

"THE DUKE GOT UPON THE WINDOW-SILL, AND THE NEXT INSTANT
DISAPPEARED INTO SPACE."

(See page 253.)

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III.—THE SWING OF THE PENDULUM.—TOLD BY NORMAN HEAD.



HERE was now little doubt that Mme. Koluchy knew herself to be in personal danger. On the Derby Day I had thrown down the gauntlet with a vengeance—her object henceforth would be to put me out of the way. I lived in an atmosphere of intangible mystery, which was all the darker and more horrible because it was felt, not seen.

By Dufroyer's advice, I left the bringing of this dangerous woman to justice in his hands. He employed the cleverest and most up-to-date detectives to have her secretly watched, and from time to time they brought us their reports. Clue after clue arose; each clue was carefully followed, but it invariably led to disappointing results. Madame eluded every effort to bring a definite charge against her. The money we were spending, however, was not entirely in vain. We learned that her influence and the wide range of her acquaintances were far beyond what we had originally surmised. Her fame as a healer, her marvellous and occult cures, the reputation of her great wealth and dazzling beauty increased daily, and I was certain that before long I should meet her in the lists. The encounter was destined to come sooner even than I had anticipated, and in a manner most unexpected.

It was the beginning of the following November that I received an invitation to dine with an old friend, Harry de Brett. He was several years my senior, and had recently succeeded to his father's business in the City—an old-established firm of bankers, whose house was in St. Mark's Court, Gracechurch Street. Only a few days previously I had seen it announced in the society papers that a marriage had been arranged between De Brett's only daughter, Geraldine, and the

Duke of Friedeck, a foreign nobleman, whose name I had seen figuring prominently at many a function the previous season. I had known Geraldine since she was a child, and was glad to have an opportunity of offering my congratulations.

At the appointed hour, I found myself at De Brett's beautiful house in Bayswater, and Geraldine, who was standing near her father, came eagerly forward to welcome me. She was a pretty and very young girl, with a clear, olive complexion and soft, dark eyes. She had the innocent and naïve manner of a schoolgirl. She was delighted to see me, and began to talk eagerly.

"Come and stand by this window, Mr. Head. I am so glad you were able to come—I want to introduce you to Karl—the Duke of Friedeck, I mean; he will be here in a minute or two." As she spoke she dropped her voice to a semi-whisper.

"You know, of course, that we are to be married soon?" she continued.

"I have heard of the engagement," I answered, "and I congratulate you heartily. I should like much to meet the Duke. His name is, of course, familiar to anyone who reads the society papers."

"He is anxious to make your acquaintance also," she replied. "I told him you were coming, and he said——" she paused.

"But surely the Duke of Friedeck has never heard of me before?" I answered, in some surprise.

"I think he has," she replied. "He was quite excited when I spoke of you. I asked him if he had met you; he said 'No,' but that you were very well known in scientific circles as a clever man. The Duke is a great scientist himself, Mr. Head, and I know he would like to have a chat with you. I am certain you will be friends."

Just at that moment the Duke was announced. He was a tall and handsome man of about five and thirty, with the somewhat florid complexion, blue eyes, and fair, curling hair of the Teuton. He was well dressed, and had the indescribable air of good breeding which proclaims the gentleman. I looked at him with much curiosity, being puzzled by an intangible memory of having seen his face before—where and how I could not tell.

Geraldine tripped up to him and brought him to my side.

"Karl," she cried, "this is my friend

you," he replied. "I, too, am fond of science, and have lost myself more than once in its tortuous mazes. I have lately started a laboratory of my own, but just now other matters—" He broke off abruptly, and glanced at Geraldine, who smiled and blushed.

Dinner was announced. I happened to sit not far from the Duke, and noticed that he was a good conversationalist. There was scarcely a subject mentioned on which he had not something to say; and on more than one occasion his repartee was brilliant, and his remarks touched with humour.

Geraldine, in her white dress, with her soft, rather sad, eyes, her manner at once bright, sweet, and timid, made a contrast to this astute-looking man of the world.

I glanced from one to the other, and an uneasiness which I could scarcely account for sprang up within me. Notwithstanding his handsome appearance and his easy and courteous manner, I wondered if this man, nearly double her age, was likely to make the pretty English girl happy.

As dinner progressed I observed that the Duke often took the trouble to look at me. I also noticed that whenever our eyes met he turned away.

How was it possible

for him to have heard of me before? Although I was a scientist, my researches were unknown to the world. I determined to take the first opportunity of solving this mystery.

Soon after eleven o'clock the guests took their leave, and I was just about to follow their example when De Brett asked me to have a pipe with him in his smoking-room. As we seated ourselves by the fire, he began to talk at once of his future son-in-law.



"KARL," SHE CRIED, "THIS IS MY FRIEND MR. HEAD."

Mr. Head. Don't you remember we talked about him this morning?"

The Duke bowed.

"I am glad to make your acquaintance," he said to me. "Yours is a name of distinction in the world of science."

"That can scarcely be the case," I answered. "It is true I am fond of original research, but up to the present I have worked for my own pleasure alone."

"Nevertheless, the world has whispered of

"He is a capital fellow, is he not, Head?" exclaimed my host. "I hope you have formed a favourable opinion of him?"

