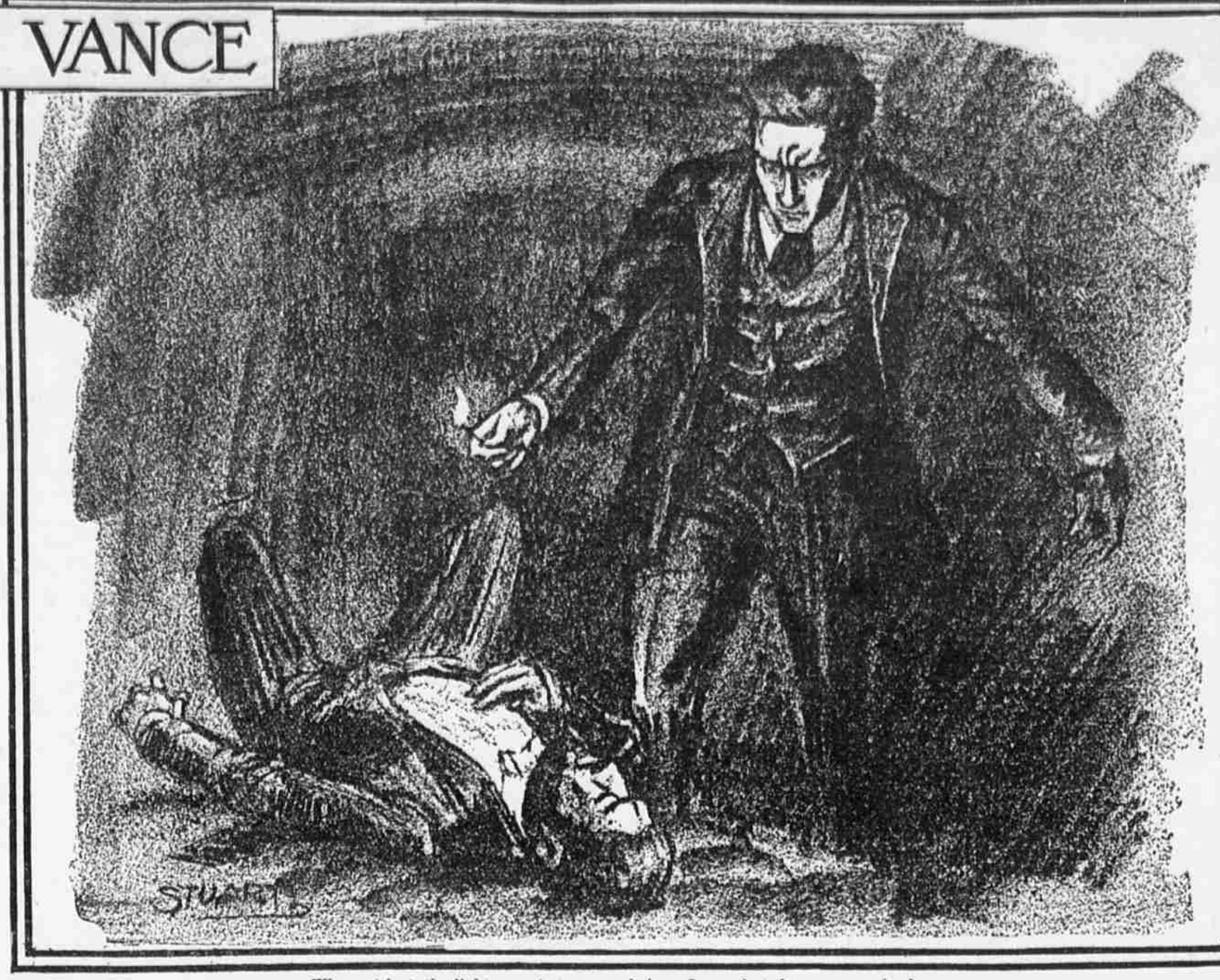
THE PRIVATE WAR

BY LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE



When, at last, the light waxed strong and clear, I saw that the man was dead.

CHAPTER I
"The Documents in the Case"

I HAVE chosen to place them here, at the head of the story, since they are in a way responsible for it, its excuse, its raison d'etre. Had they not been collected, clipped, as they were, one by one from the back files of newspapers, in part by Mr. Sevrance and in part by myself, after long and patient searchings in our respective fields; had they not been assembled thus to lend their authority to the truth of Mr. Traill's remarkable statement, I should have hesitated long ere undertaking this my task of editing, if, indeed, I could have secured my own consent to the lending of my name to a story so variously extraordinary.

