MAX PEMBERTON

JEWEL MYSTERIES FROM A DEALER'S NOTE

MUSAICUM VINTAGE MYSTERIES

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Jewel Mysteries from a Dealer's Note (Musaicum Vintage Mysteries)

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THE OPAL OF CARMALOVITCH.

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Dark was falling from a dull and humid sky, and the lamps were beginning to struggle for brightness in Piccadilly, when the opal of Carmalovitch was first put into my hand. The day had been a sorry one for business: no light, no sun, no stay of the downpour of penetrating mist which had been swept through the city by the driving south wind from the late dawn to the mock of sunset. I had sat in my private office for six long hours, and had not seen a customer. The umbrella-bearing throng which trod the street before my window hurried quickly through the mud and the slush, as people who had no leisure even to gaze upon precious stones they could not buy. I was going home, in fact, as the one sensible proceeding on such an afternoon, and had my hand upon the great safe to shut it, when the mirror above my desk showed me the reflection of a curious-looking man who had entered the outer shop, and stood already at the counter.

At the first glance I judged that this man was no ordinary customer. His dress was altogether singular. He had a black coat covering him from his neck to his heels—a coat half-smothered in astrachan, and one which could have been made by no English tailor. But his hands were ungloved, and he wore a low hat, which might have been the hat of an office boy. I could see from the little window of my private room, which gives my eye command of the shop, that he had come on foot, and for lack of any umbrella was pitiably wet. Yet there was fine bearing about him, and he was clearly a man given to command, for my assistant mounted to my room with his name at the first bidding.

"Does he say what he wants?" I asked, reading the large card upon which were the words—

but the man replied,—

"Only that he must see you immediately. I don't like the look of him at all."

"Is Abel in the shop?"

"He's at the door."

"Very well; let him come to the foot of my stairs, and if I ring as usual, both of you come up."

In this profession of jewel-selling—for every calling is a profession nowadays—we are so constantly cheek by jowl with swindlers that the coming of one more or less is of little moment in a day's work. At my own place of business the material and personal precautions are so organized that the cleverest scoundrel living would be troubled to get free of the shop with sixpenny-worth of booty on him. I have two armed men ready at the ring of my bell—Abel is one of them—and a private wire to the nearest police-station. From an alcove well hidden on the right hand of the lower room, a man watches by day the large cases where the smaller gems are shown, and by night a couple of special guards have charge of the safe and the premises. I touch a bell twice in my room, and my own detective follows any visitor who gives birth in my mind to the slightest doubt. I ring three times, and any obvious impostor is held prisoner until the police come. These things are done by most jewelers in the West End; there is nothing in them either unusual or fearful. There are so many professed swindlers—so many would-be snappers up of unconsidered and considerable trifles—that precautions such as I have named are the least that common sense and common prudence will allow one to take. And they have saved me from loss, as they have saved others again and again.

I had scarce given my instructions to Michel, my assistant—a rare reader of intention, and a fine judge of faces—when the shabby-genteel man entered. Michel

placed a chair for him on the opposite side of my desk, and then left the room. There was no more greeting between the newcomer and myself than a mutual nodding of heads; and he on his part fell at once upon his business. He took a large paper parcel from the inside pocket of his coat and began to unpack it; but there was so much paper, both brown and tissue, that I had some moments of leisure in which to examine him more closely before we got to talk. I set him down in my mind as a man hovering on the boundary line of the middle age, a man with infinite distinction marked in a somewhat worn face, and with some of the oldest clothes under the shielding long coat that I have ever looked upon. These I saw when he unbuttoned the enveloping cape to get at his parcel in the inner pocket; and while he undid it, I could observe that his fingers were thin as the talons of a bird, and that he trembled all over with the mere effort of unloosing the string.

The operation lasted some minutes. He spoke no word during that time, but when he had reduced the coil of brown paper to a tiny square of wash-leather, I asked him,—

"Have you something to show me?"

He looked up at me with a pair of intensely, ridiculously blue eyes, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Should I undo all these papers if I had not?" he responded; and I saw at once that he was a man who, from a verbal point of view, stood objectionably upon the defensive.

"What sort of a stone is it?" I went on in a somewhat uninterested tone of voice; "not a ruby, I hope. I have just bought a parcel of rubies."

