"Business good?" he asked.

Also the wines.

No-business decidedly was not

good. The waiter was voluble. Busi-

Monsieur le Comte's liking. . . .

tersely. "But remember one thing.

After the coffee has been brought in, I

do not wish to be disturbed under any

"M'sieur le Comte de Guy?"

waiter paused as he came to a door,

words. "Under no circumstances

"Mais certainement, Monsieur le

As he spoke he flung open the door

and the count entered. It cannot be

said that the atmosphere of the room

was congenial. The three occupants

were regarding one another in hostile

silence, and as the count entered they,

with one accord, transferred their sus-

For a moment he stood motionless,

"Good evening, gentlemen"-he still

spoke in French-"I am honored at

your presence." He turned to the

head waiter. "Let dinner be served in

With a bow the man left the room,

"During that five minutes, gentle-

men, I propose to introduce myself to

you, and you to one another. The

business which I wish to discuss we

will postpone, with your permission,

till after the coffee, when we shall be

In silence the three guests waited

until he unwound the thick white muf-

fler; then, with undisguised curiosity,

they studied their host. In appearance

he was striking. He had a short dark

beard, and in profile his face was aqui-

line and stern. The eyes, which had

so impressed the manager, seemed

now to be a cold grey-blue; the thick

brown hair, flecked slightly with grey.

was brushed back from a broad fore-

head. To even the most superficial ob-

server the giver of the feast was a

man of power; a man capable of form-

ing instant decisions and of carrying

And if so much was obvious to the

superficial observer, it was more than

obvious to the three men who stood by

the fire watching him. Each one of

them, as he watched the host, realized

that he was in the presence of a great

man. It was enough: great men do

not send fool invitations to dinner to

men of international repute. It mat-

tered not what form his greatness took

-there was money in greatness, big

The count advanced first to the Am-

"Mr. Hocking, I believe," he re-

marked in English, holding out his

hand. "I am glad you managed to

The American shook the proffered

hand, while the two Germans looked at

him with sudden interest. As the man

at the head of the great American cot-

ton trust, worth more in millions than

he could count, he was entitled to

"That's me, Count," returned the mil-

lionaire in his nasal twang. "I am in-

terested to know to what I am indebt-

their respect. . . .

ed for this invitation."

money. And money was their life.

them through. . . .

while he looked at each one in turn.

Then he stepped forward. . .

picious glances to him.

five minutes exactly."

and the door closed.

undisturbed."

Comte. . . . I, personally will see

and the count repeated the last few

whatever."

to it. . . .

PROLOGUE

In the month of December, 1918, and on the very day that a British cavalry division marched into Cologne, with flags flying and bands playing as the conquerors of a beaten nation, the manager of the Hotel Nationale in Berne received a letter. Its contents appeared to puzzle him somewhat, for having read it twice he rang the bell on his desk to summon his secretary. Almost immediately the door opened, and a young French

girl came into the room. "Monsieur rang?" "Have we ever had staying in the hotel a man called le Comte de Guy?" He leaned back in his chair and looked at her through his pince-nez.

The secretary thought for a mement and then shook her head. "Not as far as I can remember," she said. "Do we know anything about him? Has he ever fed here, or taken a pri-

wate room?" "Not that I know of." The manager handed her the letter,

and waited in silence until she had read it. "It seems on the face of it a pecu-

Har request from an unknown man," he remarked as she laid it down. "A dinner of four covers; no expense to be spared. Wines specified and if not in hotel to be obtained. A private room at half-past seven sharp. Guests to ask for room X."

The secretary nodded in agreement. "It can hardly be a hoax," she remarked after a short silence.

"No." The manager tapped his teeth with his pen thoughtfully. "But 11 by any chance it was, it would prove an expensive one for us. I wish I could think who this Comte de

He took off his pince-nez and laid them on the desk in front of him. "Send the maitre d'hotel to me at

Whatever may have been the manager's misgivings, they were certainly not shared by the head waiter as he circumstances whatever." The head left the office after receiving his instructions. War and short rations had not been conducive to any particularly lucrative business in his sphere; and the whole sound of the proposed entertainment seemed to him

to contain considerable promise. And so at about twenty minutes past seven the maitre d'hotel was hovering around the hall-porter, the manager was hovering round the maitre d'hotel, and the secretary was hovering around both. At five-andtwenty minutes past the first guest

arrived. . . . He was a peculiar-looking man, in a big fur coat, reminding one irresistibly of a codfish.

