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undertake. That I might easily be mistaken in these premises, I knew. But if I was, the proposition seemed almost hopeless. I admit praying most fervently for the only thing which could bring relief from such perplexity — a note from Miss Ewing. But my box at the hotel was empty.

The porter, however, had a surprise for me.

"A gentleman has twice been here to see Mr. Markham. He would leave no card, sir. He says that he will call again."

A visitor? I was not aware of a single acquaintanceship east of Vienna. Visions of the Constantinople police came to my mind.

"An American?" I asked, carelessly.

"No. A Bulgarian gentleman."

"An — an official?" To save my life I could not have kept down that choking sensation.

"No. That is, at least, he wore civilian clothes."

The relief was great. "Very well," I directed. "In case he comes before seven o'clock, you can show him to my room."

I nevertheless went upstairs in a state of suspense. It was barely possible, of course, that the

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visitor was an emissary of Miss Ewing; but I reasoned that if she sent for me at all, the word would come in the shape of an ordinary invitation to call upon her. That would certainly be the most natural and also the least suspicious method of re-obtaining possession of the vinaigrette. It seemed far more probable that I myself had again fallen into the toils.

I spent a miserable two hours in my room, dreading the expected visit yet kept a prisoner by my anxiety to see the man and have it out. I idled away the time in a thousand and one ways, my heart in none of them; writing letters, only to tear them up; stropping all my razors; listing photographs; and what not else; growing more nervous and tense with each successive occupation. It was nearly seven o'clock before there came the awaited knock at my door; and then entered — the fellow whom I had detected at Miss Ewing's valise.

"Monsieur Markham," he at once began, in French, "permit me to introduce myself. My name is Paroff. I am the Secretary to the

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Bulgarian Political Agent in Constantinople. We met under rather unusual circumstances yesterday; otherwise I should have made myself known to you at that time. But for certain reasons I thought it better to avoid any confusion."

I bowed.

"You probably thought very wisely. Whether I did the same remains to be seen. The young lady ——"

"Oh, but it is of Mlle. Ewing that I wish to speak. You know her well, perhaps?"

"I fail to see why I should discuss Miss Ewing with you."

"Pardon! Pray be careful Monsieur. We are dealing with much weightier matters than you suppose."

I contented myself with a shrug of the shoulders.

"You are a stranger to the Balkans, are you not?" he resumed, after a pause.

"I have a three days' acquaintance with the country."

He raised his hand in deprecation. "That is very little, Monsieur. Otherwise you would

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know that it is not well to dabble in conspiracies here."

"Your visit and conversation would probably become more intelligible if you told me what the conspiracy is in which I am supposed to be mixed up."

He smiled enigmatically.

"Has Mlle. Ewing not told you?"

"She certainly has not."

"You have not known Miss Ewing long? In America, perhaps?"

"I have not. I had never known even her name until yesterday, after you tried to rob her valise."

"Oh, Monsieur; not 'rob,'" he protested, with exasperating condescension. "My duty made it necessary to ascertain whether Mlle. Ewing's valise contained no papers which might be of value to us."

Thus far our fencing had been done on our feet. After recognizing my visitor I had seen no occasion for undue politeness or for even inviting him to be seated. But, as he smiled out his last words with

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all the suavity of a wily Slav, he calmly walked over to my desk, sat down in the chair before it, and glanced at a half-finished letter. The audacity of the action was too much for me.

"Get up from that chair, you insolent spy," I demanded. He rose, and I went on: "Now, see here, Monsieur What's-your-name, you already have cause to know that I dislike scenes. But you can take your choice between two things. Either you justify this behavior by telling me exactly what this plot is in which Miss Ewing and I are supposed to be involved, or you will pardon my violence if I kick you from the room."

He calmly resumed his seat, and, with his shoulders hunched up, his hands, palms together, between his knees, smiled a cunning, evasive smile.