By way of answer he opened the little wash-leather bag, and taking up my jewel-tongs, which lay at his hand, he held up an opal of such prodigious size and quality that I restrained myself with difficulty from crying out at the sight of it. It was a Cerwenitza stone, I saw at a glance, almost a perfect circle in shape, and at least four inches in diameter.

There was a touch of the oxide in its color which gave it the faintest suspicion of black in the shade of its lights; but for wealth of hue and dazzling richness in its general quality, it surpassed any stone I have ever known, even that in the imperial cabinet at Vienna. So brilliant was it, so fascinating in the ever-changing play of its amazing variegations, so perfect in every characteristic of the finest Hungarian gem, that for some moments I let the man hold it out to me, and said no word. There was running through my mind the question which must have arisen under such circumstances: Where had he got it from? He had stolen it, I concluded at the first thought; and again, at the second, How else could a man who wore rags under an astrachan coat have come to the possession of a gem upon which the most commercial instinct would have hesitated to set a price?

I had fully determined that I was face to face with a swindler, when his exclamation reminded me that he expected me to speak.

"Well," he said, "are you frightened to look at it?"

He had been holding out the tongs, in which he gripped the stone lightly, for some seconds, and I had not yet ventured to touch them, sitting, I do not doubt, with surprise written all over my face. But when he spoke, I took the opal from him, and turned my strong glass upon it.

"You seem to have brought me a fine thing," I said as carelessly as I could. "Is it a stone with a history?"

"It has no history—at least, none that I should care to write."

"And yet," I continued, "there cannot be three larger opals in Europe; do you know the stone at Vienna?"

"Perfectly; but it has not the black of this, and is coarser. This is an older stone, so far as the birth of its discovery goes, by a hundred years."

I thought that he was glib with his tale for a man who had such a poor one; and certainly he looked me in the face with

amazing readiness. He had not the eyes of a rogue, and his manner was not that of one criminally restless.

"If you will allow me," I said, when I had looked at the stone for a few moments, "I will examine this under the brighter light there; perhaps you would like to amuse yourself with this parcel of rubies."

This was a favorite little trick of mine. I had two or three parcels of stones to show to any man who came to me laboring under a sorry and palpably poor story; and one of these I then took from my desk and spread upon the table under the eyes of the Russian. The stones were all imitation, and worth no more than sixpence apiece. If he were a judge, he would discover the cheat at the first sight of them; if he were a swindler, he would endeavor to steal them. In either case the test was useful. And I took care to turn my back upon him while I examined the opal, to give him every opportunity of filling his pockets should he choose.

When I had the jewel under the powerful light of an unshaded incandescent lamp I could see that it merited all the appreciation I had bestowed upon it at first sight. It was flawless, wanting the demerit of a single mark which could be pointed to in depreciation of its price. For play of color and radiating generosity of hues, I have already said that no man has seen its equal. I put it in the scales, called Michel to establish my own opinions, tried it by every test that can be applied to a gem so fragile and so readily harmed, and came to the only conclusion possible—that it was a stone which would make a sensation in any market, and call bids from all the courts in Europe. It remained for me to learn the history of it, and with that I went back to my desk and resumed the conversation, first glancing at the sham parcel of rubies, to find that the man had not even looked at them.

"It is a remarkable opal," I said; "the finest ever put before me. You have come here to sell it, I presume?"

"Exactly. I want five thousand pounds for it."

"And if I make you a bid you are prepared to furnish me with the history both of it and of yourself?"

He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. "If you think that I have stolen it we had better close the discussion at once. I am not prepared to tell my history to every tradesman I deal with."

"In that case," said I, "you have wasted your time. I buy no jewels that I do not know all about."

His superciliousness was almost impertinent. It would have been quite so if it had not been dominated by an absurd and almost grotesque pride, which accounted for his temper. I was sure then that he was either an honest man or the best actor I had ever seen.

"Think the matter over," I added in a less indifferent tone; "I am certain that you will then acquit me of unreasonableness. Call here again in a day or two, and we will have a chat about it."

This softer speech availed me as little as the other. He made no sort of answer to it, but packing his opal carefully again, he rose abruptly and left the shop. As he went I touched my bell twice, and Abel followed him quietly down Piccadilly, while I sent a line to Scotland Yard informing the Commissioners of the presence of such a man as the Russian in London, and of the Gargantuan jewel which he carried. Then I went home through the fog and the humid night; but my way was lighted by a memory of the magnificent gem I had seen, and the hunger for the opal was already upon me.

