

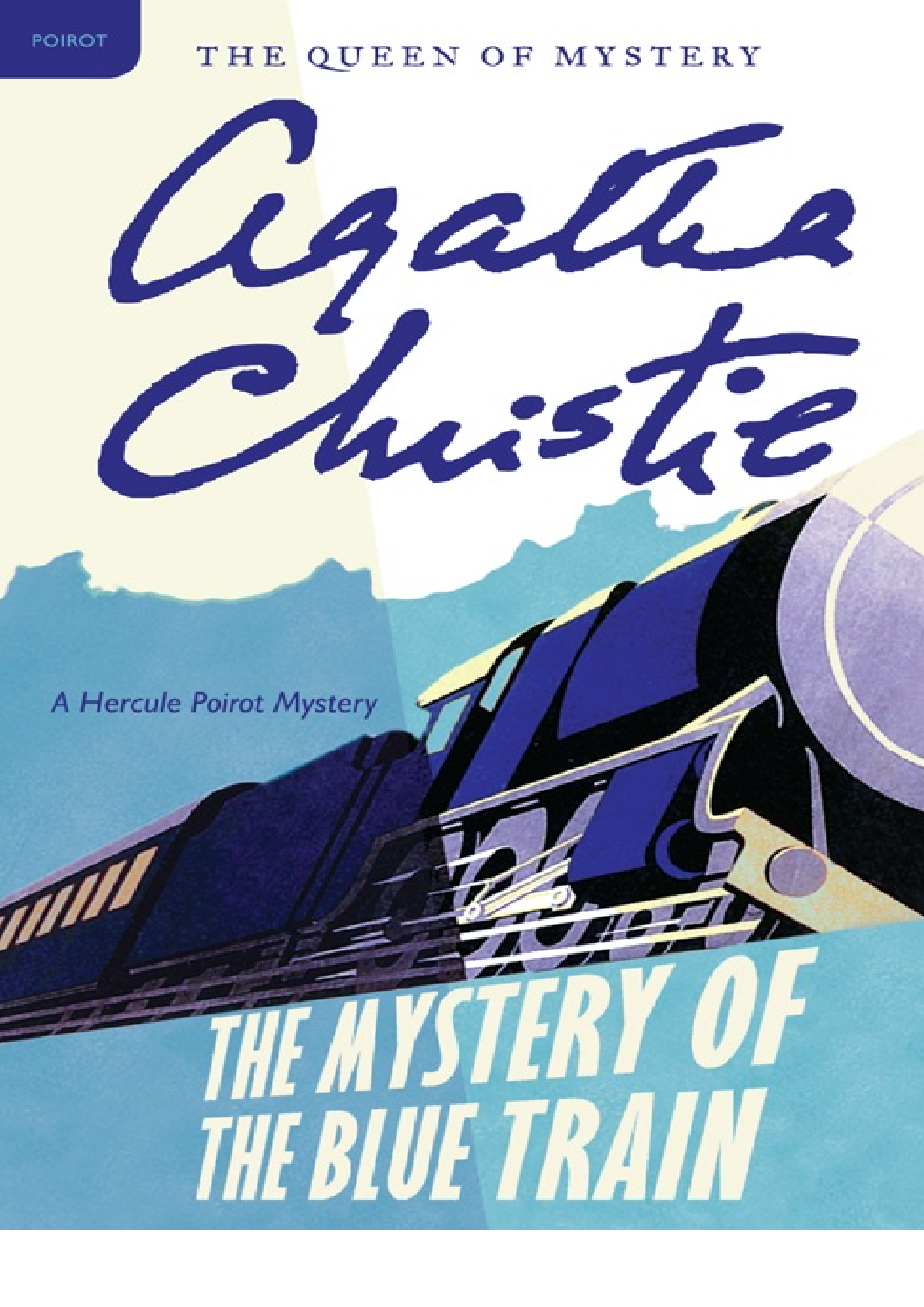
POIROT

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

**THE MYSTERY OF
THE BLUE TRAIN**



Agatha Christie

The Mystery of
the Blue Train

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

HARPER

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Dedication

*To the two
distinguished members
of the O.F.D.
Carlotta and Peter*

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One

THE MAN WITH THE WHITE HAIR

It was close on midnight when a man crossed the Place de la Concorde. In spite of the handsome fur coat which garbed his meagre form, there was something essentially weak and paltry about him.

A little man with a face like a rat. A man, one would say, who could never play a conspicuous part, or rise to prominence in any sphere. And yet, in leaping to such a conclusion, an onlooker would have been wrong. For this man, negligible and inconspicuous as he seemed, played a prominent part in the destiny of the world. In an Empire where rats ruled, he was the king of the rats.

Even now, an Embassy awaited his return. But he had business to do first—business of which the Embassy was not officially cognizant. His face gleamed white and sharp in the moonlight. There was the least hint of a curve in the thin nose. His father had been a Polish Jew, a journeyman tailor. It was business such as his father would have loved that took him abroad tonight.

He came to the Seine, crossed it, and entered one of the less reputable quarters of Paris. Here he stopped before a tall, dilapidated house and made his way up to an apartment on the fourth floor. He had barely time to knock before the door was opened by a woman who had evidently been awaiting his arrival. She gave him no greeting, but helped him off with his overcoat and then led the way into the tawdrily furnished sitting room. The electric light was shaded with dirty pink festoons, and it softened but could not disguise, the girl's face with its mask of crude paint. Could not disguise, either, the broad Mongolian cast of her countenance. There was no doubt of Olga Demiroff's profession, nor of her nationality.