"I wish to be taken to Room X." The French secretary stiffened involuntarily as the maitre d'hotel stepped obsequiously forward. Cosmopolitan as the hotel was, even now she could never hear German spoken without an inward shudder of digust.

"A Boche," she murmured in disgust. Almost immediately afterward the second and third members of the party arrived. They did not come together, and what seemed peculiar to the manager was that they were evidently strangers to one another.

The leading one—a tall gaunt man with a ragged beard and a pair of piercing eyes-asked in a nasal and by no means an inaudible tone for Room X. As he spoke a little fat man who was standing just behind him started perceptibly, and shot a birdlike glance at the speaker.

Then in execrable French he too

asked for Room X. "He's not French," said the secretary excitedly to the manager. "That

last one was another Boche." The manager thoughtfully twirled

his pince-nez between his fingers. "Two Germans and an American." He looked a little apprehensive. "Let us hope the dinner will appease everybody. Otherwise-"

But whatever fears he might have entertained with regard to the furniture in Room X, they were not destined to be uttered. Even as he spoke the door again swung open, and a man with a thick white scarf around his neck, so pulled up as almost completely to cover his face, came in. All that the manager could swear to as regards the newcomer's appearance was a pair of deep-set, steel-gray eyes which seemed to bore through him.

"You got my letter this morning?" "M'sleur le Comte de Guy?" The manager bowrd deferentially and rubbed his hands together. "Everything is ready, and three guests have arrived."

"Good. I will go to the room at once."

As he followed his guide his eyes swept round the lounge. Save for two or three elderly women of doubtful nationality, and a man in the American Red Cross, the place was deserted; and as he passed through the

"All in good time, Mr. Hocking." smiled the host. "I have hopes that the dinner will fill in that time satis-'actorily.'

He turned to the taller of the two Germans, who without his coat seemed more like a codfish than ever. "Herr Steinemann, is it not?" This time he spoke in German.

The man whose interest in German coal was hardly less well known than

Hocking's in cotton, bowed stiffly. "And Herr Von Gratz?" The Count turned to the last member of the party and shook hands. Though less well known than either of the other two in the realms of international finance, von Gratz's name in the steel trade of Central Europe was one to conjure with.

"Well, gentlemen," said the Count, before we sit down to dinner, I may perhaps be permitted to say a few words of introduction. The nations of the world have recently been engaged in a performance of unrivaled stupidity. As far as one can tell that performance is now over. The last thing I wish to do is to discuss the war-except in so far as it concerns ness had never been so poor in the our meeting here tonight. Mr. Hockmemory of man. . . . But it was to be hoped that the dinner would be to ing is an American, you two gentlemen are Germans. I'-the Count smiled slightly-"have no nationality. Or rather, shall I say, I have every na-"If everything is to my satisfaction tionality. Completely cosmopolitan. . you will not regret it," said the count

. Gentlemen, the war was waged by idiots, and when idiots get busy on a large scale, it is time for clever men to step in. . . . That is the raison d'etre for this little dinner . . . I claim that we four men are sufficiently international to be able to disregard any stupid and petty feelings about this country and that country, and to regard the world outlook at the present moment from one point of view and

one point of view only --- our own." The gaunt American gave a hoarse chuckle.

"It will be my object after dinner," continued the Count, "to try and prove to you that we have a common point of view. Until then-shall we merely concentrate on a pious hope that the Hotel Nationale will not poison us with their food?"

The next moment the head waiter opened the door, and the four men sat down to dine.

It must be admitted that the average hostess, desirous of making a dinner a success, would have been filled with secret dismay at the general atmosphere in the room. The American, in accumulating his millions, had also accumulated a digestion of such an exotic and tender character that dry! rusks and Vichy water were the limit of his capacity.

Herr Steinemann was of the common order of German, to whom food is sacred. He ate and drank enormously and evidently considered that nothing further was required of him.

Von Gratz did his best to keep his end up, but as he was apparently in a chronic condition of fear that the gaunt American would assault him with violence, he cannot be said to have contributed much to the galety of the meal.