The inquiry at Scotland Yard proved quite futile. The police telegraphed to Paris, to Berlin, to St. Petersburg, to New York, but got no tidings either of a robbery or of the man whom mere circumstances pointed at as a pretender. This seemed to me the more amazing since I could not conceive that a stone such as this was should not have made a sensation in some place. Jewels above all material things do not hide their light under bushels. Let there be a

great find at Kimberley or in the Burmese mines; let a fine emerald or a perfect turquoise be brought to Europe, and every dealer in the country knows its weight, its color, and its value before three days have passed. If this man, who hugged this small fortune to him, and without it was a beggar, had been a worker at Cerwenitza, he would have told me the fact plainly. But he spoke of the opal being older even than the famous and commonly cited specimen at Vienna. How came it that he alone had the history of such an ancient gem? There was only one answer to such a question—the history of his possession of it, at any rate, would not bear inquiry.

Such perplexity was not removed by Abel's account of his journey after Carmalovitch. He had followed the man from Piccadilly to Oxford Circus; thence, after a long wait in Regent's Park, where the Russian sat for at least an hour on a seat near the Botanical Gardens entrance, to a small house in Boscobel Place. This was evidently a lodging-house, offering that fare of shabbiness and dirt which must perforce be attractive to the needy. There was a light burning at the window of the pretentiously poor drawing-room when the man arrived, and a girl, apparently not more than twenty-five years of age, came down into the hall to greet him, the pair afterwards showing at the window for a moment before the blinds were drawn. An inquiry by my man for apartments in the house elicited only a shrill cackle and a negative from a shuffling hag who answered the knock. A tour of the little shops in the neighborhood provided the further clue "that they paid for nothing." This suburban estimation of personal worth was a confirmation of my conclusion drawn from the rags beneath the astrachan coat. The Russian was a poor man; except for the possession of the jewel he was near to being a beggar. And yet he had not sought to borrow money of me, and he had put the price of £5,000 upon his property.

All these things did not leave my mind for the next week. I was in daily communication with Scotland Yard, but absolutely to no purpose. Their sharpest men handled the case, and confessed that they could make nothing of it. We had the house in Boscobel Place watched, but, so far as we could learn, Carmalovitch, as he called himself, never left it. Meanwhile, I began to think that I had betrayed exceedingly poor judgment in raising the question at all. As the days went by I suffered that stone hunger which a student of opals alone can know. I began to believe that I had lost by my folly one of the greatest possessions that could come to a man in my business. I knew that it would be an act of childishness to go to the house and re-open the negotiations, for I could not bid for that which the first telegram from the Continent might prove to be feloniously gotten, and the embarkation of such a sum as was asked was a matter not for the spur of the moment, but for the closest deliberation, to say nothing of financial preparation. Yet I would have given fifty pounds if the owner of it had walked into my office again; and I never heard a footstep in the outer shop during the week following his visit but I looked up in the hope of seeing him.

A fortnight passed, and I thought that I had got to the beginning and the end of the opal mystery, when one morning, the moment after I had entered my office, Michel told me that a lady wished to see me. I had scarce time to tell him that I could see no one for an hour when the visitor pushed past him into the den, and sat herself down in the chair before my writing-desk. As in all business, we appreciate, and listen to, impertinence in the jewel trade; and when I observed the magnificent impudence of the young lady, I asked Michel to leave us, and waited for her to speak. She was a delicate-looking woman—an Italian, I thought, from the dark hue of her skin and the lustrous beauty of her eyes—but she was exceedingly shabbily dressed, and her hands were ungloved. She was not a

woman you would have marked in the stalls of a theater as the fit subject for an advertising photographer; but there was great sweetness in her face, and those signs of bodily weakness and want of strength which so often enhance a woman's beauty. When she spoke, although she had little English, her voice was well modulated and remarkably pleasing.

"You are Monsieur Bernard Sutton?" she asked, putting one hand upon my table, and the other between the buttons of her bodice.

I bowed in answer to her.

"You have met my husband—I am Madame Carmalovitch—he was here, it is fifteen days, to sell you an opal. I have brought it again to you now, for I am sure you wish to buy it."

