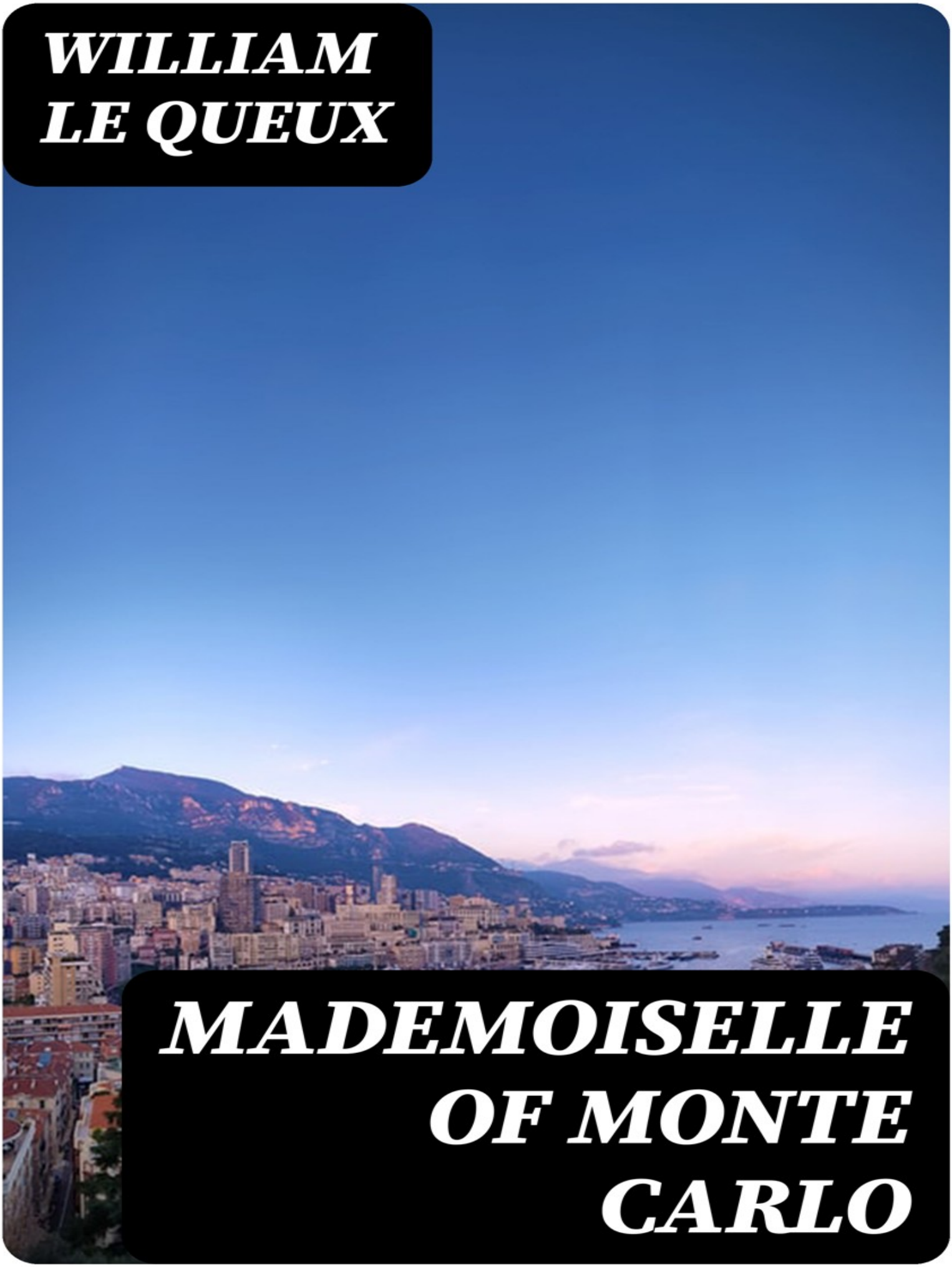
WILLIAM LE QUEUX



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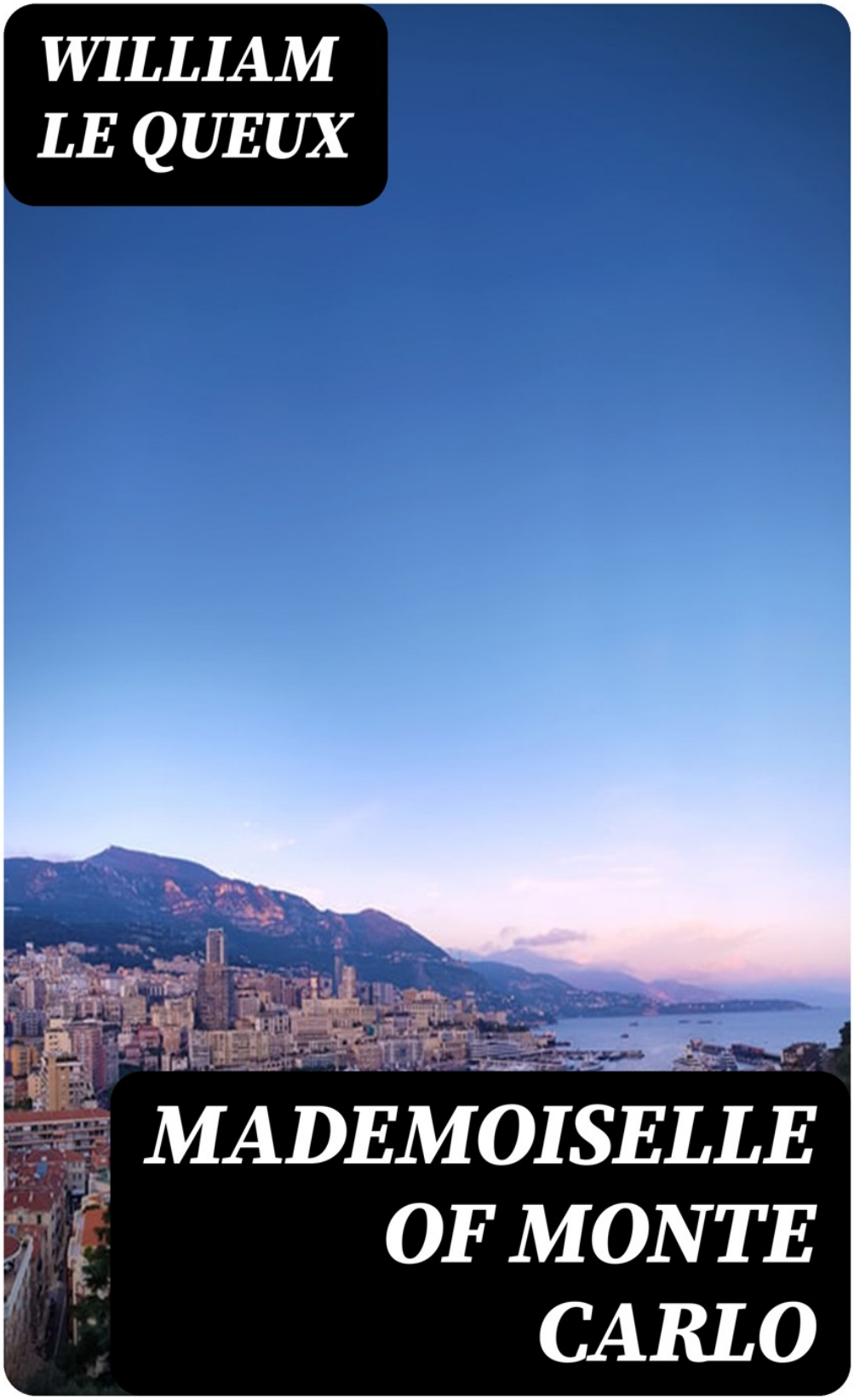

MADEMOISELLE OF MONTE CARLO

William Le Queux

Mademoiselle of Monte Carlo

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MADEMOISELLE OF MONTE CARLO

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FIRST CHAPTER

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THE SUICIDE’S CHAIR

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“Yes! I’m not mistaken at all! *It’s the same woman!*” whispered the tall, good-looking young Englishman in a well-cut navy suit as he stood with his friend, a man some ten years older than himself, at one of the roulette tables at Monte Carlo, the first on the right on entering the room—that one known to habitual gamblers as “The Suicide’s Table.”

“Are you quite certain?” asked his friend.

“Positive. I should know her again anywhere.”

“She’s very handsome. And look, too, by Jove!—how she is winning!”

“Yes. But let’s get away. She might recognize me,” exclaimed the younger man anxiously. “Ah! If I could only induce her to disclose what she knows about my poor

father’s mysterious end then we might clear up the mystery.”

“I’m afraid, if all we hear is true about her, Mademoiselle of Monte Carlo will never do that,” was the other’s reply as they moved away together down the long saloon towards the trente-et-quarante room.

“*Messieurs! Faites vos jeux*,” the croupiers were crying in their strident, monotonous voices, inviting players to stake their counters of cent-sous, their louis, or their hundred or five hundred franc notes upon the spin of the red and black wheel. It was the month of March, the height of the Riviera season, the fetes of Mi-Careme were in full swing. That afternoon the rooms were overcrowded, and the tense atmosphere of gambling was laden with the combined odours of perspiration and perfume.