As it is, they—"the documents in the case"—seem somehow to force me to such action. Reading them, one is impressed that by rights the world should know the truth, however tardily it may be presented; should be enabled, figuratively, to sit at ease in the pit and see—at last!—the rising of that curtain of blank mystery which for so long has hidden from us the cause which brought about that moving succession of strange events, in themselves seemingly so meaningless, which at the time of their publication furnished such ample reason for more than one nine days' wonderment.

They are, unfortunately, few—far too few; a mere handful of old clippings. One who does not know, who himself has not been privileged to peep behind the drop, can speculate but vaguely concerning them, perhaps recalling those hours of fruitless conjecture which they demanded of him about the time of their appearance, when not he alone, but all the world besides, and four—no, five—world Powers were all by the ears, as the saying is, to guess the secret of their enigmatic continuity, to divine the truth that has, to this day, lain hidden at the bottom of a fathomless well of mystery.

To me, however, they tell a moving and coherent story. As I thumb them over, pondering which may be the fittest, first to offer to your consideration, my eye caught and held now and again by a chance word, by a name of a phrase, I seem to see, even as Traill saw them in flesh, the living actors in this drama.

I see her ladyship, Julia—Miss Leight that our Richmond remembers with a sigh for the loss of her—with her dainty head held high and proudly and her eyes that were so calm and clear and sweet, as Gordon Traill tells us; she whose heart was a mystery more entrancing, a riddle far less readable than aught in the odd chain of circumstance that follows. "Heart's Desire" Traill loved to call her; and in some way she is such she figures to me, somehow by that name incarnated, bodied forth to the imagination between the lines of dingy, blurred type; a dear and lovable girl that she was, for all her wifehood and her widowed youth.

As clearly I see the Herr Captain, Kurd von Holzborn; dark and set of jaw, with his masklike, impassive face and his deep-set, opaque eyes that could be steady enough when he choose, but had their telltale trick of the quick, the lightning-quick, sideways glance. A big man and strong alike in his body and his passions; good to look upon and fascinating with his magnetic charm of manner: big and strong and ruthless—black as midnight at the heart of him.

And I see Monsignor de Netze, the astute and furtive—cool, debonair, fertile of expedient; with his lofty, pallid forehead and his Vandyke beard; distinguished of appearance and bearing; lover of the devious and the underhand; that arch plotter, that admirable and amiable conspirator, true to one thing only—the loyalty he held to his master, his most gracious majesty, the Czar of all the Russias.

There are others, many others, passing before me in phantasmal review as I con this little packet of clipping. There is Callahan, the engineer, a man, were he sober muddled; Grady, the gentleman's gentleman, the resourceful and the fearless; Sevrance, the Englishman, whom Traill loved as a brother, and who was worthy, true as tried steel, and a gallant gentleman; Captain Keen, with his false tongue and wavering loyalty; and others, strange to imagine for the most part—odd-seeming faces of a foreign cast to our Anglo-Saxon eyes, brutal faces and kindly, evil and honest—a ghostly rabble, with glaring eyeballs in hollow sockets, features drawn and hair matted, as becomes men who slumber in the ooze of the ocean's bed.

But, clearest of them all, I see Traill himself—Gordon Traill, of New York, U. S. A., if you please; gallant and audacious, considerate and determined, facing Fate and Chance with his laugh and that upward fling of his head; a man frail like the rest of us, but fine-grained as the best of us, bearing in his breast a faithful, dauntless heart. Out of the throng he bulks big and humanly; customarily with his hat on the back of his head, feet apart, hands in his pockets, hair tousled, brows thoughtful enough, but with his ready laugh lurking in the corners of his mouth and with eyes merry save when he faces his Heart's Desire.

* * * * *

As you say, this is wandering far from the documents in the case." Here they are, then—I give them you as the world had them, with neither comment nor explanation:

I

Gordon Traill has left us, following his habit of fleeing the city when it gets too hot to hold him. Every season a certain number of dowagers, mothers of promising maids, camp on the trail of the Traill millions; and then "Gaudy" finds it convenient to keep a pressing engagement to kill somebody, somewhere. Some time last week he folded his tent and silently stole away; rumor has it that he has sought the seclusion of the Maine woods.—*"Society Gossip," in a scurrilous New York weekly, dated January 10th.*

II

The engagement of Lady Herbert, widow of Sir Henry Herbert, K. C. S. I., is rumored. Official confirmation is lacking, but it is stated upon good authority that the prospective bridegroom is a young *attache* of the German Embassy at the Court of St. James.