"You will pardon me," I said, "but I am waiting for the history of the jewel which your husband promised me. I rather expected that he would have sent it."

"I know! oh, I know so well; and I have asked him many times," she answered; "but you can believe me, he will tell of his past to no one, not even to me. But he is honest and true; there is not such a man in all your city—and he has suffered. You may buy this beautiful thing now, and you will never regret it. I tell you so from all my heart."

"But surely, Madame," said I, "you must see that I cannot pay such a price as your husband is asking for his property if he will not even tell me who he is, or where he comes from."

"Yes, that is it—not even to me has he spoken of these things. I was married to him six years now at Naples, and he has always had the opal which he offers to you. We were rich then, but we have known suffering, and this alone is left to us. You will buy it of my husband, for you in all this London are the man to buy it. It will give you fame and money; it must give you both, for we ask but four thousand pounds for it."

I started at this. Here was a drop of a thousand pounds upon the price asked but fifteen days ago. What did it mean? I took up the gem, which the woman had placed upon the table, and saw in a moment. The stone was dimming. It had lost color since I had seen it; it had lost, too, I judged, at least one-third of its value. I had heard the old woman's tales of the capricious changefulness of this remarkable gem, but it was the first time that I had ever witnessed for myself such an unmistakeable depreciation. The woman read the surprise in my eyes, and answered my thoughts, herself thoughtful, and her dark eyes touched with tears.

"You see what I see," she said. "The jewel that you have in your hand is the index to my husband's life. He has told me so often. When he is well, it is well; when hope has come to him, the lights which shine there are as the light of his hope. When he is ill, the opal fades; when he dies, it will die too. That is what I believe and he believes; it is what his father told him when he gave him the treasure, nearly all that was left of a great fortune."

This tale astounded me; it betrayed absurd superstition, but it was the first ray of coherent explanation which had been thrown upon the case. I took up the thread with avidity and pursued it.

"Your husband's father was a rich man?" I asked. "Is he dead?"

She looked up with a start, then dropped her eyes quickly, and mumbled something. Her hesitation was so marked that I put her whole story from me as a clever fabrication, and returned again to the theory of robbery.

"Madame," I said, "unless your husband can add to that which you tell me, I shall be unable to purchase your jewel."

"Oh, for the love of God don't say that!" she cried; "we are so poor, we have hardly eaten for days! Come and see Monsieur Carmalovitch and he shall tell you all; I implore you, and you will never regret this kindness! My husband is

a good friend; he will reward your friendship. You will not refuse me this?"

It is hard to deny a pretty woman; it is harder still when she pleads with tears in her voice. I told her that I would go and see her husband on the following evening at nine o'clock, and counseled her to persuade him in the between time to be frank with me, since frankness alone could avail him. She accepted my advice with gratitude, and left as she had come, her pretty face made handsomer by its look of gloom and pensiveness. Then I fell to thinking upon the wisdom, or want of wisdom, in the promise I had given. Stories of men drugged, or robbed, or murdered by jewel thieves crowded upon my mind, but always with the recollection that I should carry nothing to Boscobel Place. A man who had no more upon him than a well-worn suit of clothes and a Swiss lever watch in a silver case, such as I carry invariably, would scarce be quarry for the most venturesome shop-hawk that the history of knavery has made known to us. I could risk nothing by going to the house, I was sure; but I might get the opal, and for that I longed still with a fever for possession which could only be accounted for by the beauty of the gem.

Being come to this determination, I left my own house in a hansom-cab on the following evening at half-past eight o'clock, taking Abel with me, more after my usual custom than from any prophetic alarm. I had money upon me sufficient only for the payment of the cab; and I took the extreme precaution of putting aside the diamond ring that I had been wearing during the day. As I live in Bayswater, it was but a short drive across Paddington Green and down the Marylebone Road to Boscobel Place; and when we reached the house we found it lighted up on the drawing-room floor as Abel had seen it at his first going there. But the hall was quite in darkness, and I had to ring twice before the shrill-voiced dame I had heard of answered to my knock. She carried a frowsy candle in her hand; and was so

uncanny-looking that I motioned to Abel to keep a watch from the outside upon the house before I went upstairs to that which was a typical lodging-house room. There was a "tapestry" sofa against one wall; half a dozen chairs in evident decline stood in hilarious attitudes; some seaweed, protected for no obvious reason by shades of glass, decorated the mantelpiece, and a sampler displayed the obviously aggravating advice to a tenant of such a place, "Waste not, want not." But the rickety writing-table was strewn with papers, and there was half a cigar lying upon the edge of it, and a cup of coffee there had grown cold in the dish.