"I never form an opinion quickly," I answered, with caution. "The Duke of Friedeck is certainly distinguished in appearance and——"

"Oh, you are too cautious, Head," cried De Brett; "you may take my word for it that he is all right. This is a great catch for my little girl. Of course, she will have plenty of money on her own account; but the Duke is not only of high family, he is also rich. He comes from Bavaria, and his title is absolutely genuine. Soon after the great Duke of Marlborough's

wars, and almost immediately after the Battle of Blenheim, the Austrian Government took possession of the Dukedom of Friedeck, and until lately the family have remained in exile. It was only a year ago that the present Duke regained his rights and all the great estates. He was introduced to us by no less a person than Mme. Koluchy—Ah, I see you start. You have heard of her, of course?"

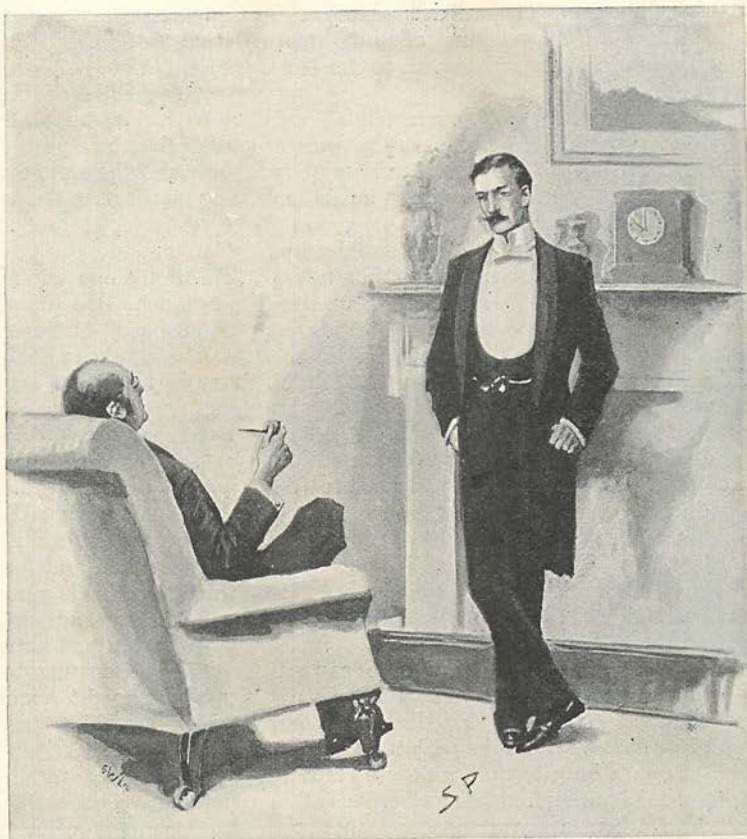
"Who has not?" I replied.

"Do you know her?"

"I have met her," I said. It was with an effort I could control the ungovernable excitement which seized me at the mere mention of this woman's name.

"She dines with us next week," continued De Brett; "a wonderful woman, wonderful! Her cures are marvellous; but that is after all the least part of her interesting personality. She is so fascinating, so wise and good-natured, that men and women alike fall at her feet. As to Geraldine, she has taken an immense fancy to her."

"Where did you first meet her?" I asked.



"HE IS A CAPITAL FELLOW, IS HE NOT, HEAD?"

"In Scotland last summer. She was staying with my old friends, the Campbells, for a couple of nights, and Friedeck was also one of the guests. If she is a friend of yours, Head—and I rather expect so from your manner—will you dine with us again next Thursday in order to meet her? We are going down to my place, Forest Manor, in Essex, and Madame is to stay with us for a couple of nights. We expect quite a large party, and can give you a bed—will you come?"

"I wish I could, but I fear it will be impossible," I replied. "It is true that I know Mme. Koluchy, but"—I broke off. "Don't ask me any more at the moment, De Brett. The fact is your news has excited me, you will say unreasonably."

De Brett gazed at me with earnestness.

"You have fallen under the spell of the most beautiful woman in London," he said; "is that so, Head?"

"You may put it that way if you like," I said, after a somewhat prolonged pause, "but I cannot explain myself to-night. Be

assured, however, of my deep interest in this matter. Pray tell me anything more you happen to know with regard to the Duke of Friedeck."

"You certainly are a strange fellow," said my host. "You are wearing at the present moment an air of quite painful mystery. However, here goes. You wish to hear about the Duke—I have nothing but good to tell of him. He is a rich man, and dabbles now and then on the Stock Exchange, but not to any serious extent. A week ago he arranged for a loan from my bank, depositing as security some of the most splendid diamonds I have ever seen. They are worth a King's ransom, and each stone is historical. He brought the diamonds away from the estates in Bavaria, and they are to be reset and presented to Geraldine just before the wedding."

"How large was the amount of the loan?" I asked.

De Brett raised his eyebrows. He evidently thought that I was infringing on the privileges even of an old friend.

"Compared with the security, the loan was a trifling one," he said, after a pause; "not more than £10,000. Friedeck will pay me back next week, as he wishes to release the diamonds in order to have them ready to present to Geraldine on her wedding-day."