“All is well, little one?”

“All is well, Boris Ivanovitch.”

He nodded, murmuring: “I do not think I have been followed.”

But there was anxiety in his tone. He went to the window, drawing the curtains aside slightly, and peering carefully out. He started away violently.

“There are two men—on the opposite pavement. It looks to me—” He broke off and began gnawing at his nails—a habit he had when anxious.

The Russian girl was shaking her head with a slow, reassuring action.

“They were here before you came.”

“All the same, it looks to me as though they were watching this house.”

“Possibly,” she admitted indifferently.

“But then—”

“What of it? Even if they *know*—it will not be *you* they will follow from here.”

A thin, cruel smile came to his lips.

“No,” he admitted, “that is true.”

He mused for a minute or two, and then observed,

“This damned American—he can look after himself as well as anybody.”

“I suppose so.”

He went again to the window.

“Tough customers,” he muttered, with a chuckle. “Known to the police, I fear. Well, well, I wish

Brother Apache good hunting.”

Olga Demiroff shook her head.

“If the American is the kind of man they say he is, it will take more than a couple of cowardly apaches to get the better of him.” She paused. “I wonder—”

“Well?”

“Nothing. Only twice this evening a man has passed along this street—a man with white hair.”

“What of it?”

“This. As he passed those two men, he dropped his glove. One of them picked it up and returned to him. A threadbare device.”

“You mean—that the white-haired man is—their employer?”

“Something of the kind.”

The Russian looked alarmed and uneasy.

“You are sure—the parcel is safe? It has not been tampered with? There has been too much talk . . . much too much talk.”

He gnawed his nails again.

“Judge for yourself.”

She bent to the fireplace, deftly removing the coals. Underneath, from amongst the crumpled ball of newspaper, she selected from the very middle an oblong package wrapped round with grimy newspaper, and handed it to the man.

“Ingenious,” he said, with a nod of approval.

“The apartment has been searched twice. The mattress on my bed was ripped open.”

“It is as I said,” he muttered. “There has been too much talk. This haggling over the price—it was a mistake.”

He had unwrapped the newspaper. Inside was a small brown paper parcel. This in turn he unwrapped, verified the contents, and quickly wrapped it up once more. As he did so, an electric bell rang sharply.

“The American is punctual,” said Olga, with a glance at the clock.

She left the room. In a minute she returned ushering in a stranger, a big, broad-shouldered man whose transatlantic origin was evident. His keen glance went from one to the other.

“M. Krassnine?” he inquired politely.

“I am he,” said Boris. “I must apologize for—for the unconventionality of this meeting place. Bu

secrecy is urgent. I—I cannot afford to be connected with this business in any way.”

“Is that so?” said the American politely.

“I have your word, have I not, that no details of this transaction will be made public? That is one of the conditions of—sale.”

The American nodded.

“That has already been agreed upon,” he said indifferently. “Now, perhaps, you will produce the goods.”

“You have the money—in notes?”

“Yes,” replied the other.

He did not, however, make any attempt to produce it. After a moment’s hesitation, Krassnine gestured towards the small parcel on the table.

The American took it up and unrolled the wrapping paper. The contents he took over to a small electric lamp and submitted them to a very thorough examination. Satisfied, he drew from his pocket a thick leather wallet and extracted from it a wad of notes. These he handed to the Russian, who counted them carefully.

“All right?”

“I thank you, Monsieur. Everything is correct.”

“Ah!” said the other. He slipped the brown paper parcel negligently into his pocket. He bowed to Olga. “Good evening, Mademoiselle. Good evening, M. Krassnine.”

He went out, shutting the door behind him. The eyes of the two in the room met. The man passed his tongue over his dry lips.

“I wonder—will he ever get back to his hotel?” he muttered.

By common accord, they both turned to the window. They were just in time to see the American emerge into the street below. He turned to the left and marched along at a good pace without once turning his head. Two shadows stole from a doorway and followed noiselessly. Pursuers and pursued vanished into the night. Olga Demiroff spoke.

“He will get back safely,” she said. “You need not fear—or hope—whichever it is.”

“Why do you think he will be safe?” asked Krassnine curiously.

“A man who has made as much money as he has could not possibly be a fool,” said Olga. “And talking of money—”

She looked significantly at Krassnine.

“Eh?”

“My share, Boris Ivanovitch.”

With some reluctance, Krassnine handed over two of the notes. She nodded her thanks, with a complete lack of emotion, and tucked them away in her stocking.

“That is good,” she remarked, with satisfaction.

He looked at her curiously.

“You have no regrets, Olga Vassilovna?”

“Regrets? For what?”

“For what has been in your keeping. There are women—most women, I believe, who go mad over such things.”

She nodded reflectively.

~~“Yes, you speak truth there. Most women have that madness. I—have not. I wonder now—”~~ She broke off.

“Well?” asked the other curiously.

“The American will be safe with them—yes, I am sure of that. But afterwards—”

“Eh? What are you thinking of?”

“He will give them, of course, to some woman,” said Olga thoughtfully. “I wonder what will happen then. . . .”