The aspect of the place amazed me. I began to regret that I had set out upon any such enterprise, but had no time to draw back before the Russian entered. He wore an out-at-elbow velvet coat, and the rest of his dress was shabby enough to suit his surroundings. I noticed, however, that he offered me a seat with a gesture that was superb, and that his manner was less agitated than it had been at our first meeting.

"I am glad to see you," he said. "You have come to buy my opal?"

"Under certain conditions, yes."

"That is very good of you; but I am offering you a great bargain. My price for the stone now is £3,000, one thousand less than my wife offered it at yesterday."

"It has lost more of its color, then?"

"Decidedly; or I should not have lowered my claim—but see for yourself."

He took the stone from the wash-leather bag, and laid it upon the writing-table. I started with amazement and sorrow at the sight of it. The glorious lights I had admired not twenty days ago were half gone; a dull, salty-red tinge was creeping over the superb green and the scintillating black which had made me covet the jewel with such longing. Yet it

remained, even in its comparative poverty, the most remarkable gem I have ever put hand upon.

"The stone is certainly going off," I said in answer to him. "What guarantee have I that it will not be worthless in a month's time?"

"You have my word. It is a tradition of our family that he who owns that heirloom when it begins to fade must sell it or die—and sell it at its worth. If I continue to possess it, the tradition must prove itself, for I shall die of sheer starvation."

"And if another has it?"

"It will regain its lights, I have no doubt of it, for it has gone like this before when a death has happened amongst us. If you are content to take my word, I will return to you in six months' time and make good any loss you have suffered by it. But I should want some money now, to-night, before an hour—could you let me have it?"

"If I bought your stone, you could have the money for it; my man, who is outside, would fetch my check-book."

At the word "man," he went to the window, and saw Abel standing beneath the gas-lamp. He looked fixedly at the fellow for a moment, and then drew down the blinds in a deliberate way which I did not like at all.

"That servant of yours has been set to watch this house for ten days," he said. "Was that by your order?"

I was so completely taken aback by his discovery that I sat for a moment dumfounded, and gave him no answer. He, however, seemed trembling with passion.

"Was it by your orders?" he asked again, standing over me and almost hissing out his words.

"It was," I answered after a pause; "but, you see, circumstances were suspicious."

"Suspicious! Then you *did* believe me to be a rogue. I have shot men for less."

I attempted to explain, but he would not hear me. He had lost command of himself, stalking up and down the room

with great strides until the temper tautened his veins, and his lean hands seemed nothing but wire and bones. At last, he took a revolver from the drawer in his table, and deliberately put cartridges into it. I stood up at the sight of it and made a step towards the window; but he pointed the pistol straight at me, crying,—

"Sit down, if you wish to live another minute—and say, do you still believe me to be a swindler?"

The situation was so dangerous, for the man was obviously but half sane, that I do not know what I said in answer to him; yet he pursued my words fiercely, scarce hearing my reply before he continued,—

"You have had my house watched, and, as I know now, you have branded my name before the police as that of a criminal; you shall make atonement here on the spot by buying that opal, or you do not leave the room alive!"

It was a desperate trial, and I sat for some minutes as a man on the borderland of death. Had I been sensible then and fenced with him in his words I should now possess the opal; but I let out the whole of my thoughts—and the jewel went with them.