"And when do you propose that the wedding shall take place?" I continued.

"Ah, you have me there, Head; that is the painful part. You know what my motherless girl is to me—well, the Duke insists upon taking her away between now and Christmas. They are to spend Christmas in the old feudal style, in the old castle in Bavaria. It is a great wrench parting from the little one, but she will be happy. I never met a man I took more warmly to than Karl Duke of Friedeck. You can see for yourself that the child is devoted to him."

"I can," I said. "I will wish you good-night now, De Brett. Be assured once again of my warm interest in all that concerns you and Geraldine."

I shook hands with my host, and a moment later found myself in the street. I called a hansom, and desired the man to drive straight to Dufrayer's flat in Shaftesbury Avenue. He had just come in, and welcomed me eagerly.

"By all that's fortunate, Head!" he exclaimed. "I was just on my way to see you."

"Then we have well met," I answered. "Dufrayer, I have come here on a most

important matter. But first of all tell me, have you ever heard of the Duke of Friedeck?"

"The Duke of Friedeck!" cried Dufrayer. "Why, it was on that very subject I wished to see you. You have, of course, observed the announcement of his approaching marriage in the society papers?"

"I have," I replied. "He is engaged to Geraldine de Brett. I have been dining at De Brett's house to-night, and met the Duke at dinner. De Brett has been telling me all about him. Dufrayer, I have learned to my consternation that the man was introduced to the De Bretts by Mme. Koluchy. That fact is quite enough to rouse my suspicions, but I see you have something to communicate on your own account. What is it?"

"Sit down, Head. You know, of course, that I am having Madame watched. The Duke of Friedeck is beyond doubt one of her satellites, and I am strongly inclined to think that this is a new plot brewing."

"Just my own opinion," I replied; "but tell me what you know."

"I was coming to see you, for I hoped that you might remember the Duke's name from your old association with the Brotherhood."

"I do not recall it, but names mean nothing. The man is handsome, and has the manners of a gentleman. When he entered De Brett's drawing-room I thought for a moment that I must have met him before, but that idea quickly vanished. Nevertheless, he contrived to arouse my suspicions by more than one stealthy glance which he favoured me with, even before his connection with Mme. Koluchy was mentioned. I regard him now as a highly suspicious individual, and I fully believe he is playing some game a little deeper than appears."

"Beyond doubt, the man has plenty of money, and moves in good circles," said Dufrayer. "He is known, however, to live a pretty fast life. He shoots at Hurlingham, drives his own drag, rents a moor in Scotland, and has a suite at the Hotel Cecil; but nothing can be discovered against him except that he is constantly seen in Madame's company."

"And that is quite enough," I replied. "Friedeck is one of Madame's satellites. Without doubt, there is mischief ahead."

"I agree with you," said Dufrayer; "I think it more than possible that this plausible Duke is simply another serpent springing from the head of this modern

Medusa. In that case, De Brett ought to be warned."

I rose uneasily.

"I would have warned him to-night," I answered, "but I want more evidence. How are we to get it?"

"Tyler's agents are doing their best, and Madame is closely watched."

"Yes, but that woman could deceive the Evil One himself," I said, bitterly.

"That is true," answered Dufroyer, "and to show our hand too soon might be fatal. We cannot move in this matter until we have got more circumstantial evidence. How we are to set to work is the puzzle!"

"Well," I said, "I shall move Heaven and earth in this matter. I have known Geraldine since she was a child. She is a sweet, innocent, motherless girl. The great risk to her happiness that may now be impending is too serious to contemplate quietly. If I had time I should go to Bavaria in order to find out if the Duke's story is true; but in any case, it might be well to send one of Tyler's agents to look up the supposed estates."

"I will do so," said Dufroyer.

"And in the meantime I shall watch," I said, "and if an opportunity occurs, believe me De Brett shall have his warning."

As I spoke I bade my friend good-night and returned to my own house.

The next few days were spent in anxious thought, but no immediate action seemed possible. Clue after clue still arose, but only to vanish into nothing. I seldom now went into society without hearing Mme. Koluchy's name, and all the accounts of her were favourable. She was the sort of woman to charm the eye and fire the

imagination. Her personal attractions were some of her strongest potentialities.

On the following Tuesday, as I was walking down Oxford Street, a brougham drew up suddenly at the pavement, the window was lowered, and a girlish face looked eagerly out. It was Geraldine de Brett.

"Mr. Head," she cried, eagerly, "you are the very man I want. Come here, I have something to say." I approached her at once. "We are dreadfully disappointed at your refusing to come to us on Thursday," she said. "We are making up such a delightful party. My father and I are going down to Forest Manor for a fortnight, in order to have plenty of room to entertain our friends. This is a personal matter with me. I ask you to come to us as a personal favour. Will you refuse?"

I looked full into the sparkling and lovely eyes of the young girl. The colour came and went in her cheeks; she laid one of her small hands for a moment on mine.

"I must tell you everything," she con-



"I MUST TELL YOU EVERYTHING," SHE CONTINUED."

tinued, eagerly. "Of course I want you, but I am not the only one. Mme. Koluchy—ah, you have heard of her?"

"Who has not?" was my cautious reply.