Lady Herbert was the beautiful Miss Julia Leigh, of Richmond, Va., whose father, General Thorpe Leigh, acquired an immense fortune through operations in the West Virginia oil fields. Sir Henry Herbert died suddenly in 1902.—*Cable dispatch from London, New York Herald, January 11th.*

III

PLYMOUTH, *Jan. 29th.*—Much excitement prevails here as the result of a peculiar affair in the shipbuilding district of the city. At an early hour this morning a number of armed ruffians forced an entrance to the shipyards of Rogers & Greer, overpowered the watchmen and successfully launched and made off with a large and valuable steam yacht which had been on the ways, in the final stages of construction and fitting out.—*London Daily Chronicle.*

IV

LONDON, *Jan. 30th.*—Reports from Harwich, Essex, state that the English torpedo-boat destroyer H. M. S. *Asp* entered that port late last night in a crippled condition, having apparently suffered severely in a naval fight. Her commander and crew were uncommunicative; a report, however, has been made to the Admiralty which withholds all details. It is rumored that the *Asp* was attacked by a Russian battleship of the first class and, despite official denials of the most positive nature, great crowds are clamoring indignantly in front of the Admiralty Office.—*Cable dispatch to the Sun, New York.*

V

HULL, *Jan. 30th.*—The Hull fishermen who recently figured so conspicuously in the public eye as victims of the Russian Baltic squadron were today thrown into a state of wild excitement by rumors of a naval engagement on the Dogger Bank in the North Sea. Captain Isaac Bull, of the steam trawler *Bullfinch*, and Captain J. M. Eaves, of the *Enterprise*, are responsible for the rumor, which became public property upon the unexpected return of the trawlers to Hull this morning. They state that, at a late hour yesterday evening, the weather being muggy and foggy, the crews of both vessels, which were fishing near each other, became aware of heavy firing in a northeasterly direction. Fearful of a repetition of the Baltic squadron outrage, the anchors were hastily weighed and the trawlers prepared for flight. In the meantime the fog lifted slightly, disclosing a battleship of the first class at a distance of some five miles, with every gun in action. According to the statements of some witnesses, the battleship flew the Japanese flag. The light was so murky that no other ship was seen by the trawlers and the fog immediately closed in again. The trawlers at once shaped for Hull and state that the firing continued for about an hour, terminating in a tremendous explosion. No further details are obtainable. — *London Daily Telegraph.*

VI

LONDON, *Jan. 31st.*—Popular indignation is responsible for an attempt to connect the appearance of a Japanese battleship in the North Sea, as reported by the Hull trawlers, with the crippled condition of H. M. S. *Asp*, now at Harwich. The Admiralty, however, has explicity stated that the injuries to the *Asp* were caused by an explosion of ammunition during target practice, and the story of the Hull fishermen is generally discredited in official circles, the presence of a Japanese warship in European waters being regarded as improbable.—*Cable dispatch to the New York Herald.*

VII

LONDON, *Feb. 1st.*—In connection with the *Asp* incident, as previously reported, it is stated that the first-class battleship *Glenavo* and the protected cruiser *Planet* left Sheerness hurriedly at midnight last night, sailing with sealed orders.—*Ibid.*

VIII

BERLIN, *Feb. 10th.*—Despite official contradiction from a high quarter, the report has leaked out and is generally credited, to the effect that the German torpedoboat destroyer *Vistula* is missing. The *Vistula* left Wilhelmshaven with sealed orders on January 26th, since when she has not been heard from.—*Ibid.*

IX

Alarmed by his continued absence, the family and friends of Mr. Anthony Sevrance, a barrister, and one of the well-known Sevrance family of Sussex, have advertised for news concerning him. Mr. Sevrance left his rooms in Lord's Chambers on the morning of Sunday, January 18th, in company with his valet, a person by the name of Grady, and a young man of unknown identity, who had been his guest for a day or two; none of the party has since been seen or heard from. Mr. Sevrance was a gentleman of means, well known to a large circle of acquaintances, and a member of four prominent clubs. Foul play is apprehended by his friends, who, nevertheless, assert that he had not an enemy in the world. The advertisement, giving details of his personal appearance, and with a description of the man Grady, appears in another column.—*London Evening Mail.*

X

WILHELMSHAVEN, *Feb. 17th.*—The protected cruiser *Danzig* and the destroyer *Ems*, both attached to the North Sea squadron of the German navy, sailed from this port yesterday under sealed orders. It is conjectured that they are commissioned with the investigation of the loss of the destroyer *Vistula*, which has not been heard from since January 26th.—*Press cable to various American newspapers.*

XI

LONDON, *Feb. 15th.*—The unaccountable disappearance of Captain Kurd von Holzborn, *attache* of the German Embassy at the Court of St. James, is responsible for rumors of his suicide. Captain von Holzborn left his apartments on the seventeenth of January, and has not since been heard from. It is known that he was financially embarrassed at the time of his disappearance.—*Cable dispatch, New York Press.*

XII

LONDON, *Feb. 21st.*—Much curiosity has been expressed here in connection with the latest vagary of the beautiful Lady Herbert, who was formally Miss Julia Leigh, of Richmond, Va., and whose marriage to the late Sir Henry Herbert, K.C.S.I., in 1900, was an event of the New York social season. Sir Henry died in 1902, without issue, leaving his Lincolnshire estates—Saltacres—to his widow, he being the last of his line. Since she discarded mourning, Lady Herbert has been a prominent figure in the London social swim, her great wealth enabling her to indulge her whims to the full of her fancy.