And so to the host must be given the credit that the dinner was a success. Without appearing to monopolize the conversation he talked ceaselessly and brilliantly. But to even the most brilliant of conversationalists the strain of talking to a hypochondriacal American and two Germans-one greedy and the other frightened-is: considerable; and the Count heaved an inward sigh of relief when the coffee had been handed round and the door; closed behind the waiter. From now on the topic was the topic of moneythe common bond of his three guests. And yer, as he carefully cut the end of his cigar, and realized that the eyes of the other three were fixed on him expectantly, he knew that the hardest part of the evening was in front of him. Big ananciers, in common with all other people, are fonder of having money put into their pockets than of taking it out. And that was the very thing the Count proposed they should do-in large quantities. . .

"Gentlemen," he remarked, when his cigar was going to his satisfaction, we are all men of business. I said before dinner that I considered we were sufficiently big to exclude any small arbitrary national distinctions from our minds. As men whose interests are international, such things are beneath us. I wish now to slightly qualify that remark." He turned to the American on his right, who with eyes half closed was thoughtfully picking his teeth. "At this stage, I address myself particularly to you." "Go right ahead," drawled Mr. Hock-

ing. "I do not wish to touch on the waror its result; but though the Central Powers have been beaten by America and France and England, I think I can speak for you two gentlemen"-he bowed to the two Germans-"when I say that it is neither France nor America with whom they desire another round. England is Germany's main enemy; she always has been, she always will be. I have reason to believe, Mr. Hocking, that you personally do not love the English?"

"I guess I don't see what my private feelings have to do with it. But if it's of any interest to the company you are correct in your belie ..."

"Good." The Count nodded his head as if satisfied. "I take it then that you would not be averse to seeing England down and out."

"Wal," remarked the American, you can assume anything you feel like. Let's go to the show-down." Once again the Count nodded his head; then he turned to the two Ger-

mans. "Now you two gentlemen must admit that your plans have miscarried somewhat. It was no part of your original programme that a British army should occupy Cologne. . . . "

"The war was the act of a fool," enarled Herr Steinemann. "In a few years more of peace, we should have beaten those swine. . .

"And now-they have beaten you." The Count smiled slightly. "Let us admit that the war was the act of a fool, if you like, but as men of business we can only deal with the result.

. . The result, gentlemen, as it concerns us. Both you gentlemen are sufficiently patriotic to resent the presence of that army at Cologne, I have no doubt. And you, Mr. Hocking, have no love on personal grounds for the English. . . . But I am not proposing to appeal to financiers of your reputation on such grounds as those to support my scheme. . . . It is enough that your personal predilections run with and not against what I am about to put before you-the defeat of England . . . a defeat more utter and complete than if she had lost the war. . .

His voice sank a little, and instinctively his three listeners drew closer. "Don't think I am proposing this

through motives of revenge merely. We are business men, and revenge is only worth our while if it pays. This will pay. There is a force in England which, if it can be harnessed and led properly, will result in millions coming to you. . . . It is present now in every nation-fettered, inarticulate, un-co-ordinated. . . . It is partly the result of the war-the war that the idiots have waged. . . . Harness that force, gentlemen, co-ordinate it, and use it for your own ends. . .

That is my proposal. Not only will you humble that cursed country to the dirt, but you will taste of power such as few men have tasted before. . . ." The Count stood up, his eyes blazing. "And I-I will do it for you."

He resumed his seat, and his left hand, slipping off the table, beat a tattoo on his knee.

"This is our opportunity-the opportunity of clever men. I have not got the money necessary: you have." . . . He leaned forward in his chair, and glanced at the intent faces of his audience. Then he began to speak. . . . Ten minutes later he pushed back

his chair. "There is my proposal, gentlemen, in a nutshell. Unforeseen developments will doubtless occur; I have spent my life overcoming the unexpect-

ed. What is your answer?" He rose and stood with his back to them by the fire, and for several minutes no one spoke. Each man was busy with his own thoughts, and showed it in his own particular way. Comte de Guy stared unconcernedly at the fire, as if indifferent to the result of their thoughts. In his attitude at that moment he gave a true expression to his attitude on life. Accustomed to play with great stakes, he had just dealt the cards for the most gigantic gamble of his life. . . . What matter and walked over to the fireplace. . . . to the three men, who were looking at the hands he had given them, that only "what have you decided?" a master criminal could have con- It was the American who answered. ceived such a game? The only ques-And on that point they had only their a quarter of a million each." judgment of his personality to rely on.