She shook herself impatiently and went over to the window. Suddenly she uttered an exclamation and called to her companion.

“See, he is going down the street now—the man I mean.”

They both gazed down together. A slim, elegant figure was progressing along at a leisurely pace. He wore an opera hat and a cloak. As he passed a street lamp, the light illuminated a thatch of thick white hair.

Two

[M. LE MARQUIS](#)

The man with the white hair continued on his course, unhurried, and seemingly indifferent to his surroundings. He took a side turning to the right and another one to the left. Now and then he hummed a little air to himself.

Suddenly he stopped dead and listened intently. He had heard a certain sound. It might have been the bursting of a tyre or it might have been—a shot. A curious smile played round his lips for a minute. Then he resumed his leisurely walk.

On turning a corner he came upon a scene of some activity. A representative of the law was making notes in a pocketbook, and one or two late passersby had collected on the spot. To one of these the man with the white hair made a polite request for information.

“Something has been happening, yes?”

“*Mais oui*, Monsieur. Two apaches set upon an elderly American gentleman.”

“They did him no injury?”

“No, indeed.” The man laughed. “The American, he had a revolver in his pocket, and before they could attack him, he fired shots so closely round them that they took alarm and fled. The police, as usual, arrived too late.”

“Ah!” said the inquirer.

He displayed no emotion of any kind.

Placidly and unconcernedly he resumed his nocturnal strolling. Presently he crossed the Seine and came into the richer areas of the city. It was some twenty minutes later that he came to a stop before a certain house in a quiet but aristocratic thoroughfare.

The shop, for shop it was, was a restrained and unpretentious one. D. Papopolous, dealer in antiques, was so known to fame that he needed no advertisement, and indeed most of his business was not done over a counter. M. Papopolous had a very handsome apartment of his own overlooking the Champs Elysées, and it might reasonably be supposed that he would have been found there and not at his place of business at such an hour, but the man with the white hair seemed confident of success as he pressed the obscurely placed bell, having first given a quick glance up and down the deserted street.

His confidence was not misplaced. The door opened and a man stood in the aperture. He wore gold rings in his ears and was of a swarthy cast of countenance.

“Good evening,” said the stranger. “Your master is within?”

“The master is here, but he does not see chance visitors at this time of night,” growled the other.

“I think he will see me. Tell him that his friend M. le Marquis is here.”

The man opened the door a little wider and allowed the visitor to enter.

The man who gave his name as M. le Marquis had shielded his face with his hand as he spoke.

When the manservant returned with the information that M. Papopolous would be pleased to receive the visitor a further change had taken place in the stranger’s appearance. The manservant must have been very unobservant or very well-trained, for he betrayed no surprise at the small black satin mask which hid the other’s features. Leading the way to a door at the end of the hall, he opened it and announced in a respectful murmur: “*M. le Marquis.*”

The figure which rose to receive this strange guest was an imposing one. There was something venerable and patriarchal about M. Papopolous. He had a high-domed forehead and a beautiful white beard. His manner had in it something ecclesiastical and benign.

“My dear friend,” said M. Papopolous.

He spoke in French and his tones were rich and unctuous.

“I must apologise,” said the visitor, “for the lateness of the hour.”

“Not at all. Not at all,” said M. Papopolous—“an interesting time of night. You have had, perhaps an interesting evening?”

“Not personally,” said M. le Marquis.

“Not personally,” repeated M. Papopolous, “no, no, of course not. And there is news, eh?”

He cast a sharp glance sideways at the other, a glance that was not ecclesiastical or benign in the least.

“There is no news. The attempt failed. I hardly expected anything else.”

“Quite so,” said M. Papopolous: “anything crude—”

He waved his hand to express his intense distaste for crudity in any form. There was indeed nothing crude about M. Papopolous nor about the goods he handled. He was well-known in most European courts, and kings called him Demetrius in a friendly manner. He had the reputation for the most exquisite discretion. That, together with the nobility of his aspect, had carried him through several very questionable transactions.

“The direct attack—” said M. Papopolous. He shook his head. “It answers sometimes—but very seldom.”

The other shrugged his shoulders.

“It saves time,” he remarked, “and to fail costs nothing—or next to nothing. The other plan—will not fail.”

“Ah,” said M. Papopolous, looking at him keenly.

The other nodded slowly.

“I have great confidence in your—er—reputation,” said the antique dealer.

M. le Marquis smiled gently.

“I think I may say,” he murmured, “that your confidence will not be misplaced.”

“You have unique opportunities,” said the other, with a note of envy in his voice.

“I make them,” said M. le Marquis.

He rose and took up the cloak which he had thrown carelessly on the back of a chair.

“I will keep you informed, M. Papopolous, through the usual channels, but there must be no hitch in your arrangements.”

M. Papopolous was pained.

“There is *never* a hitch in my arrangements,” he complained.

The other smiled, and without any further word of adieu he left the room, closing the door behind him.

M. Papopolous remained in thought for a moment, stroking his venerable white beard, and then moved across to a second door which opened inwards. As he turned the handle, a young woman, who only too clearly had been leaning against it with her ear to the keyhole, stumbled headlong into the room. M. Papopolous displayed neither surprise nor concern. It was evidently all quite natural to him.

“Well, Zia?” he asked.

“I did not hear him go,” explained Zia.

