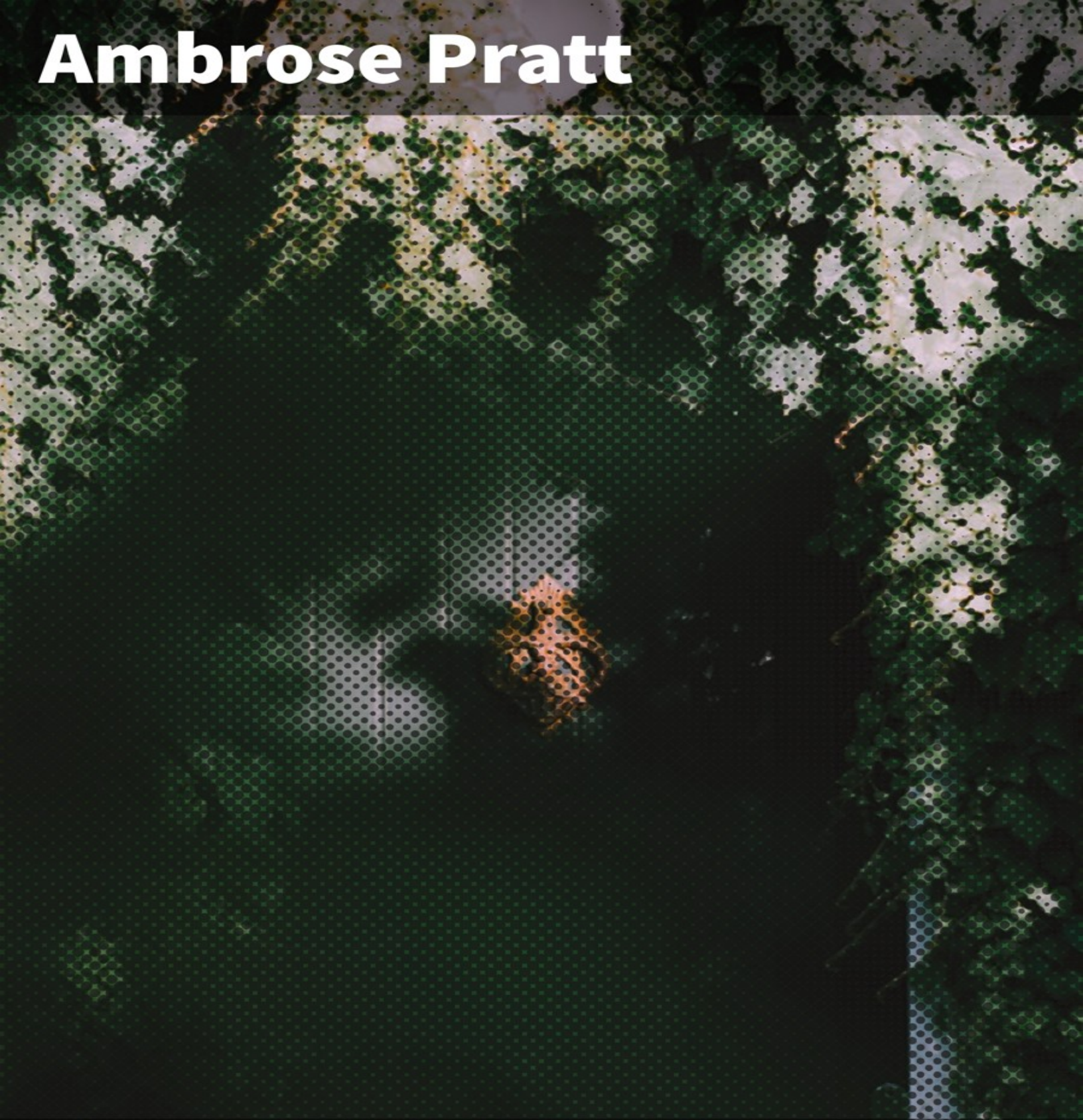
Ambrose Pratt



The Mysterious Investment

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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338094926

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Author of "Three years with Thunderbolt" "The Remittance Man," "The Outlaws of Wedden Range," etc. etc.

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CHAPTER I.