Around each table were crowds four or five deep behind those fortunate enough to obtain seats, all eager and anxious to try their fortune upon the rouge or noir, or upon one of the thirty-six numbers, the columns, or the transversales. There was but little chatter. The hundreds of well-dressed idlers escaping the winter were too intent upon the game. But above the click of the plaques, blue and red of different sizes, as they were raked into the bank by the croupiers, and the clatter of counters as the lucky players were paid with deft hands, there rose ever and anon:

“*Messieurs! Faites vos jeux!*”

Here English duchesses rubbed shoulders with the most notorious women in Europe, and men who at home in England were good churchmen and exemplary fathers of families, laughed merrily with the most gorgeously attired

cocottes from Paris, or the stars of the film world or the variety stage. Upon that wide polished floor of the splendidly decorated Rooms, with their beautiful mural paintings and heavy gilt ornamentation, the world and the half-world were upon equal footing.

Into that stifling atmosphere—for the Administration of the Bains de Mer of Monaco seem as afraid of fresh air as of purity propaganda—the glorious afternoon sunlight struggled through the curtained windows, while over each table, in addition to the electric light, oil-lamps shaded green with a billiard-table effect cast a dull, ghastly illumination upon the eager countenances of the players. Most of those who go to Monte Carlo wonder at the antiquated mode of illumination. It is, however, in consequence of an attempted raid upon the tables one night, when some adventurers cut the electric-light main, and in the darkness grabbed all they could get from the bank.

The two English visitors, both men of refinement and culture, who had watched the tall, very handsome woman in black, to whom the older man had referred as Mademoiselle of Monte Carlo, wandered through the trente-et-quarante rooms where all was silence, and counters, representing gold, were being staked with a twelve-thousand franc maximum.

Those rooms beyond are the haunt of the professional gambler, the man or woman who has been seized by the demon of speculation, just as others have been seized by that of drugs or drink. Curiously enough women are more prone to gamble than men, and the Administration of the

Etablissement will tell you that when a woman of any nationality starts to gamble she will become reckless until her last throw with the devil.

Those who know Monte Carlo, those who have been habitues for twenty years—as the present writer has been—know too well, and have seen too often, the deadly influence of the tables upon the lighter side of woman's nature. The smart woman from Paris, Vienna, or Rome never loses her head. She gambles always discreetly. The fashionable cocottes seldom lose much. They gamble at the tables discreetly and make eyes at men if they win, or if they lose. If the latter they generally obtain a "loan" from somebody. What matter? When one is at "Monty" one is not in a Wesleyan chapel. English men and women when they go to the Riviera leave their morals at home with their silk hats and Sunday gowns. And it is strange to see the perfectly respectable Englishwoman admiring the same daring costumes of the French pseudo-"countesses" at which they have held up their hands in horror when they have seen them pictured in the papers wearing those latest "creations" of the Place Vendome.

Yes. It is a hypocritical world, and nowhere is canting hypocrisy more apparent than inside the Casino at Monte Carlo.

While the two Englishmen were strolling over the polished parquet of the elegant world-famous *salles-de-jeu* "Mademoiselle of Monte Carlo" was experiencing quite an extraordinary run of luck.

But "Mademoiselle," as the croupiers always called her, was usually lucky. She was an experienced, and therefore a

careful player. When she staked a maximum it was not without very careful calculation upon the chances. Mademoiselle was well known to the Administration. Often her winnings were sensational, hence she served as an advertisement to the Casino, for her success always induced the uninitiated and unwary to stake heavily, and usually with disastrous results.

The green-covered gaming table, at which she was sitting next to the end croupier on the left-hand side, was crowded. She sat in what is known at Monte as “the Suicide’s Chair,” for during the past eight years ten men and women had sat in that fatal chair and had afterwards ended their lives abruptly, and been buried in secret in the Suicide’s Cemetery.

The croupiers at that table are ever watchful of the visitor who, all unawares, occupies that fatal chair. But Mademoiselle, who knew of it, always laughed the superstition to scorn. She habitually sat in that chair—and won.

Indeed, that afternoon she was winning—and very considerably too. She had won four maximums *en plein* within the last half-hour, and the crowd around the table noting her good fortune were now following her.

It was easy for any novice in the Rooms to see that the handsome, dark-eyed woman was a practised player. Time after time she let the coups pass. The croupiers’ invitation to play did not interest her. She simply toyed with her big gold-chain purse, or fingered her dozen piles or so of plaques in a manner quite disinterested.

She heard the croupier announce the winning number and saw the rakes at work dragging in the stakes to swell the bank. But she only smiled, and now and then shrugged her shoulders.

Whether she won or lost, or whether she did not risk a stake, she simply smiled and elevated her shoulders, muttering something to herself.

Mademoiselle of Monte Carlo was, truth to tell, a sphinx to the staff of the Casino. She looked about thirty, but probably she was older. For five years she had been there each season and gambled heavily with unvarying success. Always well but quietly dressed, her nationality was as obscure as her past. To the staff she was always polite, and she pressed hundred-franc notes into many a palm in the Rooms. But who she was or what were her antecedents nobody in the Principality of Monaco could ever tell.