She was a handsome young woman, built on Junoesque lines, with dark flashing eyes and such a general air of resemblance to M. Papopolous that it was easy to see they were father and daughter.

“It is annoying,” she continued vexedly, “that one cannot see through a keyhole and hear through it at the same time.”

“It has often annoyed me,” said M. Papopolous, with great simplicity.

“So that is M. le Marquis,” said Zia slowly. “Does he always wear a mask, Father?”

“Always.”

There was a pause.

“It is the rubies, I suppose?” asked Zia.

Her father nodded.

“What do you think, my little one?” he inquired, with a hint of amusement in his beady black eyes.

“Of M. le Marquis?”

“Yes.”

“I think,” said Zia slowly, “that it is a very rare thing to find a well-bred Englishman who speaks French as well as that.”

“Ah!” said M. Papopolous, “so that is what you think.”

As usual, he did not commit himself, but he regarded Zia with benign approval.

“I thought, too,” said Zia, “that his head was an odd shape.”

“Massive,” said her father—“a trifle massive. But then that effect is always created by a wig.”

They both looked at each other and smiled.

Three

[HEART OF FIRE](#)

Rufus Van Aldin passed through the revolving doors of the Savoy, and walked to the reception desk. The desk clerk smiled a respectful greeting.

“Pleased to see you back again, Mr. Van Aldin,” he said.

The American millionaire nodded his head in a casual greeting.

“Everything all right?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. Major Knighton is upstairs in the suite now.”

Van Aldin nodded again.

“Any mail?” he vouchsafed.

“They have all been sent up, Mr. Van Aldin. Oh! wait a minute.”

He dived into a pigeonhole, and produced a letter.

“Just come this minute,” he explained.

Rufus Van Aldin took the letter from him, and as he saw the handwriting, a woman’s flowing hand, his face was suddenly transformed. The harsh contours of it softened, and the hard line of his mouth relaxed. He looked a different man. He walked across to the lift with the letter in his hand and the smile still on his lips.

In the drawing room of his suite, a young man was sitting at a desk nimbly sorting correspondence with the ease born of long practice. He sprang up as Van Aldin entered.

“Hallo, Knighton!”

“Glad to see you back, sir. Had a good time?”

“So so!” said the millionaire unemotionally. “Paris is rather a one-horse city nowadays. Still—I got what I went over for.”

He smiled to himself rather grimly.

“You usually do, I believe,” said the secretary, laughing.

“That’s so,” agreed the other.

He spoke in a matter-of-fact manner, as one stating a well-known fact. Throwing off his heavy overcoat, he advanced to the desk.

“Anything urgent?”

“I don’t think so, sir. Mostly the usual stuff. I have not quite finished sorting it out.”

Van Aldin nodded briefly. He was a man who seldom expressed either blame or praise. His methods with those he employed were simple; he gave them a fair trial and dismissed promptly those

who were inefficient. His selections of people were unconventional. Knighton, for instance, he had met casually at a Swiss resort two months previously. He had approved of the fellow, looked up his war record, and found in it the explanation of the limp with which he walked. Knighton had made no secret of the fact that he was looking for a job, and indeed diffidently asked the millionaire if he knew of any available post. Van Aldin remembered, with a grim smile of amusement, the young man's complete astonishment when he had been offered the post of secretary to the great man himself.

"But—but I have no experience of business," he had stammered.

"That doesn't matter a cuss," Van Aldin had replied. "I have got three secretaries already to attend to that kind of thing. But I am likely to be in England for the next six months, and I want an Englishman who—well, knows the ropes—and can attend to the social side of things for me."

So far, Van Aldin had found his judgement confirmed. Knighton had proved quick, intelligent, and resourceful, and he had a distinct charm of manner.

The secretary indicated three or four letters placed by themselves on the top of the desk.

"It might perhaps be as well, sir, if you glanced at these," he suggested. "The top one is about the Colton agreement—"

But Rufus Van Aldin held up a protesting hand.

"I am not going to look at a durned thing tonight," he declared. "They can all wait till the morning. Except this one," he added, looking down at the letter he held in his hand. And again that strange transforming smile stole over his face.

Richard Knighton smiled sympathetically.

"Mrs. Kettering?" he murmured. "She rang up yesterday and today. She seems very anxious to see you at once, sir."

"Does she, now!"

The smile faded from the millionaire's face. He ripped open the envelope which he held in his hand and took out the enclosed sheet. As he read it his face darkened, his mouth set grimly in the line which Wall Street knew so well, and his brows knit themselves ominously. Knighton turned tactfully away, and went on opening letters and sorting them. A muttered oath escaped the millionaire, and his clenched fist hit the table sharply.

"I'll not stand for this," he muttered to himself. "Poor little girl, it's a good thing she has her old father behind her."

He walked up and down the room for some minutes, his brows drawn together in a scowl. Knighton still bent assiduously over the desk. Suddenly Van Aldin came to an abrupt halt. He took up his overcoat from the chair where he had thrown it.

"Are you going out again, sir?"

"Yes, I'm going round to see my daughter."

"If Colton's people ring up—?"

"Tell them to go to the devil," said Van Aldin.

"Very well," said the secretary unemotionally.

Van Aldin had his overcoat on by now. Cramming his hat upon his head, he went towards the door. He paused with his hand upon the handle.

"You are a good fellow, Knighton," he said. "You don't worry me when I am rattled."

Knighton smiled a little, but made no reply.