It is, however, only just to say that none of her pranks has resulted harmfully, and that no iota of scandal clings about the dainty skirts of the little American lady. But so odd, unprecedented and *outre* have been many of her freaks that society has stood aghast and breathless, able only to wonder what she would choose to do next. Her most grave breaches of Mrs. Grundy's code, however, are attributable to nothing more serious than the effervescent spirits of a young and mischief-loving girl; for Lady Herbert is little more, having been married (against her wishes, it is whispered) at the age of eighteen. Hardly more than an awkward but promising *debutante* when Sir Henry brought her to England as his wife, she has since developed into a most beautiful and brilliant woman.

Her latest extravagence is positively inexplicable, in that it consists of a total disappearance from the face of the known earth—so far, at least, as her friends are concerned. Shortly after the recent announcement of her engagement to the dashing young German *attache*, Captain Kurd von Holsborn, she chose to vanish completely, leaving not a word of explanation. Inquiries have been made at her country estate and of her solicitors, but both servants and lawyers remain mute; if they know anything, they won't tell it.

The fact that her ladyship's private yacht, the *Myosotis*, was recently put into commission and sailed from Portsmouth for parts unknown, coincidently with the disappearance of its owner, on January 17th, seems significant, when coupled with the simultaneous vanishing of the gallant German captain. The worldly-wise are shaking their heads knowingly and whispering that Lady Herbert had made up her mind to dispense with the pomp and ceremony of a "society wedding"; in plain English, she is supposed to have eloped with her fascinating *fiance* and is probably now spending a honeymoon on the yacht, perhaps in the Mediterranean.

But nobody really knows; and nobody who is acquainted with Lady Herbert, however personally convinced he might feel of the truth of this hypothesis, would venture to back his opinion with any considerable sum of money. Her ladyship's mind is an uncertain quantity, you know.—*London correspondence published in the scurrilous New York weekly first quoted.*

That is not all, but I think it is enough. There are other clippings, 20 odd more of them, but their interest is but passing; they tell us nothing new. Some are mere duplicates of those which I have quoted, duplicates in essence, that is.

Others, again, are of later dates than the last above, and furnish only a continuation or, rather, a confirmation of their intelligence. I read in one, dated March 30, that nothing has been heard of Mr. Anthony Sevrance, well-known barrister, "who disappeared"—and so forth.

From another I learn that the Commander von Something-or-other has been ordered from Kiel to the Court of St. James, to replace Captain Kurd von Holzborn, absent without leave. This is some three months after the event.

Again we hear that it is believed that Lady Herbert and her yacht, the *Myosotis*, shared in the fate that overtook the hapless *Vistula* in the North Sea. This is under the date of April 18, up to which time the *Myosotis* had not been reported. But fishermen had brought into Lynn Regis the portion of the sternpost of a lifeboat, which they had picked up far out at sea. The fragment showed three letters, presumably part of the name of the vessel to which the boat belonged. They were: "STU." Which is held fairly conclusive proof of the sinking of the *Vistula*.

The matter of the stolen yacht was dropped by its owners, Messrs. Rogers & Greer, shipwrights of Barmouth. The search instituted for the vessel and its crew of ruffians was reported fruitless. The world followed the example of the worthy builders and ceased to concern itself with the matter; in a fortnight it was become ancient history.

As for the Japanese battleship, the wags made merry over the visions of the hysterical Hull trawlers for a week or so—who, as one says, "went down to the sea in ships to catch haddocks and caught hallucinations." And then that subject, too, lost flavor for the public palate. The trawlers lapsed into sullen silence, as befits true men whose word is doubted without sufficient cause.

But last of all the little stack of clippings comes one from the same source as the first—and only other—concerning Mr. Traill.

It is now three months since Mr. Traill has vanished from the haunts of men—which is to say, has left New York. He has sent home no word. His relatives, with their minds' eyes on the Traill income, are anxious and perturbed on his account. His lawyers profess ignorance of his whereabouts, though they are obviously not distressed. He is in danger of being forgotten of the world—that part of the world, that is, which lies within the limits of Manhattan Island. So the scandalmongering sheet rushes valiantly to the rescue, sounding his name for the last time in many a day.

A mere line, this:

"Where, oh, where, is Gordon Traill, Esquire—our 'Gaudy' Traill?"