The whole Cote d’Azur from Hyeres to Ventimiglia knew of her. She was one of the famous characters of Monte Carlo, just as famous, indeed, as old Mr. Drewett, the Englishman who lost his big fortune at the tables, and who was pensioned off by the Administration on condition that he never gamble at the Casino again. For fifteen years he lived in Nice upon the meagre pittance until suddenly another fortune was left him, whereupon he promptly paid up the whole of his pension and started at the tables again. In a month, however, he had lost his second fortune. Such is gambling in the little country ruled over by Prince Rouge-et-Noir.

As the two Englishmen slipped past the end table unseen on their way out into the big atrium with its many columns—

the hall in which players go out to cool themselves, or collect their determination for a final flutter—Mademoiselle had just won the maximum upon the number four, as well as the column, and the croupier was in the act of pushing towards her a big pile of counters each representing a thousand francs.

The eager excited throng around the table looked across at her with envy. But her handsome countenance was quite expressionless. She simply thrust the counters into the big gold-chain purse at her side, glanced at the white-gloved fingers which were soiled by handling the counters, and then counting out twenty-five, each representing a louis, gave them to the croupier, exclaiming:

"*Zero-trois!*"

Next moment a dozen persons followed her play, staking their cent-sous and louis upon the spot where she had asked the croupier at the end of the table to place her stake.

"*Messieurs! Faites vos jeux!*" came the strident cry again.

Then a few seconds later the croupier cried:

"*Rien ne vas plus!*"

The red and black wheel was already spinning, and the little ivory ball sent by the croupier's hand in the opposite direction was clicking quickly over the numbered spaces.

Six hundred or more eyes of men and women, fevered by the gambling mania, watched the result. Slowly it lost its impetus, and after spinning about unevenly it made a final jump and fell with a loud click.

"*Zer-r-o!*" cried the croupier.

And a moment later Mademoiselle had pushed before her at the end of the croupier's rake another pile of counters,

while all those who had followed the remarkable woman's play were also paid.

"Mademoiselle is in good form to-day," remarked one ugly old Frenchwoman who had been a well-known figure at the tables for the past ten years, and who played carefully and lived by gambling. She was one of those queer, mysterious old creatures who enter the Rooms each morning as soon as they are open, secure the best seats, occupy them all the luncheon hour pretending to play, and then sell them to wealthy gamblers for a consideration—two or three louis—perhaps—and then at once go to their ease in their own obscure abode.

The public who go to Monte know little of its strange mysteries, or of the odd people who pick up livings there in all sorts of queer ways.

"Ah!" exclaimed a man who overheard her. "Mademoiselle has wonderful luck! She won seventy-five thousand francs at the *Cercle Prive* last night. She won *en plein* five times running. *Dieu!* Such luck! And it never causes her the slightest excitement."

"The lady must be very rich!" remarked an American woman sitting next to the old Frenchwoman, and who knew French well.

"Rich! Of course! She must have won several million francs from the Administration. They don't like to see her here. But I suppose her success attracts others to play. The gambling fever is as infectious as the influenza," declared the old Frenchwoman. "Everyone tries to discover who she is, and where she came from five years ago. But nobody has yet found out. Even Monsieur Bernard, the chief of the

Surveillance, does not know," she went on in a whisper. "He is a friend of mine, and I asked him one day. She came from Paris, he told me. She may be American, she may be Belgian, or she may be English. She speaks English and French so well that nobody can tell her true nationality."

"And she makes money at the tables," said the American woman in the well-cut coat and skirt and small hat. She came from Chelsea, Mass., and it was her first visit to what her pious father had always referred to as the plague spot of Europe.

"Money!" exclaimed the old woman. "Money! *Dieu!* She has losses, it is true, but oh!—what she wins! I only wish I had ten per cent of it. I should then be rich. Mine is a poor game, madame—waiting for someone to buy my seat instead of standing the whole afternoon. You see, there is only one row of chairs all around. So if a smart woman wants to play, some man always buys her a chair—and that is how I live. Ah! madame, life is a great game here in the Principality."

Meanwhile young Hugh Henfrey, who had travelled from London to the Riviera and identified the mysterious mademoiselle, had passed with his friend, Walter Brock, through the atrium and out into the afternoon sunshine.

As they turned upon the broad gravelled terrace in front of the great white facade of the Casino amid the palms, the giant geraniums and mimosa, the sapphire Mediterranean stretched before them. Below, beyond the railway line which is the one blemish to the picturesque scene, out upon the point in the sea the constant pop-pop showed that the tir-aux-pigeons was in progress; while up and down the terrace,

enjoying the quiet silence of the warm winter sunshine with the blue hills of the Italian coast to the left, strolled a gay, irresponsible crowd—the cosmopolitans of the world: politicians, financiers, merchants, princes, authors, and artists—the crowd which puts off its morals as easily as it discards its fur coats and its silk hats, and which lives only for gaiety and without thought of the morrow.