“Ruth is my only child,” said Van Aldin, “and there is no one on this earth who knows quite what she means to me.”

A faint smile irradiated his face. He slipped his hand into his pocket.

“Care to see something, Knighton?”

He came back towards the secretary.

From his pocket he drew out a parcel carelessly wrapped in brown paper. He tossed off the wrapping and disclosed a big, shabby, red velvet case. In the centre of it were some twisted initials surmounted by a crown. He snapped the case open, and the secretary drew in his breath sharply. Against the slightly dingy white of the interior, the stones glowed like blood.

“My God! sir,” said Knighton. “Are they—are they real?”

Van Aldin laughed a quiet little cackle of amusement.

“I don’t wonder at your asking that. Amongst these rubies are the three largest in the world. Catherine of Russia wore them, Knighton. That centre one there is known as ‘Heart of Fire.’ It’s perfect—not a flaw in it.”

“But,” the secretary murmured, “they must be worth a fortune.”

“Four or five hundred thousand dollars,” said Van Aldin nonchalantly, “and that is apart from the historical interest.”

“And you carry them about—like that, loose in your pocket?”

Van Aldin laughed amusedly.

“I guess so. You see, they are my little present for Ruthie.”

The secretary smiled discreetly.

“I can understand now Mrs. Kettering’s anxiety over the telephone,” he murmured.

But Van Aldin shook his head. The hard look returned to his face.

“You are wrong there,” he said. “She doesn’t know about these; they are my little surprise for her.”

He shut the case, and began slowly to wrap it up again.

“It’s a hard thing, Knighton,” he said, “how little one can do for those one loves. I can buy a good portion of the earth for Ruth, if it would be any use to her, but it isn’t. I can hang these things round her neck and give her a moment or two’s pleasure, maybe, but—”

He shook his head.

“When a woman is not happy in her home—”

He left the sentence unfinished. The secretary nodded discreetly. He knew, none better, the reputation of the Hon. Derek Kettering. Van Aldin sighed. Slipping the parcel back in his coat pocket he nodded to Knighton and left the room.

Four

ON CURZON STREET

The Hon. Mrs. Derek Kettering lived in Curzon Street. The butler who opened the door recognized Rufus Van Aldin at once and permitted himself a discreet smile of greeting. He led the way upstairs to the big double drawing room on the first floor.

A woman who was sitting by the window started up with a cry.

“Why, Dad, if that isn’t too good for anything! I’ve been telephoning Major Knighton all day to try and get hold of you, but he couldn’t say for sure when you were expected back.”

Ruth Kettering was twenty-eight years of age. Without being beautiful, or in the real sense of the word even pretty, she was striking-looking because of her colouring. Van Aldin had been called Carrot and Ginger in his time, and Ruth’s hair was almost pure auburn. With it went dark eyes and very black lashes—the effect somewhat enhanced by art. She was tall and slender, and moved well. At a careless glance it was the face of a Raphael Madonna. Only if one looked closely did one perceive the same line of jaw and chin as in Van Aldin’s face, bespeaking the same hardness and determination. It suited the man, but suited the woman less well. From her childhood upward Ruth Van Aldin had been accustomed to having her own way, and anyone who had ever stood up against her soon realized that Rufus Van Aldin’s daughter never gave in.

“Knighton told me you’d ’phoned him,” said Van Aldin. “I only got back from Paris half an hour ago. What’s all this about Derek?”

Ruth Kettering flushed angrily.

“It’s unspeakable. It’s beyond all limits,” she cried. “He—he doesn’t seem to listen to anything I say.”

There was bewilderment as well as anger in her voice.

“He’ll listen to me,” said the millionaire grimly.

Ruth went on.

“I’ve hardly seen him for the last month. He goes about everywhere with that woman.”

“With what woman?”

“Mirelle. She dances at the Parthenon, you know.”

Van Aldin nodded.

“I was down at Leconbury last week. I—I spoke to Lord Leconbury. He was awfully sweet to me and sympathized entirely. He said he’d give Derek a good talking to.”

“Ah!” said Van Aldin.

“What do you mean by ‘Ah!’ Dad?”

“Just what you think I mean, Ruthie. Poor old Leconbury is a washout. Of course he sympathized with you, of course he tried to soothe you down. Having got his son and heir married to the daughter of one of the richest men in the States, he naturally doesn’t want to mess the thing up. But he’s got one foot in the grave already, everyone knows that, and anything he may say will cut darned little ice with Derek.”

“Can’t *you* do anything, Dad?” urged Ruth, after a minute or two.

“I might,” said the millionaire. He waited a second reflectively, and then went on. “There are several things I might do, but there’s only one that will be any real good. How much pluck have you got, Ruthie?”

She stared at him. He nodded back at her.

“I mean just what I say. Have you got the grit to admit to all the world that you’ve made a mistake? There’s only one way out of this mess, Ruthie. Cut your losses and start afresh.”

“You mean—?”

“Divorce.”

“Divorce!”

Van Aldin smiled drily.

“You say that word, Ruth, as though you’d never heard it before. And yet your friends are doing all round you every day.”

“Oh! I know that. But—”

She stopped, biting her lip. Her father nodded comprehendingly.