"Pardon, Monsieur," he said. "I did not accuse you yourself of being involved in anything at all. But Mlle. Ewing, Monsieur, is engaged in a conspiracy to sell ——"

He was interrupted by a vigorous rap at the

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door, followed by the appearance within the room of the jolly red face of the British Consul.

"All ready, Mr. Markham?"

His eye fell upon my insolent visitor.

"Hello!" he cried, to my utter surprise. "Where in the world did you come from, Paroff? I had no idea that you two men knew one another. Has Markham told you that we are dining together at the club to-night? You will of course come with us, won't you?"

Monsieur Paroff rose serenely to his feet.

"Wiz ze great plaisair," said he, in English.

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CHAPTER VI

THERE was nothing for it but to yield to the situation with the best possible grace; the Consul, either from stupidity or from sheer wilfulness, refusing to see that anything was wrong. Arm in arm with Paroff on the one side and myself on the other, he conducted us to the club, keeping up a running fire of conversation on the way; conversation which set my spine a-shivering.

"You are quite the best person we could have found to dine with us, Paroff. Markham here is rather an expert at diplomatic intrigue; are you not, Markham? Do you know, Paroff, he thrust his nose into a deep conspiracy before he had been in the East twelve hours. In fact, he is here because the Constantinople police disapprove of him. You must tell Paroff that

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yarn, over the soup, Markham. And Paroff will repay you with the latest developments in this last mystery. Won't you, Paroff? Unless Markham was in the plot himself, as he probably was, the whole story may be news to him."

"What story is that," I asked.

"The Bulgarian Political Agent in Constantinople seems to have been objectionable to someone," returned Fenn-Brook. "At any rate, he has been kidnapped. It happened, by the way, on the very night of your own adventure there."

"Ah—h," breathed the slippery secretary, "Monsieur Markham certainly must tell us of his adventure. He dislikes to talk of himself. He has not yet related it to me."

I made up my mind then and there that he would never hear it, at least from my own lips. I cast about for some other topic of conversation; but Fenn-Brook himself introduced a new theme, which proved equally merciless.

"By the way, Markham, we have been enjoying the society of a very charming countrywoman of

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yours, a Miss Ewing, of Cleveland or some such place. Do you chance to know her?"

I shuddered.

"She was on the train coming from Constantinople yesterday. I had a little talk with her then," I answered.

"Capital sort of a girl, is n't she? Rich, too. I dare say those things are exaggerated a bit, but people say that her father has a tremendous pile. We are quite daft over her here in Sofia. All the bachelors in the diplomatic corps are downright in love with her, and there's some danger of international complications. All, that is, you know, except Paroff. He is quite the last horse in the race; are n't you Paroff? We really should n't talk of her, Markham. Paroff is quite cut up. She snubs him right and left. I 'll lay a pony, though, that he proposes to her in spite of himself."

"Pardon? I do not understand the English ver' well," said Paroff, stiffly.

"Oh, yes you do. You know it perfectly. But you can tell your love affairs in French, if you wish.

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For myself, I hate to talk the silly language; don't you, Markham? Here we are at the club."

If all the conversation was to be like this, a very delightful evening indeed was in store for me. Our entrance, however, afforded at least a brief respite from the torture; and I determined henceforth to control the flow of talk myself; to keep my companions so busy listening to American yarns, and to anything else non-suggestive of the East, that Paroff would forget the problem in hand and let me alone. Little I knew the difficulties of my path.

The Diplomatic Club of Sofia is, in one sense of the word, a most ordinary affair; a rambling, red-tiled one-storied Bulgarian house, unpretentious both without and within. It has but one main room, which contains a few small drinking tables and one long table, on which lie the dominating newspapers of Europe. On one side of this general hall folding doors open into a bowling alley; on the other, into the dining-room, a cheaply decorated apartment, also furnished with one long table and several smaller ones. Into this

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Fenn-Brook led us directly, asking, as we crossed the reading room,

"Which do you prefer, Markham, a table for three, or to dine with the crowd? All the bachelors in the corps eat here, you know."