“Let’s sit down,” suggested Hugh wearily. “I’m sure that she’s the same woman—absolutely certain!”

“You are quite confident you have made no mistake—eh?”

“Quite, my dear Walter. I’d know that woman among ten thousand. I only know that her surname is Ferad. Her Christian name I do not know.”

“And you suspect that she knows the secret of your father’s death?”

“I’m confident that she does,” replied the good-looking young Englishman. “But it is a secret she will, I fear, never reveal, unless—unless I compel her.”

“And how can you compel her?” asked the elder of the two men, whose dark hair was slightly tinged with grey. “It is difficult to compel a woman to do anything,” he added.

“I mean to know the truth!” cried Hugh Henfrey fiercely, a look of determination in his eyes. “That woman knows the true story of my father’s death, and I’ll make her reveal it. By gad—I will! I mean it!”

“Don’t be rash, Hugh,” urged the other.

“Rash!” he cried. “It’s true that when my father died so suddenly I had an amazing surprise. My father was a very curious man. I always thought him to be on the verge of

bankruptcy and that the Manor and the land might be sold up any day. When old Charman, the solicitor, read the will, I found that my father had a quarter of a million lying at the bank, and that he had left it all to me—provided I married Louise!”

“Well, why not marry her?” queried Brock lazily. “You’re always so mysterious, my dear Hugh.”

“Why!—because I love Dorise Ranscomb. But Louise interests me, and I’m worried on her account because of that infernal fellow Charles Benton. Louise poses as his adopted daughter. Benton is a bachelor of forty-five, and, according to his story, he adopted Louise when she was a child and put her to school. Her parentage is a mystery. After leaving school she at first went to live with a Mrs. Sheldon, a young widow, in an expensive suite in Queen Anne’s Mansions, Westminster. After that she has travelled about with friends and has, I believe, been abroad quite a lot. I’ve nothing against Louise, except—well, except for the strange uncanny influence which that man Benton has over her. I hate the fellow!”

“I see! And as you cannot yet reach Woodthorpe and your father’s fortune, except by marrying Louise—which you don’t intend to do—what are you going to do now?”

“First, I intend that this woman they call ‘Mademoiselle of Monte Carlo,’ the lucky woman who is a decoy of the Administration of the Bains de Mer, shall tell me the true circumstance of my father’s death. If I know them—then my hand will be strengthened.”

“Meanwhile you love Lady Ranscomb’s daughter, you say?”

“Yes. I love Dorise with all my heart. She, of course, knows nothing of the conditions of the will.”

There was a silence of some moments, interrupted only by the pop-pop of the pigeon-shots below.

Away across the white balustrade of the broad magnificent terrace the calm sapphire sea was deepening as the winter afternoon drew in. An engine whistled—that of the flower train which daily travels express from Cannes to Boulogne faster than the passenger train-deluxe, and bearing mimosa, carnations, and violets from the Cote d’Azur to Covent Garden, and to the florists’ shops in England.

“You’ve never told me the exact circumstances of your father’s death, Hugh,” remarked Brock at last.

“Exact circumstances? Ah! That’s what I want to know. Only that woman knows the secret,” answered the young man. “All I know is that the poor old guv’-nor was called up to London by an urgent letter. We had a shooting party at Woodthorpe and he left me in charge, saying that he had some business in London and might return on the following night—or he might be away a week. Days passed and he did not return. Several letters came for him which I kept in the library. I was surprised that he neither wrote nor returned, when, suddenly, ten days later, we had a telegram from the London police informing me that my father was lying in St. George’s Hospital. I dashed up to town, but when I arrived I found him dead. At the inquest, evidence was given to show that at half-past two in the morning a constable going along Albemarle Street found him in evening dress lying huddled up in a doorway. Thinking him intoxicated, he tried to rouse

him, but could not. A doctor who was called pronounced that he was suffering from some sort of poisoning. He was taken to St. George's Hospital in an ambulance, but he never recovered. The post-mortem investigation showed a small scratch on the palm of the hand. That scratch had been produced by a pin or a needle which had been infected by one of the newly discovered poisons which, administered secretly, give a post-mortem appearance of death from heart disease."

"Then your father was murdered—eh?" exclaimed the elder man.

"Most certainly he was. And that woman is aware of the whole circumstances and of the identity of the assassin."

"How do you know that?"

"By a letter I afterwards opened—one that had been addressed to him at Woodthorpe in his absence. It was anonymous, written in bad English, in an illiterate hand, warning him to 'beware of that woman you know—Mademoiselle of Monte Carlo.' It bore the French stamp and the postmark of Tours."

"I never knew all this," Brock said. "You are quite right, Hugh! The whole affair is a tangled mystery. But the first point we must establish before we commence to investigate is—who is Mademoiselle of Monte Carlo?"