But the query has lain long enough unanswered; doubtless even its author has forgotten the penning of it. Yet I fancy that even he will take an interest in the reply, from Traill's own lips, belated though it comes. Here is his story.

CHAPTER II
Traill's Narrative

Dear Traill—I tell you, Gordon, faint heart ne'er will win fair Julia. My dear fellow, you are delinquent in your duty. And why? For the life of me, I cannot determine. Surely, if ever a prize was worth the winning, it is this same Lady Herbert. And you, you have, as you tell me, loved her from the days when you played together as boy and girl—you linger idly in New York, letting the precious minutes slip by, permitting the prize you covet to slip through your nerveless fingers!

I am all out of patience with you. What do you fear? I tell you the girl at heart is still a girl. Sir Henry—oh, I can see him clearly; I knew the man like a book. Count me blind and witless if it is not true that he was more father than husband; stolid, kind, courteous—an English gentleman. His affection for the girl was paternal, purely. I doubt if even her sweet beauty ever stirred his withered heart other than with its appeal for protection. But he is now a negligible factor. There are living men, men of flesh and blood, who are likewise alive to her loveliness—and, frankly, I am not the least of them.

So I counsel you to bestir yourself. Time and a woman's heart wait for no man. She is young and all for love. She dreams of love—I'll swear she does—I, who have looked in her eyes traitorously to see if she gave me her lightest thought. She is vibrant with her new-found freedom and, womanlike, only too eager to put her pretty neck in the yoke of another master. If not you—then another.

Who? Why not myself, for one. Oh, I'm all for candor. If you show yourself disposed to let slip the chance, I'll throw our friendship to the winds, dear boy, and go in for my own hand. There you have it.

And there are others unbound by the chains of friendship. Have you heard the rumors that are afloat to the effect that she is engaged to the German naval attache? Both her ladyship and Captain Kurd von Holzborn (that's his name) are busy denying the fact today. The chances are, then, that it is truth, and that the news will be published, the engagement announced, within the next fortnight. So you see what your timid dalliance has meant for you—or what it may mean. You'd best take ship at once and make up for lost time, regain lost ground * * *

I did not care to read farther. Sevrance's letter slipped from my fingers and fluttered to the floor, while I stared out of the window.

It snowed gustily; in the park opposite, the trees were like shivering ghosts, swaying and flopping in gray shrouds of whirling flakes.

Later I remembered them; but at the moment I saw nothing but my Heart's Desire, separated from me by many leagues of cold and storm-swept ocean: Julia Leigh—as I remembered her—making in her loneliness for the protection of another's arms!

The thought was intolerable. I chose my course, in the few moments that I stood there gazing abstractedly out at the dismal wilderness of Central Park, bleak and desolate. When I stooped and picked up the letter, feeling myself faintly warmed by gratitude for Sevrance's kindliness, it was all settled; I was for England—for the first time in many years. My heart was young and hot within me, and I pictured myself very chivalrously and gallantly winning my love back to me. As for the German, there was to be the devil to pay with him, had he indeed forestalled my suit.

But, at the time, I had not the pleasure of Kurd von Holzborn's acquaintance. I figured him to myself as the self-sufficient boor in uniform, with the ferocious Kaiser Wilhelm mustaches; the type with which I had been familiar enough in my student days at Munich—a swaggering, intolerant, insolent Prussian naval officer. Nor could I easily imagine Julia giving him a second thought.

As I say, however, I did not know the captain—then.

Timmins was instructed to pack my trunks and procure me passage on the first steamer leaving New York. After my departure, his duty was to consist in staying in my apartments and informing all inquiries that Mr. Traill was gone moose hunting in the Maine woods. I understand that he has performed his duties faithfully.

There were things to be attended to, and I had a brisk time of it for a day; the cab fares, I remember, were considerable; but 24 hours sufficed and gained me my end—I was able to sail on the following morning.

Sevrance's letter with its startling intelligence had been necessary to stir me to action. Well, it had accomplished that purpose. It had been like a draft upon the embers of my love; and now, behold, there was a flame in my breast and a consuming fire.

The steamer was all too slow for me; the five and a half days were so many ages. I hurried down the gangplank, in the end, almost before it was made fast to the pier. I was preoccupied, ever looking ahead, into the future—like a man possessed of a demon. Indeed, I retain but the vaguest of recollections of that disembarkation, of my cab ride through the grimy streets of Liverpool, of my taking passage on the London and Northwestern.

Even when in my otherwise empty compartment, I was whirled on Londonward wrapt in dreams, I only wakened when we drew in at the Euston Square Station, and then only for a moment.