Believing that greater safety lay in the greater number, I promptly elected to meet his confrères.

"Very well. Come along. I 'll introduce you. Gentlemen, permit me to present my friend, Mr. Markham, of America." And he rolled off to me a long list of "off's" and "itches," in response to each of which some man rose, bowed low over the table, and gravely resumed his seat. The air seemed somewhat frigid for the moment; but Fenn-Brook promptly broke the ice. He would endure no formality.

"Sit there, Markham, and you, Paroff, next him." He took his place at the head of the table and turned to an olive-skinned gentleman in extremely loud clothes — "I say, Lapouros, why can't your people keep your beggarly Greeks in Macedonia quiet. Do you know they have been killing a lot of Bulgarians again? I had to see the

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Prince about it to-day and lost my morning canter. I have been bilious ever since as a result."

The Greek representative bowed.

"If Monsieur le Con ——"

"Oh, cut titles during dinner. I will call upon you formally about it to-morrow. I spoke of it now only because I have no appetite. Waiter, some burgundy. By the way, Shevutkin, speaking *en famille*, is it true that you had a hand in this disappearance of the Bulgarian Agent in Constantinople? There's a rumor about to that effect."

The gentleman addressed as Shevutkin smiled. "Russia does not descend to such play, my friend."

"Oh yes she does. You need n't be ashamed. It is quite legitimate down here you know; especially if it is as well done as in this instance. What is your own explanation of the affair, Paroff?"

Paroff hesitated.

"I—I have nothing on which to base a theory," he finally remarked. "Everyone knows as much about it as I do; which is simply that my chief

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left his bureau about four o'clock in the afternoon, last Tuesday, and has not yet returned. Until further details have been acquired there is no good in discussing it. I am sure," he added softly, "that the gentlemen would be much more interested in this mysterious adventure which Mr. Markham experienced on the same evening."

Their eyes turned upon me. In my anger I could have risen and choked the man for his calm, smooth insolence. But no appropriate excuse for avoiding his challenge offered itself, and I was obliged to tell the story as best I could. It was not a simple task; for I was conscious throughout that if the assumed conspiracy was at all extensive in its scope, some one, at least, of that diplomatic assemblage must certainly be cognizant of it; and that, for such a one, I was betraying to the public a conspirator's secret. I tried to study unobserved the faces of my hearers, that I might know from whom to expect danger. But only once did I detect a suspicious sign, and this came from Paroff himself. I gave the same version of the story as I had previously rendered to Miss Ewing

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and to Fenn-Brook, omitting all reference to what had happened on the bridge and claiming that I first saw the priest only on the road up the Bosphorus. It was at this point that I heard Paroff utter three words.

"Ah! a priest."

His voice was low, very low, his lips hardly giving an indication that he had spoken. But in a flash I recalled something which, until that moment, had escaped my memory; the picture of the priest standing in conversation with another, smaller man, just after he had left the street-car. In the deep twilight I had been unable to distinguish this man's features, but I remembered his stature, and still more, his bearing. And stature and bearing were those of Paroff, the man beside me at the table.

I do not believe that my face showed anything. I know my voice did not. But to finish that story was a work of mental anguish. I managed to do it and had the sense to enlarge, before I had finished, on my absolute ignorance of even the appearance of my captors and the whereabouts of

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my prison; and to remain silent as to both the blond-haired girl and the fact that the room next mine was the prison of another. Paroff, I think, was little wiser when I ended than before I began. And as for myself, I had learned two things: First, that the captured Greek priest and the missing Bulgarian Agent were one; second, that when Paroff said that the Agent was last seen at four o'clock on that afternoon, he lied, for he himself had seen his chief at seven.