“I know, Ruth. You’re like me, you can’t bear to let go. But I’ve learnt, and you’ve got to learn, that there are times when it’s the only way. I might find ways of whistling Derek back to you, but it would all come to the same in the end. *He’s no good*, Ruth; he’s rotten through and through. And mind you, I blame myself for ever letting you marry him. But you were kind of set on having him, and he seemed in earnest about turning over a new leaf—and well, I’d crossed you once, honey. . . .”

He did not look at her as he said the last words. Had he done so, he might have seen the swift colour that came up in her face.

“You did,” she said in a hard voice.

“I was too durned softhearted to do it a second time. I can’t tell you how I wish I had, though. You’ve led a poor kind of life for the last few years, Ruth.”

“It has not been very—agreeable,” agreed Mrs. Kettering.

“That’s why I say to you that this thing has got to *stop!*” He brought his hand down with a bang on the table. “You may have a hankering after the fellow still. *Cut it out*. Face facts. Derek Kettering married you for your money. That’s all there is to it. Get rid of him, Ruth.”

Ruth Kettering looked down at the ground for some moments, then she said, without raising her head:

“Supposing he doesn’t consent?”

Van Aldin looked at her in astonishment.

“He won’t have a say in the matter.”

She flushed and bit her lip.

“No—no—of course not. I only meant—”

She stopped. Her father eyed her keenly.

“What did you mean?”

“I meant—” She paused, choosing her words carefully. “He mayn’t take it lying down.”

The millionaire’s chin shot out grimly.

“You mean he’ll fight the case? Let him! But, as a matter of fact, you’re wrong. He won’t fight.

Any solicitor he consults will tell him he hasn’t a leg to stand upon.”

“You don’t think”—she hesitated—“I mean—out of sheer spite against me—he might, well, try to make it awkward?”

Her father looked at her in some astonishment.

“Fight the case, you mean?”

He shook his head.

“Very unlikely. You see, he would have to have something to go upon.”

Mrs. Kettering did not answer. Van Aldin looked at her sharply.

“Come, Ruth, out with it. There’s something troubling you—what is it?”

“Nothing, nothing at all.”

But her voice was unconvincing.

“You are dreading the publicity, eh? Is that it? You leave it to me. I’ll put the whole thing through so smoothly that there will be no fuss at all.”

“Very well, Dad, if you really think it’s the best thing to be done.”

“Got a fancy for the fellow still, Ruth? Is that it?”

“No.”

The word came with no uncertain emphasis. Van Aldin seemed satisfied. He patted his daughter on the shoulder.

“It will be all right, little girl. Don’t you worry any. Now let’s forget about all this. I have brought you a present from Paris.”

“For me? Something very nice?”

“I hope you’ll think so,” said Van Aldin, smiling.

He took the parcel from his coat pocket and handed it to her. She unwrapped it eagerly, and snapped open the case. A long-drawn “Oh!” came from her lips. Ruth Kettering loved jewels—always had done so.

“Dad, how—how wonderful!”

“Rather in a class by themselves, aren’t they?” said the millionaire with satisfaction. “You like them, eh.”

“Like them? Dad, they’re unique. How did you get hold of them?”

Van Aldin smiled.

“Ah! that’s my secret. They had to be bought privately, of course. They are rather well-known. See that big stone in the middle? You have heard of it, maybe; that’s the historic ‘Heart of Fire.’ ”

“ ‘Heart of Fire!’ ” repeated Mrs. Kettering.

She had taken the stones from the case and was holding them against her breast. The millionaire watched her. He was thinking of the series of women who had worn the jewels. The heartaches, the

despairs, the jealousies. "Heart of Fire," like all famous stones, had left behind it a trail of tragedy and violence. Held in Ruth Kettering's assured hand, it seemed to lose its potency of evil. With her cool, equable poise, this woman of the western world seemed a negation to tragedy or heart burnings. Ruth returned the stones to their case; then, jumping up, she flung her arms round her father's neck.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, Dad. They are wonderful! You do give me the most marvellous presents always."

"That's all right," said Van Aldin, patting her shoulder. "You are all I have, you know, Ruthie."

"You will stay to dinner, won't you, Father?"

"I don't think so. You were going out, weren't you?"

"Yes, but I can easily put that off. Nothing very exciting."

"No," said Van Aldin. "Keep your engagement. I have got a good deal to attend to. See you tomorrow, my dear. Perhaps if I 'phone you, we can meet at Galbraiths?"

Messrs. Galbraith, Galbraith, Cuthbertson & Galbraith were Van Aldin's London solicitors.

"Very well, Dad." She hesitated. "I suppose it—this—won't keep me from going to the Riviera?"

"When are you off?"

"On the fourteenth."

"Oh, that will be all right. These things take a long time to mature. By the way, Ruth, I shouldn't take those rubies abroad if I were you. Leave them at the bank."

Mrs. Kettering nodded.

"We don't want to have you robbed and murdered for the sake of 'Heart of Fire,' " said the millionaire jocosely.

"And yet you carried it about in your pocket loose," retorted his daughter, smiling.

"Yes—"

Something, some hesitation, caught her attention.

"What is it, Dad?"

"Nothing." He smiled. "Thinking of a little adventure of mine in Paris."

"An adventure?"

"Yes, the night I bought these things."

He made a gesture towards the jewel case.

"Oh, do tell me."

"Nothing to tell, Ruthie. Some apache fellows got a bit fresh and I shot at them and they got off. That's all."