Suddenly the American removed the toothpick from his mouth and

stretched out his legs. "There is a question which occurs to me, Count, before I make up my mind on the matter. Are you disposed to be a little more communicative about yourself? If we agree to come in on The handling of that money is with you. Wal-who are you?"

Von Gratz nodded his head in agreement. Steinemann raised his eyes to the Count's face as he turned and faced them. . . .

"A very fair question, gentlemen," and yet one which I regret I am unable to answer. I would not insult your intelligence by giving you the fictitious address of-a fictitious Count. Enough that I am a man whose livelihood lies in other people's pockets. As you say, Mr. Hocking, it is going to cost big

you to pay me when the job is tin-"And that payment will be-lifter much?" Steinemann's guttural voice

broke the silence. "One million pounds sterling-to be split up between you in any proportion you may decide, and to be paid within one month of completion of my work. After that the matter will pass into your hands . . . and may you leave that cursed country groveling in the dirty . . . " His eyes glowed with a fierce, vindictive fury; and then, as if replacing a mask which had slipped for a moment, the Count was once again the suave, courteous host. He had stated his terms frankly and without haggling; stated them as one big man states them to another of the same kidney, to whom time is money and indecision or beating about the bush anathema.

"Perhaps, Count, you would be good enough to leave us for a few minutes." Von Gratz was speaking. "The decision is a big one, and . . .'

"Why, certainly, gentlemen." The Count moved toward the door. "I will return in ten minutes. By that time you will have decided-one way or the other."

Genius that he was in the reading of men's minds, he felt that he knew the result of that ten minutes deliberation. . . And then . . . What then? . In his imagination he saw himself supreme in power, glutted with it -a king, an autocrat, who had only to lift his finger to plunge his kingdom

into destruction and annihilation. . . And when he had done it, and the country he hated was in ruins, then he would claim his million and enjoy it as a great man should enjoy a great reward. . . . Thus for the space of ten minutes did the Count see visions and dream dreams. That the force he proposed to tamper with was a dangerous force disturbed him not at all: he was a dangerous man. That this scheme would bring ruin, perhaps death, to thousands of innocent men and women caused him no qualm: he was a supreme egoist. All that appealed to him was that he had seen the opportunity that existed, and that he had the nerve and the brain to turn that opportunity to his own advantage. Only the necessary money was lacking . . and . . . With a quick movement he pulled out his watch. They had had their ten minutes . . . The matter

was settled, the die was cast. . . . He rose and walked across the lounge. For an appreciable moment the Count paused by the door, and a faint smile came to his lips. Then he opened it, and passed into the room. The American was still chewing his toothpick; Steinemann was still breathing hard. Only von Gratz had changed his occupation and he was sitting at the table smoking a long thin cigar. The Count closed the door,

"Well, gentlemen," he said quietly,

With one amendment. "It goes. tion which occupied their minds was The money is too big for three of us: whether he could carry it through. there must be a fourth. That will be

> The Count bowed. "Have you any suggestions as to whom the fourth should be?"

"Yep," said the American shortly. "These two gentlemen agree with me that it should be another of my coun-:rymen—so that we get equal numbers. The man we have decided on is coming to England in a few weeks-Hiram his hand, it's going to cost big money. C. Potts. If you get him in, you can count us in, too. If not, the deal's

> The Count nodded, and if he felt any annoyance at this unexpected development he showed no sign of it on his face.

"I know of Mr. Potts," he answered quickly. "Your big shipping man, isn't

he? I agree to your reservation." "Good," said the American. "Let's

discuss some details." Without a trace of emotion on his face the Count drew up a chair to the table. It was only when he sat down that he started to play a tattoo on his knee with his left hand. . . .

. Half an hour later he entered his luxurious suite of rooms at the Hotel

Magnificent. A girl, who had been lying by the fire reading a French novel, looked up at the sound of the door. She did not speak, for the look on his face told her

all she wanted to know. He crossed to the sofa and smiled

down at her. "Successful . . . on our own terms. Tomorrow, Irma, the Comte de Guy dies, and Carl Peterson and his daughter leave for England. A country gentleman, I think, is Carl Peterson. He might keep hens, and possibly pigs."

The girl on the sofa rose, yawning. "Mon Dieu! what a prospect! Pigs and hens—and in England! How long is it going to take?"

The Count looked thoughtfully into the fire.