The rest of the meal passed off quietly enough, and I soon recovered my equilibrium. For the matter of that, I even began to find a certain charm in the unique atmosphere of my surroundings. It was strange to see these pigmies aping the manners of a great diplomatic corps; preserving — so far at least as Fenn-Brook would let them — an attitude of the most weighty and grandiose reticence, insisting to the end upon the dignity of their calling; resolutely refusing to admit that their powers were not plenipotentiary in fact as well as in name. Well, it was an amusing game, and perfectly safe. They could fuss and bicker and present their

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grievances and threaten *ad libitum;* take themselves most seriously; and yet, after all, every make-believe diplomat there must have known that his hands were absolutely tied, that his government could not back up a single demand without the prior consent of Mother Europe.

Dinner over, six or eight of us adjourned to the bowling alley, where the bars of State were sufficiently lowered to permit of an international match. With the rivalry of the game and the circulation of more wine, as the evening wore on, we actually began to manufacture fun. The reading room, behind us, also gradually wakened up, and through the folding doors I could see a number of drinking parties gathered about the tables. One of them, seated close by the entrance of the alley, threatened even to become hilarious. By midnight it had passed from hilarious to worse; and just about midnight occurred the last unfortunate event of the evening.

I was at the time engaged in a game in which the Servian representative and I were standing Fenn-Brook and someone else, no matter whom.

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At any rate, the score was close and the outcome depended upon me, With a chance to tie, my last ball rolled off into the gutter, ten feet from my hand. The shouts of victory and discomfiture, respectively, attracted the attention of the drunken crowd by the door, and just at that moment Fenn-Brook made a disastrous remark.

"By Jove, Markham," said he, "you must never tell your friend, Miss Ewing, of that shot. She would disown you as a fellow-countryman."

With the words, one of the men outside rolled into the room, glass in hand. I recognized him at once, although the last time I had seen him he had worn a fez and the imitation frock coat of a clerk at the Porte. It was the dandified little Turk, or rather the fellow whom I had apparently mistaken for a Turk, who had dropped the dahlia stem at my feet on the Galata Bridge.

He came up to us, looking at Fenn-Brook and myself.

"Meesh Ewing? Who I hear shpeak ze name ze Meesh Ewing?" he demanded, thickly, in broken English. "I proposhe ze toas 'Meesh Ewing.'"

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As politeness, even under such circumstances, required, Fenn-Brook and I reached for our glasses. The incident would have been over and forgotten the next moment had the intruder not seen fit to proceed, with the astounding words,

"I make ze marr'ge wiz Meesh Ewing."

Fenn-Brook laughed and raised his glass. He may possibly have regarded it merely as the senseless ebullition of an intoxicated man about the reigning belle.

"I congratulate you, Zemoff," he returned, lightly. "When does the event occur?"

As for myself — Well, to make my position clear, I must first of all explicitly disclaim any belief in the nonsense of love at first sight. I deny that even at that moment I thought of Miss Ewing in any such light. But those words roused in me an ire unmanageable. I realized in an instant that, ever since my handing her that dahlia stem on the Galata Bridge, she had scarcely been out of my thoughts; that, although it was not for love I was putting my head in a noose, it was at least for a feeling far beyond any which an acquaintance-

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ship of a few hours would normally produce. Call it interest if you will. At any rate, its depth was sufficient to make my blood boil now. That its object should be married to this silly, insignificant, paralyzed fool! I raised my glass, as if to accept the toast, and then dashed it, contents and all, upon the alley floor. Then, picking up Paroff's glass, I turned to Fenn-Brook.

"To the safe future of Miss Ewing," I said, and clinked with him.

The room was in an uproar in an instant. Zemoff, as Fenn-Brook had called the cad, turned absolutely green with drunken rage.

"Wha'! Wha'! You do drink wish him an' yet wish me not!"

"I will drink that toast with any gentleman; not with a drunken little Bulgarian sot."

"Bravo!" I heard a voice behind me say; "you certainly do put your foot in it, Markham, but — Bravo!"

I remember only very indistinctly the rest of what happened. The picture comes to me, rather confusedly, of Fenn-Brook and myself standing

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