SECOND CHAPTER

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CONCERNS A GUILTY SECRET

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Just after seven o’clock that same evening young Henfrey and his friend Brock met in the small lounge of the Hotel des Palmiers, a rather obscure little establishment in the Avenue de la Costa, behind the Gardens, much frequented by the habitues of the Rooms who know Monte Carlo and prefer the little place to life at the Paris, the Hermitage, and the Riviera Palace, or the Gallia, up at Beausoleil.

The Palmiers was a place where one met a merry cosmopolitan crowd, but where the cocotte in her bright plumage was absent—an advantage which only the male habitue of Monte Carlo can fully realize. The eternal feminine is always so very much in evidence around the Casino, and the most smartly dressed woman whom one might easily take for the wife of an eminent politician or financier will deplore her bad luck and beg for “a little loan.”

“Well,” said Hugh as his friend came down from his room to the lounge, “I suppose we ought to be going—eh? Dorise said half-past seven, and we’ll just get across to the Metropole in time. Lady Ranscomb is always awfully punctual at home, and I expect she carries out her time-table here.”

The two men put on light overcoats over their dinner-jackets and strolled in the warm dusk across the Gardens and up the Galerie, with its expensive little shops, past the original Ciro’s to the Metropole.

In the big hall they were greeted by a well-preserved, grey-haired Englishwoman, Lady Ranscomb, the widow of

old Sir Richard Ranscomb, who had been one of the greatest engineers and contractors of modern times. He had begun life as a small jerry-builder at Golder's Green, and had ended it a millionaire and a knight. Lady Ranscomb was seated at a little wicker table with her daughter Dorise, a dainty, fair-haired girl with intense blue eyes, who was wearing a rather daring jazzing gown of pale-blue, the scantiness of which a year or two before would have been voted quite beyond the pale for a lady, and yet in our broad-minded to-day, the day of undressing on the stage and in the home, it was nothing more than "smart."

Mother and daughter greeted the two men enthusiastically, and at Lady Ranscomb's orders the waiter brought them small glasses of an aperitif.

"We've been all day motoring up to the Col di Tenda. Sospel is lovely!" declared Dorise's mother. "Have you ever been there?" she asked of Brock, who was an habitue of the Riviera.

"Once and only once. I motored from Nice across to Turin," was his reply. "Yes. It is truly a lovely run there. The Alps are gorgeous. I like San Dalmazzo and the chestnut groves there," he added. "But the frontiers are annoying. All those restrictions. Nevertheless, the run to Turin is one of the finest I know."

Presently they rose, and all four walked into the crowded *salle-a-manger*, where the chatter was in every European language, and the gay crowd were gossiping mostly of their luck or their bad fortune at the *tapis vert*. At Monte Carlo the talk is always of the run of sequences, the many times

the zero-trois has turned up, and of how little one ever wins *en plein* on thirty-six.

To those who visit “Charley’s Mount” for the first time all this is as Yiddish, but soon he or she, when initiated into the games of roulette and trente-et-quarante, quickly gets bitten by the fever and enters into the spirit of the discussions. They produce their “records”—printed cards in red and black numbers with which they have carefully pricked off the winning numbers with a pin as they have turned up.

The quartette enjoyed a costly but exquisite dinner, chatting and laughing the while.

Both men were friends of Lady Ranscomb and frequent visitors to her fine house in Mount Street. Hugh’s father, a country landowner, had known Sir Richard for many years, while Walter Brock had made the acquaintance of Lady Ranscomb a couple of years ago in connexion with some charity in which she had been interested.

Both were also good friends of Dorise. Both were excellent dancers, and Lady Ranscomb often allowed them to take her daughter to the Grafton, Ciro’s, or the Embassy. Lady Ranscomb was Hugh’s old friend, and he and Dorise having been thrown together a good deal ever since the girl returned from Versailles after finishing her education, it was hardly surprising that the pair should have fallen in love with each other.

As they sat opposite each other that night, the young fellow gazed into her wonderful blue eyes, yet, alas! with a sinking heart. How could they ever marry?

He had about six hundred a year—only just sufficient to live upon in these days. His father had never put him to anything since he left Brasenose, and now on his death he had found that, in order to recover the estate, it was necessary for him to marry Louise Lambert, a girl for whom he had never had a spark of affection. Louise was good-looking, it was true, but could he sacrifice his happiness; could he ever cut himself adrift from Dorise for mercenary motives—in order to get back what was surely by right his inheritance?