Incontinently I was plunged into an odd adventure; and in a way I seemed to have been prepared for it. My state of mind was appropriate; I was ready for anything. A mad dash across an ocean and an island in the pursuit of a dream had fitted me to step promptly into the coil of medieval deviltry wherein I was presently to find myself entangled.

At the time, you must know that I was to all intents and purposes a stranger in a strange land; my knowledge of the geography of London was of the slenderest! I had not seen the city since my sixteenth year. Time had blended the impressions of that visit into a dismal dingy memory of wet and shining pavements, of hollow, clapping hoofs, and of long stretches of drab dwellings, one as like to its fellow as peas.

So, properly, I needed the services of a guide—though if it is objected that a keeper would have been more useful, I shan't contend the point.

Moreover, I returned to find the town fog-bound.

I handed my baggage checks to a runner for the Carleton and immediately stepped out into the street and the fog—stepped, in a way, from the crude realities of today into a mystical midregion of Romance; from the twentieth to the eighteenth century.

This was at night, you understand. I believe the hour was verging toward 10. The swinging doors of the terminal slapped together. I slipped on a wet and slimy step and lurched forward into the fog's dank embrace. In that instant I was lost.

When I turned the terminal was vanished—swallowed up in the omnivorous maw of that cursed mist; I was instantly undetermined as to whether or no I had turned squarely about. I was dazed, if the truth is to be told, and swung slowly around on my heel, glaring into an almost impenetrable obscurity.

Here and there lights glowed feebly roseate, seemingly at considerable distances; what they stood for was a riddle. I made for one, struggling with a ridiculous desire to stretch out my arms and thrust the fog behind with the palms of my hands—much as one swims. On the way I blundered into the arms of an individual who first clasped me ardently to his bosom, then thrust me aside with a muttered oath—or an apology. It was difficult to determine which. I did not greatly care.

Presently I was embracing a lamp-post, and, reasoning logically that a curb must be near at hand, I put out a tentative foot and verified this sage surmise. Then casting adrift, I began to follow the curb, with the comfortable assurance that it would eventually lead me somewhere. In the gloom men passed me like shadows—somewhat as I have seen a steamer loom hugely from a fog on the Newfoundland Bank and slip silently on into the unknown.

And after a bit I lost my guiding curb and was utterly at sea. Presently, however, I stumbled smack into the rear wheels of a coupe, and incontinently gave heartfelt thanks. A London fog is an interesting thing; it teems with an infinity of possibilities; but, even to the fascinated stranger, sufficient unto one day is a sample thereof. For my part I was heartily sick of it all, and desired nothing better than my bedroom at the Carleton.

Pawing the wheels and sides of the vehicle—for I was determined not to get out of touch with it under any circumstances—I made my way around to the shafts and there, looking up, beheld in the dim illumination furnished by a lamp toward which I had evidently been progressing, but which seemed to poke itself suddenly out of the obscurity—I beheld, I say, on a level with my eyes, a pair of shoes and a knee-high length of frayed trousers, conceivably a section of the driver.

At once grumbled protests became audible. His words, however, were unintelligible, being delivered into a stratum of atmosphere several feet above my head.

At length, however, a round, red countenance, resembling somewhat a drowsy harvest moon, was lowered jerkily toward me. Two sleep-blinded eyes blinked into mine, and a breath, foul with a stench of liquor, caused me to step back to a respectful distance.

"Wot?" said the driver surily.

"Are you engaged?" I demanded.

His answer seemed to be in the negative.

"Can you take me to the Carleton?" I pursued tenaciously.

He nodded.

"The Carleton!" I shouted, hoping to drill my desired destination into his head by sheer force of repetition.

He seemed to come to himself abruptly. His voice, husky and thick, was suddenly and surprisingly strong and distinct.

"Hi said yes!" he told me resentfully. "Ow many toimes 'ave Hi got to tell yer?" Then in a quieter, more respectful tone: "Climb in, gov'ner."

I obeyed meekly, sure that I had accomplished my end, seeing the white coverlet of the bed in near prospect—a grateful thought.

I had no notion as to the Carleton's place upon the map of London; it might have been within half a block or miles away, for all I could say; and I realized that I was at the mercy of my guide, and must bide my time with what composure I had at my command.

And we crawled. Today I could not recognize the horse that drew that superannuated vehicle were I to meet him face to face, but I am willing to wager recklessly that he was a mere wornout rack of hide and bones. Throughout the whole adventure he showed but once the slightest evidence of speed; only once did he seem familiar with a trot, or even on speaking terms with a rapid walk.

Minutes dragged on into I know not how many tens; after some time I struck a match and examined the dial of my watch. It was twenty minutes after ten. Some time later I resorted to the same device. In the interim I must have nodded—dozed for forty winks; for it did not seem such a very long time. Yet it was then a little past eleven; and still we progressed through the heart of London at a snail's pace. Having failed to attract the driver's attention by repeated knocks on the roof of the coupe, I thrust my head out of the door and yelled at him.