She looked at him with some pride.

"You're a tough proposition, Dad."

"You bet I am, Ruthie."

He kissed her affectionately and departed. On arriving back at the Savoy, he gave a curt order to Knighton.

"Get hold of a man called Goby; you'll find his address in my private book. He's to be here tomorrow morning at half past nine."

"Yes, sir."

"I also want to see Mr. Kettering. Run him to earth for me if you can. Try his Club—at any rate,

get hold of him somehow, and arrange for me to see him here tomorrow morning. Better make it latish, about twelve. His sort aren't early risers."

The secretary nodded in comprehension of these instructions. Van Aldin gave himself into the hands of this valet. His bath was prepared, and as he lay luxuriating in the hot water, his mind went back over the conversation with his daughter. On the whole he was well-satisfied. His keen mind had long since accepted the fact that divorce was the only possible way out. Ruth had agreed to the proposed solution with more readiness than he had hoped for. Yet, in spite of her acquiescence, he was left with a vague sense of uneasiness. Something about her manner, he felt, had not been quite natural. He frowned to himself.

"Maybe I'm fanciful," he muttered, "and yet—I bet there's something she has not told me."

Five

A USEFUL GENTLEMAN

Rufus Van Aldin had just finished the sparse breakfast of coffee and dry toast, which was all he ever allowed himself, when Knighton entered the room.

“Mr. Goby is below, sir, waiting to see you.”

The millionaire glanced at the clock. It was just half past nine.

“All right,” he said curtly. “He can come up.”

A minute or two later, Mr. Goby entered the room. He was a small, elderly man, shabbily dressed with eyes that looked carefully all round the room, and never at the person he was addressing.

“Good morning, Goby,” said the millionaire. “Take a chair.”

“Thank you, Mr. Van Aldin.”

Mr. Goby sat down with his hands on his knees, and gazed earnestly at the radiator.

“I have got a job for you.”

“Yes, Mr. Van Aldin?”

“My daughter is married to the Hon. Derek Kettering, as you may perhaps know.”

Mr. Goby transferred his gaze from the radiator to the left-hand drawer of the desk, and permitted a deprecating smile to pass over his face. Mr. Goby knew a great many things, but he always hated to admit the fact.

“By my advice, she is about to file a petition for divorce. That, of course, is a solicitor’s business. But, for private reasons, I want the fullest and most complete information.”

Mr. Goby looked at the cornice and murmured:

“About Mr. Kettering?”

“About Mr. Kettering.”

“Very good, sir.”

Mr. Goby rose to his feet.

“When will you have it ready for me?”

“Are you in a hurry, sir?”

“I’m always in a hurry,” said the millionaire.

Mr. Goby smiled understandingly at the fender.

“Shall we say two o’clock this afternoon, sir?” he asked.

“Excellent,” approved the other. “Good morning, Goby.”

“Good morning, Mr. Van Aldin.”

“That’s a very useful man,” said the millionaire as Goby went out and his secretary came in. “In his own line he’s a specialist.”

“What is his line?”

“Information. Give him twenty-four hours and he would lay the private life of the Archbishop of Canterbury bare for you.”

“A useful sort of chap,” said Knighton, with a smile.

“He has been useful to me once or twice,” said Van Aldin. “Now then, Knighton, I’m ready for work.”

The next few hours saw a vast quantity of business rapidly transacted. It was half past twelve when the telephone bell rang, and Mr. Van Aldin was informed that Mr. Kettering had called. Knighton looked at Van Aldin, and interpreted his brief nod.

“Ask Mr. Kettering to come up, please.”

The secretary gathered up his papers and departed. He and the visitor passed each other in the doorway, and Derek Kettering stood aside to let the other go out. Then he came in, shutting the door behind him.

“Good morning, sir. You are very anxious to see me, I hear.”

The lazy voice with its slightly ironic inflection roused memories in Van Aldin. There was charm in it—there had always been charm in it. He looked piercingly at his son-in-law. Derek Kettering was thirty-four, lean of build, with a dark, narrow face, which had even now something indescribably boyish in it.

“Come in,” said Van Aldin curtly. “Sit down.”

Kettering flung himself lightly into an armchair. He looked at his father-in-law with a kind of tolerant amusement.

“Not seen you for a long time, sir,” he remarked pleasantly. “About two years, I should say. Seen Ruth yet?”

“I saw her last night,” said Van Aldin.

“Looking very fit, isn’t she?” said the other lightly.

“I didn’t know you had had much opportunity of judging,” said Van Aldin drily.

Derek Kettering raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, we sometimes meet at the same nightclub, you know,” he said airily.

“I am not going to beat about the bush,” Van Aldin said curtly. “I have advised Ruth to file a petition for divorce.”

Derek Kettering seemed unmoved.

“How drastic!” he murmured. “Do you mind if I smoke, sir?”

He lit a cigarette, and puffed out a cloud of smoke as he added nonchalantly:

“And what did Ruth say?”

“Ruth proposes to take my advice,” said her father.

“Does she really?”

“Is that all you have got to say?” demanded Van Aldin sharply.

Kettering flicked his ash into the grate.

“I think, you know,” he said, with a detached air, “that she’s making a great mistake.”

“From your point of view she doubtless is,” said Van Aldin grimly.