Yet, after all, as he again met Dorise's calm, wide-open eyes, the grim truth arose in his mind, as it ever did, that Lady Ranscomb, even though she had been so kind to him, would never allow her only daughter to marry a man who was not rich. Had not Dorise told him of the sly hints her mother had recently given her regarding a certain very wealthy man named George Sherrard, an eligible bachelor who lived in one of the most expensive flats in Park Lane, and who was being generally sought after by mothers with marriageable daughters. In many cases mothers—and especially young, good-looking widows with daughters "on their hands"—are too prone to try and get rid of them "because my daughter makes me look so old," as they whisper to their intimates of their own age.

After dinner all four strolled across to the Casino, presenting their yellow cards of admission—the monthly cards granted to those who are approved by the smug-looking, black-coated committee of inspection, who judge by one's appearance whether one had money to lose.

Dorise soon detached herself from her mother and strolled up the Rooms with Hugh, Lady Ranscomb and Brock following.

None of them intended to play, but they were strolling prior to going to the opera which was beneath the same roof, and for which Lady Ranscomb had tickets.

Suddenly Dorise exclaimed:

“Look over there—at that table in the corner. There’s that remarkable woman they call ‘Mademoiselle of Monte Carlo’!”

Hugh started, and glancing in the direction she indicated saw the handsome woman seated at the table staking her counters quite unconcernedly and entirely absorbed in the game. She was wearing a dead black dress cut slightly low in the neck, but half-bare shoulders, with a string of magnificent Chinese jade beads of that pale apple green so prized by connoisseurs.

Her eyes were fixed upon the revolving wheel, for upon the number sixteen she had just thrown a couple of thousand franc counters. The ball dropped with a sudden click, the croupier announced that number five had won, and at once raked in the two thousand francs among others.

Mademoiselle shrugged her shoulders and smiled faintly. Yvonne Ferad was a born gambler. To her losses came as easily as gains. The Administration knew that—and they also knew how at the little pigeon-hole where counters were exchanged for cheques she came often and handed over big sums in exchange for drafts upon certain banks, both in Paris and in London.

Yet they never worried. Her lucky play attracted others who usually lost. Once, a year before, a Frenchman who occupied a seat next to her daily for a month lost over a quarter of a million sterling, and one night threw himself under the Paris *rapide* at the long bridge over the Var. But on hearing of it the next day from a croupier Mademoiselle merely shrugged her shoulders, and said:

“I warned him to return to Paris. The fool! It is only what I expected.”

Hugh looked only once across at the mysterious woman whom Dorise had indicated, and then drew her away. As a matter of fact he had no intention that mademoiselle should notice him.

“What do you know of her?” he asked in a casual way when they were on the other side of the great saloon.

“Well, a Frenchman I met in the hotel the day before yesterday told me all sorts of queer stories about her,” replied the girl. “She’s apparently a most weird person, and she has uncanny good luck at the tables. He said that she had won a large fortune during the last couple of years or so.”

Hugh made no remark as to the reason of his visit to the Riviera, for, indeed, he had arrived only the day previously, and she had welcomed him joyously. Little did she dream that her lover had come out from London to see that woman who was declared to be so notorious.

“I noticed her playing this afternoon,” Hugh said a moment later in a quiet reflective tone. “What do the gossips really say about her, Dorise? All this is interesting. But there are so many interesting people here.”

“Well, the man who told me about her was sitting with me outside the Cafe de Paris when she passed across the Place to the Casino. That caused him to make the remarks. He said that her past was obscure. Some people say that she was a Danish opera singer, others declare that she was the daughter of a humble tobacconist in Marseilles, and others assert that she is English. But all agree that she is a clever and very dangerous woman.”

“Why dangerous?” inquired Hugh in surprise.

“Ah! That I don’t know. The man who told me merely hinted at her past career, and added that she was quite a respectable person nowadays in her affluence. But—well ——” added the girl with a laugh, “I suppose people gossip about everyone in this place.”

“Who was your informant?” asked her lover, much interested.

“His name is Courtin. I believe he is an official of one of the departments of the Ministry of Justice in Paris. At least somebody said so yesterday.”

“Ah! Then he probably knew more about her than he told you, I expect.”

“No doubt, for he warned my mother and myself against making her acquaintance,” said the girl. “He said she was a most undesirable person.”

At that moment Lady Ranscomb and Walter Brock joined them, whereupon the former exclaimed to her daughter:

“Did you see that woman over there?—still playing—the woman in black and the jade beads, against whom Monsieur Courtin warned us?”

“Yes, mother, I noticed her. I’ve just been telling Hugh about her.”

“A mysterious person—eh?” laughed Hugh with well-affected indifference. “But one never knows who’s who in Monte Carlo.”

“Well, Mademoiselle is apparently something of a mystery,” remarked Brock. “I’ve seen her here before several times. Once, about two years ago, I heard that she was mixed up in a very celebrated criminal case, but exactly what it was the man who told me could not recollect. She is, however, one of the handsomest women in the Rooms.”

“And one of the wealthiest—if report be true,” said Lady Ranscomb.

“She fascinates me,” Dorise declared. “If Monsieur Courtin had not warned us I should most probably have spoken to her.”