"Perhaps a year—perhaps six months. . . It is on the lap of the gods. . . ."

CHAPTER I

In Which He Takes Tea at the Carlton and Is Surprised. ONE.

Captain Hugh Drummond, D.S.O., M. C., late of His Majesty's Royal Loamshires, was whistling in his morning bath. Being by nature of a cheerful disposition, the symptom did not surprise his servant, late private of the famous regiment, who was laying breakfast in an adjoining room.

After a while the whistling ceased, and the musical gurgle of escaping water announced that the concert was over. It was the signal for James Denny-the square-jawed ex-batmanwer pocket. . . . I shall have to trust to disappear into the back regions and

get from his wife the kidneys and bacon which that most excellent woman had grilled to a turn. But on this particular morning the invariable routine was broken. James Denny seemed preoccupied, distrait.

Once or twice he scratched his head and stared out of the window with a puzzled frown.

"What's you looking for, James Denny?" The irate voice of his wife at the door made him look round guiltily. "Them kidneys is ready and waiting these five minutes."

Her eyes fell on the table, and she advanced into the room wiping her hands on her apron.

"Did you ever see such a bunch of letters?" she said.

"Forty-five," returned her husband, grimly, "and more to come." He picked up the newspaper lying beside the

chair and opened it. "Them's the result of that," he continued cryptically, indicating a paragraph with a square finger, and thrusting the paper under his wife's nose.

"Demobilized officer," she read slowly, "finding peace incredibly tedious,



"Demobilized Officer," She Read Slowly, "Finding Peace Incredibly Tedious, Would Welcome Diversion."

would welcome diversion. Legitimate, if possible; but crime, if of a comparatively humorous description, no objection. Excitement essential. Would be prepared to consider permanent job if suitably impressed by applicant for his services. Reply at once Box X10."

She put down the paper on a chair and stared first at her husband and then at the rows of letters neatly arranged on the table.

"I calls it wicked," she announced at length. "Fair flying in the face of Providence. Crime, Denny-crime. Don't you get 'aving notning to do with such mad pranks, my man, or you and me will be having words." She shook an admonitory finger at him, and retired slowly to the kitchen.

A moment or two later Hugh Drummond came in. Slightly under six feet in height, he was broad in proportion: His best friend would not have called him good-looking, but he was the fortunate possessor of that cheerful type of ugliness which inspires immediate

confidence in its owner. He paused as he got to the table and glanced at the rows of letters. "Who would have thought it, James?" he remarked. "Great Scot! I shall have to get a partner."

With disapproval showing in every line of her face, Mrs. Denny entered the room, carrying the kidneys, and Drummond glanced at her with a smile.

"Good morning, Mrs. Denny," he said. "Wherefore this worried look on your face? Has that reprobate James been misbehaving himself?"

The worthy woman snorted. "He has not, sir-not yet, leastwise. And if so be that he does"-her eyes traveled up and down the back of the hapless Denny, who was quite unnecessarily pulling books off shelves and putting them back again-"if so be that he does," she continued grimly, "him and me will have words-as I've told him already this morning." She stalked from the room, after staring pointedly at the letters in Drummond's hand, and the two men looked at one another.

"It's that there reference to crime, sir, that's torn it," said Denny in a hoarse whisper.

"Thinks I'm going to lead you astray, does she, James?" He was opening the first envelope, and suddenly he looked up with a twinkle in his eyes. "Just to set her mind at rest," he remarked gravely, "you might tell her that, as far as I can see at present, I shall only undertake murder in exceptional cases."

He propped the letter up against the toast-rack and commenced his breakfast. "Where is Pudlington, James? and one might almost askwhy is Pudlington? No town has any right to such an offensive name." He glanced through the letter and shook his head. "Tush! tush! And the wife of the bank manager too-the bank manager of Pudlington, James! Can you conceive of anything so dreadful? But I'm afraid Mrs. Bank Manager is a puss—a distinct puss. It's when they get on the soul-mate stunt that the furniture begins to fly."

Drummond tore up the letter and cropped the pieces into the basket beside him. Then he turned to his ser-

(Contined on page 7, Col 1.)

"I Will Return in Ten Minutes. By That Time You Will Have Decided One Way or the Other."

money; but compared to the results the costs will be a flea-bite. You will have to trust me, even as I shall have to trust you. . . . You will have to trust me not to divert the money which you give me as working expenses into my