"Yes, but Mr. Head, you are concealing something. Madame is one of your very greatest friends; she has told me so. It is only an hour since I left her. She is most anxious to meet you on Thursday at our house. I promised you should be there—wasn't it rash of me? But I made up my mind that I would insist on your coming. Now, you won't allow me to break my word, will you?"

"Did Mme. Koluchy really say that she wished to see me?" I asked. As I put the question I felt my face turning pale. I looked again full at Miss De Brett. It was evident that she misinterpreted my emotion. Well, that mattered nothing. I quickly made up my mind.

"I had an engagement for Thursday," I said, "but your word is law—I cannot refuse you."

Geraldine laughed.

"Madame doubted my power to bring you, but I knew you would come, if I could really see you."

"Suppose we had not met in this chance sort of way?"

"I was going to your house. I had no intention of leaving a stone unturned. Without you my party will not be complete. Yes, you will come, and it is all right. You will hear from father to-morrow. He very often drives out to Forest Manor from the bank, and, if you can, come with him, but you will get all particulars straight from him. Thank you a thousand times—you have made me a happy girl."

She waved her hand to me in farewell, and the brougham rolled out of sight.

My blood was coursing quickly through my veins and my mind was made up. Madame would not wish me to meet her at De Brett's house without a strong reason. With her usual astuteness she was using Geraldine de Brett as her tool in more senses than one. I must not delay another moment in warning the banker.

Calling a hansom, I desired the man to drive me straight to De Brett's bank in the City, and soon after twelve o'clock I found myself in Gracechurch Street. In a few moments the hansom turned down a narrow lane leading into St. Mark's Court. Here I paid my driver, and a moment later found myself in the open space in front of the bank. This was a *cul-de-sac*, but there was another

lane leading into it also from Gracechurch Street running parallel to the one I had come down, and separated from it by a narrow row of buildings, which came to an abrupt termination about fifty feet from the houses forming the further side of the court.

Well as I knew De Brett, I had not been at the old bank for some years, and looked around me now eagerly until my eye fell upon the large brass plate bearing the well-known name. I entered the office, and going up to the counter asked if Mr. De Brett were in. The clerk replied in the affirmative, and giving him my card he passed through a door into an inner room. The next moment he re-appeared and requested me to step inside, where I found De Brett seated at a writing-table, upon which a circle of light fell from a shaded incandescent.

"Welcome, Head," he exclaimed, rising and coming forward with his usual heartiness of manner. "To what am I indebted for this visit? Sit down. I am delighted to see you. By the way, Geraldine tells me——"

"I have just met your daughter," I interrupted, "and it is principally on account of that meeting that I have come here to trouble you during business hours."

"Oh, I can spare you ten minutes," he answered, looking around him as he spoke. "The fact is this, Head, Geraldine is anxious that you should join our party at Forest Manor, and I wish you would re-consider your determination. The Duke has taken a fancy to you, and as you happen to know Mme. Koluchy, it would be a pleasure to us all if you would give us the benefit of your society for a night or two."

"I have promised Geraldine to come," I answered, gravely; "but, De Brett, you must pardon me. I have intruded on you in your business hours to speak on a most delicate private matter. However you may receive what I have to say, I must ask you to hear it in confidence, and with that good feeling that has prompted me to come to you."

"My dear Head, what do you mean? Pray explain yourself."

"I am uneasy," I continued, "very uneasy. I am also in a peculiar position, and cannot disclose the reason of my fears. You are pleased with the match which Geraldine is about to make. Now, I have reasons for doubting the Duke of Friedeck, reasons which I cannot at present disclose, but I am bound—yes, bound, De Brett, in your girl's interests—to warn you as to your dealings with him."

De Brett looked at me through his gold-

rimmed spectacles with a blank expression of amazement.

"If it were any other man who spoke to me in this strain," he said, at last, "I believe I should show him the door. Are you aware, Head, that this is a most serious allegation? You must give me your reasons for what you say."

"I cannot do so at the present moment. I can only repeat that they exist, and that they are grave. All I ask of you is to use double caution, to find out all you can about the man's antecedents——"

De Brett interrupted me, rising hastily from his seat.

"In our dealings one with the other," he said, "this is the first time in which you have shown bad taste. I shall see the Duke this afternoon, and shall be bound to acquaint him, in his and my own interests, with your communication."

"I hope you won't do so. Remember, my warning is given in confidence."

"It is not fair to give a man such a warning, and then to give him no reason for it," retorted the banker.

"I will give you my reasons."

"When?"

"On Thursday night. Will you regard my confidence as sacred until then?"

"You have disturbed me considerably, but I will do so. I should be sorry to alarm Geraldine unnecessarily. I am quite certain you are mistaken. You never saw the Duke until you met him at my house?"

"That is true, but I cannot say anything further now. I will explain my reasons fully on Thursday night."

De Brett rose from his seat. He bade me good-bye, but not with his customary friendliness. I went away, to pass the intervening hours between then and Thursday in much anxiety.

After grave thought I resolved, if I discovered nothing fresh with regard to Friedeck, to acquaint De Brett with what I knew of Mme. Koluchy. I Geraldine married the Duke, she should at least do so with her father's eyes opened. I little guessed, however, when I made these plans, what circumstances were about to bring forth.