He had been asleep! He woke up, yawning and ill-tempered.

"The Carleton?" I asked appealingly.

He started as if shot.

"Yessir," he said again, with that amazing quality of voice, penetrating as the rasping of a file. "Brought yer right to the door, guv'ner."

He picked up the reins and admonished the horse: "Giddap!" We moved again, delving into profoundities of fog. I gave up hope with a sigh.

Yet, within one minute at the most, we paused again. I looked out, incredulity in my heart.

We had stopped at a curb; the arch of an illuminated awning, extending down across the sidewalk, confronted me. Beyond there was a glow of greater light, together with hushed strains of music.

We had arrived! Personally, I harbored doubts as to the place being actually the Carleton; but that mattered little; it was a hotel—a place to rest my confused head and weary body. In a fever of impatience I jumped out and paid the man what he asked—two or three shillings—adding a handsome but totally undeserved gratuity; and dismissed the memory of that interminable journey from my mind—forever, I fondly anticipated.

As I strode eagerly up the strip of carpet, I was forced to step aside and give way to a party of three who came down the steps of the building arm in arm. For an instant something queer in their manner puzzled me; and then I recognized that two were acting the roles of Samaritans to the third, the fellow in the middle, who was repulsively intoxicated.

As they passed, making their way with some difficulty because of the dead weight of the central figure, I caught a glimpse of his face—not an unhandsome face, of a foreign, Slavic type, ghastly pale, wholly stupid, brutalized and made disgustingly sensual by excesses. It was gone in an instant; yet I felt myself shudder a bit—and I am not squeamish.

A moment later I was at the top of the stairs; and there a bitter disappointment awaited me, in the person of the most magnificently plus-upholstered lackey, with the stoutest British calves, radiant in white stockings, that it has ever been my privilege to view.

He stepped suddenly from behind the door and barred the way with a majestic arm.

"'Oom," he inquired precisely, "do you wish to see?"

I paused, aghast, realizing the bitter truth.

"This is a private house?"

"Hit is," he returned without emotion.

I hesitated, stammering something about a mistake. A gleam of suspicion lightened the dull surface of his eyes. He shook his head, firmly compressing his lips. I turned and fled, conscious that his unfriendly glare remained concentrated upon the small of my back.

As I had suspected, the cab had not stirred. I poked the cabby with my cane and again succeeded in rousing him.

"The Carleton!" I told him desperately. "Do you think you can take me to the Carleton?"

He touched his hat stiffly this time.

"The Carleton," he agreed with wistful patience. "Climb in, gov'ner."

What choice had I? I climbed in. It was either that or a night's wandering about the streets of an unknown city. I chose what I fancied the lesser evil.

I pulled open the door, and at the same moment the horse started forward. The movement was slight enough, in all conscience, and yet it was enough to make me stumble and to tangle up my feet. By the time I got them straightened out the vehicle was converging toward the middle of the street. I caught hold of the side of the door and, with a spring, threw myself in.

Lunging in upon my knees, I thrust out both hands to save myself a nasty fall, expecting to land upon the cushions of the seats. To the contrary, my fingers encountered, on the one side, the warm flesh of a hand, on the other, a trousered leg, and, simultaneously, a man swore with vigor.

"You damned fool!" he cried, "do you desire to bring the police about our ears?"

"I beg pardon—" I faltered, recovering, but pardonably amazed.

My voice apparently betrayed to the speaker his mistake. I heard him shut his teeth together with a sharp, unpleasant click, and before I could make another move a blinding glare of light was in my eyes.

I suppose I blinked like an owl; certainly I saw nothing beyond the bullseye of that pocket-size electric hand lamp. It was like gazing full-eyed at the sun itself for a moment. And then, as abruptly, it was switched off, the interior of the coupe again wrapped in total darkness.

"Get up and sit down," said the voice—a rich and heavy voice, well modulated, its accents those of a man of cultivation, yet tinged faintly with a foreign intonation, as though the speaker used his English with knowledge, yet without cruel facility.

"I have no wish to intrude—" I began.

"Sit down!" said the man peremptorily.

"I fancied the carriage vacant—"

"Sit down and hold your tongue!"

"Who the devil—" I expostulated hotly.

A hand clapped itself across my mouth so sharply as to cause a momentary sensation of pain, and as unceremoniously something cool and hard was pressed against my temple. The voice came again, charged with an inflexible resolution:

"Sit down, sir, and be quiet!"

I recognized the contact of cold steel against my skin and knew that my life was threatened with a revolver.