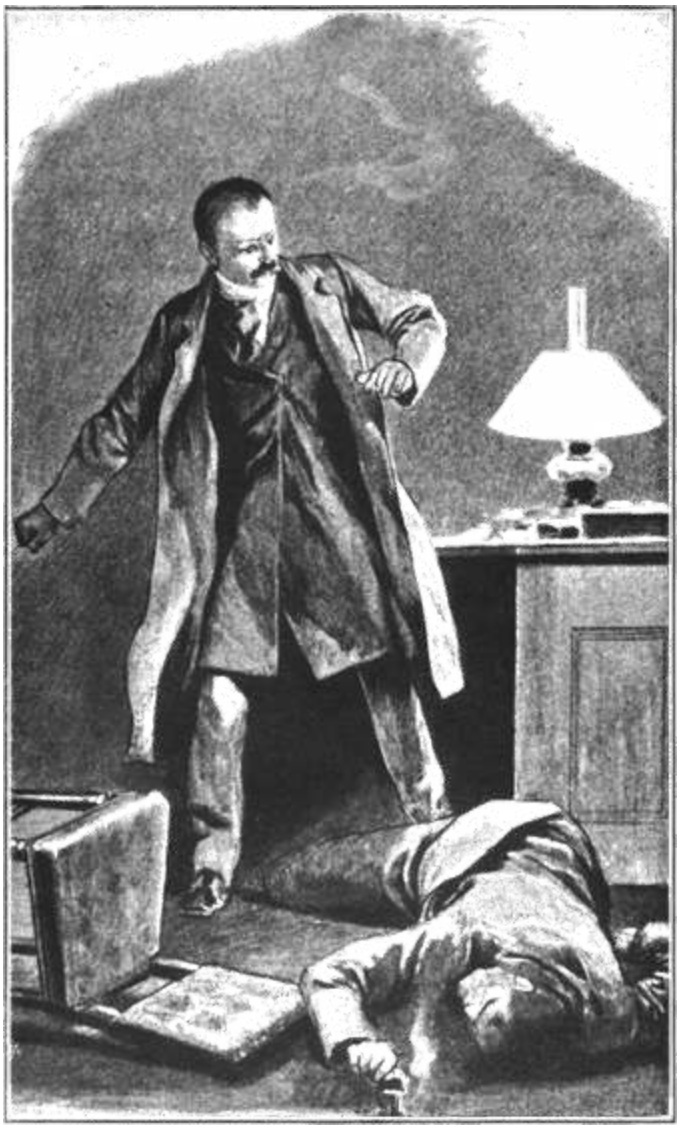
"I cannot buy your stone," I said, "until I have your history and your father's——" But I said no more, for at the mention of his father he cried out like a wounded beast, and fired the revolver straight at my head. The shot skinned my forehead and the powder behind it blackened my face; but I had no other injury, and I sprang upon him.

For some moments the struggle was appalling. I had him gripped about the waist with my left arm, my right clutching the hand wherein he held the pistol. He, in turn, put his left hand upon my throat and threw his right leg round mine with a sinewy strength that amazed me. Thus we were, rocking like two trees blown in a gale, now swaying towards the window, now to the door, now crashing against the table, or hurling the papers and the ink and the ornaments in a confused heap, as, fighting the ground foot by foot, we

battled for the mastery. But I could not cry out, for his grip about my neck was the grip of a maniac; and as it tightened and tightened, the light grew dim before my eyes and I felt that I was choking. This he knew, and with overpowering fury pressed his fingers upon my throat until he cut me with his nails as with knives. Then, at last, I reeled from the agony of it; and we fell with tremendous force under the window, he uppermost.

Of that lifelong minute that followed, I remember but little. I know only that he knelt upon my chest, still gripping my throat with his left hand, and began to reach out for his revolver, which had dropped beneath the table in our struggle. I had just seen him reach it with his finger-tips, and so draw it inch by inch towards him, when a fearful scream rang out in the room, and his hand was stayed. The scream was from the woman who had come to Piccadilly the day before, and it was followed by a terrible paroxysm of weeping, and then by a heavy fall, as the terrified girl fainted. He let me go at this, and stood straight up; but at the first step towards his wife he put his foot upon the great opal, which we had thrown to the ground in our encounter, and he crushed it into a thousand fragments.

When he saw what he had done, one cry, and one alone, escaped from him; but before I could raise a hand to stay him, he had turned the pistol to his head, and had blown his brains out.



"He had turned the pistol to his head and blown his brains out."

The story of the opal of Carmalovitch is almost told. A long inquiry after the man's death added these facts to the few I had already gleaned. He was the son of a banker in Buda-Pesth, a noble Russian, who had emigrated to Hungary and taken his wealth with him to embark it in his business. He himself had been educated partly in England, partly in France; but at the moment when he should have entered the great firm in Buda-Pesth, there came the Argentine crash, and his father was one of those who succumbed. But he did more than succumb, he helped himself to the money