On the following Thursday morning I awoke from a disturbed sleep to find London enveloped in one of the thickest fogs that had been known for some years. The limit of my vision scarcely extended beyond the area railings round which the soot-laden mist clung in a breathless calm.

In the course of the morning I received a telegram from De Brett.

"Meet me at the bank not later than a quarter past four," were the few words which it contained.

Soon after three o'clock I started for my destination, avoiding omnibuses and preferring to walk the greater part of the way. I arrived at St. Mark's Court at the time named, and was just approaching the bank when two men knocked violently against me in the thick fog. One of them apologized, but before I could make any reply vanished into the surrounding gloom. I had caught a glimpse of his features, however. It was the Duke of Friedeck. Across the narrow court, at the opposite side from the bank, I



"I CAUGHT A GLIMPSE OF HIS FEATURES."

saw a stream of light from an open door making a blurred gleam in the surrounding darkness. I crossed the court to see what this indicated. I then discovered that the light came from an old-fashioned eating-house, something in the style of the celebrated "Cock" in Fleet Street. As I stood in the shadow, the two men who had knocked against me entered the eating-house.

I returned now to the bank. As soon as I arrived the manager came up to me.

"Mr. De Brett was called out about half an hour ago," he said, "but he has asked you to wait for him here, Mr. Head. He expects to be back not later than half-past four."

I seated myself accordingly, a clerk brought me the *Times*, and I drew up my chair in front of a bright fire. Now and then someone made a desultory remark about the fog, which was thickening in intensity each moment.

The time flew by; the bank had, of course, closed at four o'clock, but the clerks were busy finishing accounts and putting the place in order for the night. The different tills were emptied of their contents, and the money was taken down to the great vaults where the different safes were kept. The hands of the clock over the mantelpiece pointed to a quarter to five, when the sound of wheels was heard distinctly outside, and the next moment I saw a splendidly equipped brougham and pair draw up outside the bank. A footman dismounted and handed the commissioner a note. This was brought into the office. It was for me; a clerk gave it to me. I glanced at the writing, and saw that the letter was from De Brett. I tore open the envelope, and read as follows:—

"DEAR HEAD,—I have been unexpectedly detained at Lynn's bank, in Broad Street, so have sent the brougham for you. Will you come on at once and pick me up at Lynn's? Please ask Derbyshire, the manager, for the keys of the small safe. He will give them to you after he has locked up the strong-room.—Yours, HARRY DE BRETT."

I turned to the manager. He was an elderly man, with grizzled hair and an anxious expression of face.

"Mr. De Brett wants me to bring him the keys of the small safe," I said. I saw the man raise his brows in surprise.

"That is an unusual request," he answered; "but, of course, it must be as Mr. De Brett wishes. As a rule, either Mr. Frome or I keep the keys, as Mr. De Brett never cares to be troubled with them."

"Here is his letter," I replied, handing it to the manager. He read it, retaining it in his hand.

"Do you object to my keeping this, Mr. Head? The request is so unusual, that I should like to have this note as my authority."

"Certainly," I replied.

"Very well, sir; I shall have to detain you for a few moments, as we have not quite cleared the tills. The keys of all the other safes are kept in the small one. I will bring you the keys of the small safe in a moment or two."

The clerks bustled about, the work of the night was quickly accomplished, and shortly after five o'clock I was seated in De Brett's luxurious brougham, with the keys of the small safe in my pocket.

We went along very slowly, as the fog seemed to grow thicker each moment. Suddenly as the coachman piloted his way in the direction of Broad Street I began to feel a peculiar sensation. My head was giddy, an unusual weakness trembled through my nerves, and for the first time I noticed that the brougham was full of a faint, sweet odour. Doubtless the smell of the fog had prevented my observing this at first. The sensation of faintness grew worse, and I now made an effort to attract the coachman's attention. This I altogether failed to do, and becoming seriously alarmed I tried to open the door, but it resisted all my efforts, as also did the windows, which were securely fixed. The horrible feeling that I was the victim of some dastardly plot came over me with force. I shouted and struggled to attract attention, and finally tried to break the windows. All in vain—the sense of giddiness grew worse, everything seemed to whirl before my mental vision—the bank, De Brett, the keys of the safe which I had in my pocket, the thought of Geraldine and her danger, were mixed up in a hideous phantasmagoria. The next moment I had lost consciousness.

When I came to myself I found that I was lying on a piece of waste ground in the neighbourhood of Putney. For one or two moments I could not in the least recall what had happened. Then my memory came back with a quick flash.

"The Duke of Friedeck! The bank! Geraldine!" I said to myself. I sprang to my feet and began a hasty examination of my pockets. Yes, my worst conjectures were confirmed, for the keys of the small safe were gone!

My watch and money were intact; the

keys alone were stolen. I stood still for a moment considering; then the need of immediate action came over me, and I made my way at once to the nearest railway station. I found to my relief that it was only a little past eleven o'clock. Beyond doubt, I had recovered consciousness much sooner than the villains who had planned this terrible plot intended.

I took the next train to town, and on my way up resolved on my line of action. To warn De Brett was impracticable, for the simple reason that he was out of town—to waste time visiting Dufrayer was also not to be thought of. Without the least doubt, the bank was in imminent danger, and I must not lose an unnecessary moment in getting to St. Mark's Court.