CHAPTER III
A Swift Descent Into Melodrama

BREATHLESS with astonishment—stupefied, indeed, for the time being—I obeyed without question; and sinking limply into the vacant seat, with my back to the horse, I caught a whiff of alcohol-laden breath that brought to mind the drunkard whom, with his friends, I had encountered within the past few moments.

Sitting quietly and puzzling the matter out as best I might, I sensed something of the nature of this predicament wherein I found myself. The fellow by my side was plainly sleeping off the effects of a debauch; his heavy and stertorous breathing testified to that fact—he was not to be reckoned with.

It was with the man, the armed man on the opposite seat, that I had to deal; and he was entirely an unknown quantity. What his motive was in that strange affair I could not even conjecture. Why I should be permitted to enter the vehicle at all under the circumstances was an enigma. Evidently I had stumbled upon some project of a criminal—at least of an underhand—character, having for its victim the drunkard.

Robbery offered itself as the most plausible explanation; and yet, if that were the man's intent, why should he detain me there to be a witness? The affair bristled with incongruities, not the least of which was the presence of the pair (what had become of the third member?) in the coupe which I had vacated only temporarily.

And yet there existed a most unevadable determination not to permit me to withdraw at this stage of the game. When I moved restlessly, feeling for the other's position with the toe of my shoe, he understood the ruse, and put a period to it without ceremony.

I heard the sound of a swift change of position from the quarter where the sober man sat masked in darkness, and guessed that he was bending over and going through the pockets of the drunkard. The latter grunted dully, swinishly, but as if in pain.

Here was my opportunity, ready to my hand, dared I grasp it. While the other was thus occupied, I might grapple with him. Unthinkingly, perhaps, I took the chances, dared the odds—and they were long.

I reached across the drunkard, and at once my groping fingers fastened tenaciously about the wrist of the other. I believe he swore; but I gritted my teeth and tightened my grip.

He was a man of tremendous strength and infinite resource, however. No sooner had I touched him than he had turned on me with a snarl and thrown me off by a clever, upward twist of his arms. I was slammed back against the seat with a crash that rattled the windows of the coupe; and instantly I kicked out with all the ill-will in the world—kicked with all the strength that was in me.

I landed, feeling his flesh give beneath my boot heel, and heard him groan. Something thumped upon the floor. An instant, and we were at hand grips again. For a time we fought madly, striving each for the mastery, there in the pitch-black interior of that ramshackle cab.

I was gradually shifting my hold; in the end I got one hand firmly clinched about his throat, forcing his head back. I fancy that he was then belaboring me with his one free fist, but I cannot remember distinctly.

Somehow—I can't say how—I pulled myself together and flung him from me. His shoulders crashed against the door. There was a snap, sharp and metallic, and it flew off its hinges, letting him out.

He fell heavily to the paving, but seemed to possess all the agility of a rubber ball. The man actually bounced up from the cobbles. He was on his feet in a trice, and, before I could reach the street, was off—gone into the fog.

Meanwhile, I found myself trudging with absurd stolidity by the side of the vehicle, which maintained a progress as deliberate as unabated. The folly of it struck me after a moment, and I jumped lightly in again, with a passing consideration for the condition of the drunkard.

He was as we had left him, motionless as though drugged. But it seemed to me that his breathing had become less labored. I bent to listen—and failed to catch the least sound of respiration.

With a sickening fear in my heart, I put a hand to his breast; it came away moist with a liquid both warm and sticky.

In my horror I think I must have cried out aloud, for the coupe stopped at once. I remember pulling out a handkerchief, wiping my hands and throwing it into the street before feeling for my match safe. With tremulous fingers, I managed to strike a light. The tiny flame sputtered and flickered feebly; I shielded it with my hand, bending over the recumbent figure.

When at last the light waxed strong and clear, and I might see for myself, I saw that the man was dead, stabbed, apparently, to the heart.

On the bottom of the carriage the light caught the sheen of nickeled steel. It was the revolver. I stooped and gathered it in.

As I rose, fingers closing over the roughened, hard rubber butt of the weapon with a feeling somehow comfortable, I heard the voice of my cabman.

"Wot's hup, gov'nor?" he asked with difficulty.

He looked me up and down, slowly enough, as I stood—stooping, of course—within the vehicle; and he waited doggedly for his answer.

He spoke again, thickly as though his tongue had swollen.

"Wot's hup?"

I started to jump from the cab, but the cabby's burly figure interposed. The besotted fool, with drunken perversity, had seized upon the glimmering of a notion that something was wrong; he was bound to see it righted ere he proceeded or let me pass. His hand caught me upon the chest, holding me back.

"No, yer don't," he growled. "Wot's hup; w'y don't yer tell me?" he hiccoughed.

Continued in Monday's Evening Ledger