“Oh, come now,” said the other; “don’t let’s be personal. I really wasn’t thinking of myself at the moment. I was thinking of Ruth. You know my poor old Governor really can’t last much longer; all the doctors say so. Ruth had better give it a couple more years, then I shall be Lord Leconbury, and she can be châtelaine of Leconbury, which is what she married me for.”

“I won’t have any of your darned impudence,” roared Van Aldin.

Derek Kettering smiled at him unmoved.

“I agree with you. It’s an obsolete idea,” he said. “There’s nothing in a title nowadays. Still, Leconbury is a very fine old place, and, after all, we are one of the oldest families in England. It will be very annoying for Ruth if she divorces me to find me marrying again, and some other woman queening it at Leconbury instead of her.”

“I am serious, young man,” said Van Aldin.

“Oh, so am I,” said Kettering. “I am in very low water financially; it will put me in a nasty hole if Ruth divorces me, and, after all, if she has stood it for ten years, why not stand it a little longer? I give you my word of honour that the old man can’t possibly last out another eighteen months, and, as I said before, it’s a pity Ruth shouldn’t get what she married me for.”

“You suggest that my daughter married you for your title and position?”

Derek Kettering laughed a laugh that was not all amusement.

“You don’t think it was a question of a love match?” he asked.

“I know,” said Van Aldin slowly, “that you spoke very differently in Paris ten years ago.”

“Did I? Perhaps I did. Ruth was very beautiful, you know—rather like an angel or a saint, or something that had stepped down from a niche in a church. I had fine ideas, I remember, of turning over a new leaf, of settling down and living up to the highest traditions of English home life with a beautiful wife who loved me.”

He laughed again, rather more discordantly.

“But you don’t believe that, I suppose?” he said.

“I have no doubt at all that you married Ruth for her money,” said Van Aldin unemotionally.

“And that she married me for love?” asked the other ironically.

“Certainly,” said Van Aldin.

Derek Kettering stared at him for a minute or two, then he nodded reflectively.

“I see you believe that,” he said. “So did I at the time. I can assure you, my dear father-in-law, I was very soon undeceived.”

“I don’t know what you are getting at,” said Van Aldin, “and I don’t care. You have treated Ruth darned badly.”

“Oh, I have,” agreed Kettering lightly, “but she’s tough, you know. She’s your daughter. Underneath the pink-and-white softness of her she’s as hard as granite. You have always been known as a hard man, so I have been told, but Ruth is harder than you are. You, at any rate, love one person better than yourself. Ruth never has and never will.”

“That is enough,” said Van Aldin. “I asked you here so that I could tell you fair and square what meant to do. My girl has got to have some happiness, and remember this, I am behind her.”

Derek Kettering got up and stood by the mantelpiece. He tossed away his cigarette. When he

spoke, his voice was very quiet.

“What exactly do you mean by that, I wonder?” he said.

“I mean,” said Van Aldin, “that you had better not try to defend the case.”

“Oh,” said Kettering, “is that a threat?”

“You can take it any way you please,” said Van Aldin.

Kettering drew a chair up to the table. He sat down fronting the millionaire.

“And supposing,” he said softly, “that, just for argument’s sake, I did defend the case?”

Van Aldin shrugged his shoulders.

“You have not got a leg to stand upon, you young fool. Ask your solicitors, they will soon tell you. Your conduct has been notorious, the talk of London.”

“Ruth has been kicking up a row about Mirelle, I suppose. Very foolish of her. I don’t interfere with her friends.”

“What do you mean?” said Van Aldin sharply.

Derek Kettering laughed.

“I see you don’t know everything, sir,” he said. “You are, perhaps naturally, prejudiced.”

He took up his hat and stick and moved towards the door.

“Giving advice is not much in my line.” He delivered his final thrust. “But, in this case, I should advise most strongly perfect frankness between father and daughter.”

He passed quickly out of the room and shut the door behind him just as the millionaire sprang up.

“Now, what the hell did he mean by that?” said Van Aldin as he sank back into his chair again.

All his uneasiness returned in full force. There was something here that he had not yet got to the bottom of. The telephone was by his elbow; he seized it, and asked for the number of his daughter’s house.

“Hallo! Hallo! Is that Mayfair 81907? Mrs. Kettering in? Oh, she’s out, is she? Yes, out to lunch. What time will she be in? You don’t know? Oh, very good; no, there’s no message.”

He slammed the receiver down again angrily. At two o’clock he was pacing the floor of his room waiting expectantly for Goby. The latter was ushered in at ten minutes past two.

“Well?” barked the millionaire sharply.

But little Mr. Goby was not to be hurried. He sat down at the table, produced a very shabby pocketbook, and proceeded to read from it in a monotonous voice. The millionaire listened attentively with an increasing satisfaction. Goby came to a full stop, and looked attentively at the wastepaper basket.

“Um!” said Van Aldin. “That seems pretty definite. The case will go through like winking. The hotel evidence is all right, I suppose?”

“Cast iron,” said Mr. Goby, and looked malevolently at a gilt armchair.

“And financially he’s in very low water. He’s trying to raise a loan now, you say? Has already raised practically all he can upon his expectations from his father. Once the news of the divorce gets about, he won’t be able to raise another cent, and not only that, his obligations can be bought up and pressure can be put upon him from that quarter. We have got him, Goby; we have got him in a cleft stick.”

He hit the table a bang with his fist. His face was grim and triumphant.

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