As I thought over matters I felt more and more certain that the eating-house facing the bank was a *rendezvous* for Madame's agents. I hastily resolved, therefore, to disguise myself and go there. Once I had belonged to the infamous Brotherhood. I knew their password. By this means, if my suspicions were true, I could doubtless gain admission—as for the rest, I must leave it to chance.

As soon as I reached town I drove off at once to a theatrical agent, whose acquaintance I had already made. He remembered me, and I explained enough of the situation to induce him to render me assistance. In a very short time I was metamorphozed. By a few judicious touches twenty years were added to my age, a wig of dark hair completely covered my own, my complexion was dyed to a dark olive, and in a thick travelling cloak, with a high fur collar, I scarcely knew myself. My final act was to slip a loaded

revolver into my pocket, and then, feeling that I was prepared for the worst, I hurried forth.

It was now between twelve and one in the morning, and the fog was denser than ever. Few men know London better than I do, but once or twice in that perilous journey I lost my way. At last, however, I found myself in St. Mark's Court. I was now breathing with difficulty; the fog was piercing my lungs and hurting my throat, my eyes watered. When I got into the court I heard the steady tramp of the police-

man whose duty it was to guard the place at night. Taking no notice of him, I went across the court in the direction of the eating-house. The light within still burned, but dimly. There was a blur visible, nothing more. This came through one of the windows, for the door was shut. I tapped at the door. A man came immediately and opened it. He asked me what my business was. I repeated the password of the society. A change came over his face. My conjectures were verified—I was instantly admitted.

"Are you expecting to see a friend here to-night?" said the man. "It is rather late, and we are just closing."

As he uttered the words, suddenly, like a flash of lightning, an old memory returned to me. I have said that when I first saw the Duke at De Brett's house, I was puzzled by an intangible likeness. Now I knew who the man really was. In the old days in Naples, an English boy of the name of Drake was often seen in Madame's salons. Drake and the Duke of Friedeck were one and the same.

"I have come here to see Mr. Drake," I said, stoutly.



"METAMORPHOZED."

The man nodded. My chance shot had found its billet.

"Mr. Drake is upstairs," he said. "Will you find your own way up, or shall I announce you?"

"I will find my own way," I said. "He is in the——"

"Room to the front—third floor," answered the man.

He returned to the dining saloon, and I heard the swing-door close behind him. Without a moment's hesitation I ascended the stairs. The stairs and passage were in complete darkness. I went up, passed the first and second stories, and on to the third. As I approached the landing of the third story I saw an open door and a gleam of light in a small room which faced the court. The light was caused by a lamp which stood on a deal table, the wick of which was turned down very low. Except the lamp and table there was no other furniture in the room. I went in and looked around me. The Duke was not present. I was just considering what my next step should be, when I heard voices and several steps ascending the stairs. I saw an empty cupboard, the door of which stood ajar. I made for it, and closed the door softly behind me. As the men approached, I slipped the revolver from my pocket and held it in my hand. It was probable that Friedeck had been told of my arrival. If so, he would search for me, and in all probability look in the cupboard. Three or four men at least were coming up the stairs, and I knew that my life was scarcely worth a moment's purchase. I had a wild feeling of regret that I had not summoned the

policeman in the court to my aid, and then the men entered the room. When they did so, I breathed a sigh of relief. They talked to one another as if I did not exist. Evidently the waiter downstairs had thought that my knowledge of the password was all-sufficient, and had not troubled himself to mention my appearance on the scene.

One of the men went up to the lamp, turned it on to a full blaze, and then placed it in the window.

"This will be sufficient for our purpose," he said, with a laugh, "otherwise, with the fog as thick as it is now, the bolt might miss its mark."

"The thicker the fog the safer," said another voice, which I recognised as that of the Duke. "I am quite ready, gentlemen, if you are."

"All right," said the man who had first spoken, "I will go across to Bell's house and fix the rope from the bar outside the window. As the *bob of the pendulum* you will swing true, Drake, no fear of that. You

will swing straight to the balcony, as sure as mathematics. Have you anything else to ask?"

"No," answered Friedeck, "I am ready. Get your part of the work through as quickly as you can; you cannot fail to see this window with the bright light in it. I will have the lower sash open, and be ready to receive the bolt from the crossbow with the light string attached."

"All right," answered his confederate; "when the bolt reaches you, pull in as hard as you can, for the rope will be fastened to the light string. The crossbar is here. You have only to attach it to the rope and swing across. Well, all right, I'm off."



"I CLOSED THE DOOR SOFTLY BEHIND ME."

The man whose mission it was to send the bolt into the open window now left the room, and I heard his footsteps going softly downstairs. I opened the cupboard door about half an inch, and was able to watch the proceedings of the other three men who remained on the scene. The window was softly opened. They spoke in whispers. I could judge by their attitudes that all three were in the highest state of nervous excitement.

Presently a low cry of satisfaction from Friedeck reached my ears, and I saw that something had entered the window. The next moment he and his confederates were pulling in a silken string, to which a thick scaffolding rope was attached. I then saw the Duke remove his coat. A wooden crossbar was securely fastened to the end of the stout rope, the rope was held outside the window by the two confederates, and the Duke got upon the window-sill, slipped his legs over the crossbar, and the next instant had disappeared into space.