“Oh, my dear, you must do no such thing!” cried her mother, horrified. “It was extremely kind of monsieur to give us the hint. He has probably seen how unconventional you are, Dorise.”

And then, as they strolled on into the farther room, the conversation dropped.

“So they’ve heard about Mademoiselle, it seems!” remarked Brock to his friend as they walked back to the Palmiers together in the moonlight after having seen Lady Ranscomb and her daughter to their hotel.

“Yes,” growled the other. “I wish we could get hold of that Monsieur Courtin. He might tell us a bit about her.”

“I doubt if he would. These French officials are always close as oysters.”

“At any rate, I will try and make his acquaintance at the Metropole to-morrow,” Hugh said. “There’s no harm in trying.”

Next morning he called again at the Metropole before the ladies were about, but to his chagrin, he learnt from the blue-and-gold concierge that Monsieur Courtin, of the Ministry of Justice, had left at ten-fifteen o’clock on the previous night by the *rapide* for Paris. He had been recalled urgently, and a special *coupe-lit* had been reserved for him from Ventimiglia.

That day Hugh Henfrey wandered about the well-kept palm-lined gardens with their great beds of geraniums, carnations and roses. Brock had accepted the invitation of a bald-headed London stock-broker he knew to motor over to lunch and tennis at the Beau Site, at Cannes, while Dorise and her mother had gone with some people to lunch at the Reserve at Beaulieu, one of the best and yet least pretentious restaurants in all Europe, only equalled perhaps by Capsa’s, in Bucharest.

“Ah! If she would only tell!” Hugh muttered fiercely to himself as he walked alone and self-absorbed. His footsteps led him out of Monte Carlo and up the winding road which runs to La Turbie, above the beautiful bay. Ever and anon powerful cars climbing the hill smothered him in white dust, yet he heeded them not. He was too full of thought.

“Ah!” he kept on repeating to himself. “If she would only tell the truth—if she would only tell!”

Hugh Henfrey had not travelled to Monte Carlo without much careful reflection and many hours of wakefulness. He intended to clear up the mystery of his father’s death—and

more, the reason of that strange incomprehensible will which was intended to wed him to Louise.

At four o’clock that afternoon he entered the Rooms to gain another surreptitious look at Mademoiselle. Yes! She was there, still playing on as imperturbably as ever, with that half-suppressed sinister smile always upon her full red lips.

Sight of her aroused his fury. Was that smile really intended for himself? People said she was a sphinx, but he drew his breath, and when outside the Casino again in the warm sunshine he halted upon the broad red-carpeted steps and beneath his breath said in a hard, determined tone:

“Gad! She shall tell me! She shall! I’ll compel her to speak—to tell me the truth—or—or——!”

That evening he wrote a note to Dorise explaining to her that he was not feeling very well and excusing himself from going round to the hotel. This he sent by hand to the Metropole.

Brock did not turn up at dinner. Indeed, he did not expect his friend back till late. So he ate his meal alone, and then went out to the Cafe de Paris, where for an hour he sat upon the *terrasse* smoking and listening to the weird music of the red-coated orchestra of Roumanian gipsies.

All the evening, indeed, he idled, chatting with men and women he knew. *Carmen* was being given at the Opera opposite, but though he loved music he had no heart to go. The one thought obsessing him was of the handsome and fascinating woman who was such a mystery to all.

At eleven o’clock he returned to the cafe and took a seat on the *terrasse* in a dark corner, in such a position that he

could see anyone who entered or left the Casino. For half an hour he watched the people passing to and fro. At last, in a long jade-green coat, Mademoiselle emerged alone, and, crossing the gardens, made her way leisurely home on foot, as was her habit. Monte Carlo is not a large place, therefore there is little use for taxis.

When she was out of sight, he called the waiter to bring him a liqueur of old cognac, which he sipped, and then lit another cigarette. When he had finished it he drained the little glass, and rising, strolled in the direction the woman of mystery had taken.

A walk of ten minutes brought him to the iron gates of a great white villa, over the high walls of which climbing roses and geraniums and jasmine ran riot. The night air was heavy with their perfume. He opened the side gate and walked up the gravelled drive to the terrace whereon stood the house, commanding a wonderful view of the moon-lit Mediterranean and the far-off mountains of Italy.

His ring at the door was answered by a staid elderly Italian manservant.

“I believe Mademoiselle is at home,” Hugh said in French. “I desire to see her, and also to apologize for the lateness of the hour. My visit is one of urgency.”

“Mademoiselle sees nobody except by appointment,” was the man’s polite but firm reply.

“I think she will see me if you give her this card,” answered Hugh in a strained, unusual voice.

The man took it hesitatingly, glanced at it, placed it upon a silver salver, and, leaving the visitor standing on the mat, passed through the glass swing-doors into the house.