Where he had gone -- what he was doing, were mysteries yet to be solved. The men remained for a moment longer beside the window, then they softly closed the sash, and putting out the lamp, left the room. I heard their steps descending the stairs, the sounds died away into utter stillness. I listened intently, and then, softly leaving the cupboard, approached the window. In the intense darkness, caused by the fog, I could not see a yard in front of me. De Brett's bank was in danger -- the Duke of Friedeck and his accomplices were burglars; but what the crossbow, the rope, the bolt, the crossbar of wood, and the sudden disappearance of the Duke himself through the open window portended I could not fathom. My duty, however, was clear. I must immediately give the alarm to the policeman in the court, whose tramp I even now heard coming up to me through the fog.

I waited for a few moments longer, and then determined to make my exit. I ran downstairs, treading as softly as I could. I had just reached the little hall and put my hand on the latch of the door, when I was accosted.

"Who is there?" said a voice.

I replied, glibly, that I was going in search of Drake.

"You cannot see him, he is engaged," said the same voice, and now a man came forward. He held a dark lantern in his hand and suddenly threw its bull's-eye full on my face. Perhaps he saw through my disguise; anyhow, he must have observed that my face



"HE THREW ITS BULL'S-EYE FULL ON MY FACE."

was unfamiliar to him. The expression on his own changed to one of alarm. He suddenly made a low and peculiar whistle, and two or three other men entered the hall. The first man said something, the words of which I could not catch, and all four made a rush for me. But the door was on the latch. I burst it open, and escaped into the court. The thick fog favoured me, and I hoped that I had escaped the gang, when a heavy blow on the back of my head rendered me, for the second

time within that ominous twenty-four hours, unconscious.

When I awoke I found myself in the ward of a London hospital, and the kind face of a house-surgeon was bending over me.

"Ah! you'll do," I heard him say; "you are coming to nicely. You had a nasty blow on your head, though. Don't talk just at present; you'll be all right in a couple of hours."

I lay still, feeling bewildered. Figures were moving about the room, and the daylight was streaming in at the windows. I saw a nurse come up and look at me. She bent down.

"You feel better? You are not suffering?" she said.

"I am not," I replied; "but how did I get here? What has happened?"

"A policeman heard you cry and picked you up unconscious in a place called St. Mark's Court. Someone gave you a bad blow on your head—it is a wonder your skull was not cracked, but you are better. Have you a message to give to anyone?"

"I must get up immediately," I said; "I have not a moment to lose. Something dreadful has happened, and I must see to it. I must leave the hospital at once."

"Not without the surgeon's permission," said the nurse. "Have you any friend you would like to be sent to you?"

I mentioned Dufroyer's name. The nurse said she would dispatch a messenger immediately to his house and ask him to come to me.

I waited with what patience I could. The severe blow had fortunately only stunned me. I was not seriously hurt, and all the events of the preceding night, previous to the blow, presented themselves clearly before my memory.

In a little over an hour Dufroyer arrived. His eyes were blazing with excitement. He came up to me full of consternation.

"What has happened, Head?" he asked.

"Oh, I am all right; don't bother about me," I said. "But listen, Dufroyer, I must go to St. Mark's Court immediately—there is mischief."

"St. Mark's Court! Are you mad? Have you heard anything?"

"Heard what?" I asked.

"They have done it, that's all," cried Dufroyer.

"What?" I exclaimed.

"Well, there's the very deuce to pay in the City this morning. De Brett's bank was broken into last night, the night watchman

seriously injured, and securities and cash to the tune of one hundred thousand pounds taken from the strong-room, and the man has got clean away. Your messenger from here followed me to the bank. Tyler is there and De Brett. The daring and ingenuity of the robbery are unparalleled."

"I can throw light on this matter," I said. "Get the surgeon to give me leave to go, Dufroyer. There is not a moment to lose if we are to catch the scoundrel. I must accompany you to the bank."

"Well, you seem all right, old chap, and if you have anything to say——"

"I have," I cried, impatiently. "See the surgeon. I must get off immediately."

Dufroyer did what I requested him. The surgeon shook his head over what he called my imprudence, but said he could not detain me against my will. Dufroyer and I stepped into a hansom, and on my way to the bank I repeated my strange adventures of the previous night.

"Did ever anyone hear of another man doing such a foolhardy thing?" cried Dufroyer. "What possessed you to enter that house alone beats my comprehension."

"Never mind that now," I replied. "Remember, I knew the Brotherhood; my one chance consisted in going alone. Thank goodness, the fog has risen."

A light breeze was blowing over the City, and as we entered St. Mark's Court a ray of sunshine cast a watery gleam over the old, smoke-begrimed buildings. We entered the bank and found De Brett, his manager, two police inspectors, and Tyler's agent awaiting us.

De Brett exclaimed, when he caught sight of me:—

"Ah, Head, here's a pretty business! I'm a ruined man. The bank cannot stand a blow of this kind."

"Courage," I replied; "we may be able to put things right yet. I have a story to tell. Mr. Derbyshire, you have doubtless kept the note which Mr. De Brett wrote to me last night?"

"The note I wrote to you!" cried De Brett. "What do you mean, Head?"

"Will you produce the note?" I said to the manager.

The man brought it and put it into his chief's hand. De Brett read it with increasing amazement.

"But I never put pen to paper on such a fool's errand," he cried. "Why, I never take the keys of the small safe. Derbyshire and Frome have charge of them. Head,

this note is a forgery. What in the name of Heaven does it mean?"

"It meant for me a brougham which was a death-trap," I replied; "and it also meant the most dastardly scheme to rob you, and perhaps murder me, which has ever been conceived. But listen, let me tell my story."

I did so, amidst the breathless silence of the spectators.

"And now," I continued, "the best thing we can do, gentlemen, is to go across to the house from which the bolt was shot. It is possible that we may see something in that upper room which will explain the

the question. The annihilation of gravity is a new departure in the burglar's art."

We had now reached the building which faced the court, and which was between the bank and the eating-house. It was composed entirely of offices—we went up at once to the top floor. The door of the room which faced the court was locked. The inspector took a step back, and, flinging his shoulders against it, it flew open. The room was bare and unoccupied, but, as we entered, Inspector Brown uttered a cry.

"Here is confirmation of your story, Mr. Head." As he spoke he lifted up a coil of



"HERE IS CONFIRMATION OF YOUR STORY."

manner in which the burglar entered the bank."

"I am at your service, Mr. Head," said Inspector Brown, in a cheerful tone; "a mystery of this sort is quite to my mind. All the same, sir," he continued, as he and I took the lead of the little procession which crossed St. Mark's Court, "I cannot imagine how any man got into that window of the bank on the second floor without wings. There is a constable on patrol in the court all night, so ladders are out of

strong rope which lay in a corner of the room. Attached to it was a crossbar of wood. A strong iron bar with a hook at one end and a crossbow also lay in the neighbourhood of the rope.

"The thing is as clear as daylight," I exclaimed. "I could not put two and two together last night, for the fog fairly bewildered me, but now I see the whole scheme. Let me explain. This rope was sent by means of the crossbow across to the window in the eating-house. To the bolt of the crossbow

was attached a silken cord, to which again the rope was fastened. The man who swung himself out of the window by the rope last night acted as the bob of the pendulum, and so reached the window of the bank. Swinging through the eating-house window and rising to the balcony outside the bank window, he then doubtless seized the handle of the outside frame and, settling on the balcony, cut out the glass with a diamond."

"We will go at once and see the room in the eating-house," said the inspector.

We did so, and found to our amazement that the door of the eating-house was locked and the place empty. After some slight difficulty we got the door burst open and went upstairs. Here we found the final confirmation of my words—the string which had been attached to the rope and cut from it before the Duke made his aerial flight.

"But who did it?" cried De Brett. "We must secure the scoundrel without a moment's delay, for amongst other things he has stolen the Duke of Friedeck's priceless securities, the diamonds. By the way," continued the banker, "where is the Duke? I sent him a telegram, and expected him here before now."

An ominous silence fell upon everyone. De Brett's face grew white; he looked at me.

"For God's sake, speak," he cried. "Have you anything else to confide?"

"You must be prepared for bad news, De Brett," I said. I went up and laid my hand on my old friend's shoulder. "Thank God, I

was in time. Your little girl is saved from the most awful fate which could overtake any woman. The man who committed the burglary was known to you as the Duke of Friedeck."

De Brett stepped back; his face changed from white to purple.

"Then that accounts for the telegrams," he said. "I received two yesterday, one

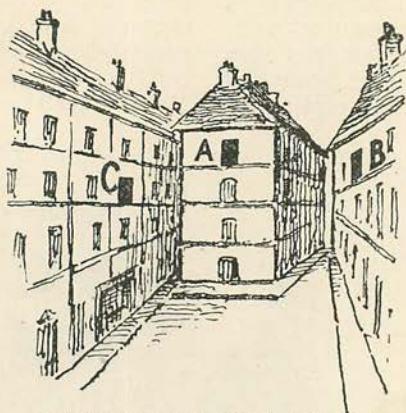
from you telling me to expect you by a late train at Forest Manor—the other from that scoundrel. In it he said that he was unexpectedly detained in town. Doubtless both telegrams were sent by the same man."

"Without doubt," I replied. "The whole thing was carefully planned, and not a stone left unturned to secure the success of this most dastardly scheme. But, De Brett, I have one thing more to say. There is no Duke of Friedeck: it was an assumed name.

I am prepared to swear to the man's real identity when the police have secured him."

The remainder of this story can be told in a few words. The ruffian who had posed as the Duke of Friedeck was captured a few days later, but the greater part of the securities and money which he had stolen were never recovered. Doubtless Mme. Koluchy had them in her possession. The man passed through his trial and received his sentence, but that has nothing to do with the story.

By the energetic aid of his many friends De Brett escaped ruin, and his bank still exists and prospers. He is a sadder and a wiser man.



ROUGH SKETCH OF ST. MARK'S COURT, E.C.

- A.—Window from which iron bar holding the rope was fixed.
 B.—Window from which the Duke swung across the court.
 C.—Window on second floor of the Bank. The Duke alighted on the ledge below and removed the pane.