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THE event that was to alter the course of my life occurred at the town house of Lady Adela Drummond, towards the close of the season. Lady Adela was an indefatigable lion-hunter, and one could always depend on meeting the latest celebrities at her parties, on which account I usually declined her invitations. But I found it impossible to escape the one in question, for the good reason that she trapped me into naming a date when I should be free some weeks beforehand, and afterwards she informed me that my assistance was needed to make her party a success. It appeared that she had discovered an exceptional lion—or perhaps I should say bear—in the person of a Russian thought-reader. And since he could not roar intelligibly in the English tongue, Lady Adela required me to act as his interpreter. I remember cheerlessly anticipating that the whole business would prove a dreary bore, and I'm afraid that I was not in the best of humors when, half an hour before midnight, I entered the salon; for I did not fancy the idea of making a quasi-public appearance as the partner and bear leader of some half-governed Slav or Tartar charlatan. Conceive my surprise, therefore, when Lady Adela led me to a couch upon which was seated a little old man, with snow-white, close-cropped hair and Vandyck beard, who rose as we approached, and bowed with all a seventeenth century courtier's grace.

"Monsieur Rovenski—Sir Francis Coates," said Lady Adela. I don't know how long she remained with us; for on

the instant I was absorbedly interested in the man. His face was the most remarkably beautiful I had ever seen. His features were regular and quite perfect, judged by western standards, with the sole exception of his eyes. They were just a little bit too widely separated in his head. But that defect was redeemed by their size and extraordinary expression. They were ruddy-brown in color; not bright, not piercing in glance, but steady, thoughtful eyes, that met all opposition with a full, receptive stare. Nothing could have been less disconcerting than their gaze. No eyes, could have less resembled my pre-conceived conception of a mind-reader's eyes. Instead of exercising an aggressive and penetrating influence, they appeared to be depreciatively expecting a gift of information. In short, they were the eyes of a dignified, mild-mannered beggar. Presently he smiled and said to me in Russian, "I was lonely till you came, Sir Francis. I have been waiting here an hour, alone. I am a paid showman, not a guest; you understand?"

I liked his candor and the mode of his confession. The little old man was evidently not a boor.

"Let us sit down," I suggested. He complied, and we listened for a time to a long-haired piano-thumper mangling Liszt. But my curiosity was all the while awake, and soon I turned to my companion.

"You had better tell me just what I have to do!" I whispered. "There's not much time for a rehearsal—but——"

He smiled. "If you would kindly tell me what they say, and tell them what I say, it is enough!" he replied.

I shrugged. "Then you are truly a thought-reader, M. Rovenski?"

He gravely inclined his head. "Would you wish an instance?"

"Very much!" I answered eagerly.

"Then think your most private thought about another person, name me a name, and look at me."

Half irritated, half amused by a request so singular, I was about to refuse, but then I thought—"Why not? The thing is impossible. And by accepting his challenge I can prove him to my own satisfaction a charlatan—at once."

"Helen!" I whispered suddenly, and looked him straight in the face. His curiously expectant and almost wistful regard held mine for about sixty seconds. Then his eyes closed and he was silent, frowning, for another minute. Involuntarily my lip curled, but an instant later he looked at me again, "Pardon—you think in English, Sir Francis, I in Russian—I translate but slowly," he explained.

"I understood that you are ignorant of English," I said contemptuously.

"I do not speak your tongue fluently, Sir Francis; but it and most other languages are known to me."

"Well, have you translated yet?" By then I had lost the bulk of both my patience and politeness. In fact I was almost discourteously disdainful. M. Rovenski, however, resented nothing. Very quietly he asked, "Shall I speak?"

"Of course," I sneered; adding, "unless you would prefer to change the conversation, or listen to the music your compatriot is making yonder."

The little old man drew himself up with an air of wounded pride. "But listen," he said coldly, "and give me your

attention, for I wish to render you your thought in such a way that you will recognise it."

"Proceed," said I.

M. Rovenski half closed his eyes, and he said in a dreamy voice, "What right have I to think of her—with my pitiful three hundred pounds a year!"

It is no exaggeration to declare that I was stunned. I had not been conscious of thinking more of Helen than the fact that she existed while I looked into the little old man's eyes; but when he spoke I knew that I had. And I recognised the expression of my thought, just as a once familiar face is recognised after a period of lapsed remembrance. There followed a hiatus in my reckoning. I have no recollection of what happened afterwards, until I discovered myself mechanically responding to Lady Adela, who had come up to us again. I fear she found me very stupid, for she gave me her instructions twice; and I obeyed them like a man hypnotised, only half comprehending their import. It was M. Rovenski who recovered me. He put his hand upon my arm and said with an engaging smile, "Your secret is safe with me, Sir Francis." Absurd as may appear, I felt distinctly grateful for his assurance, and I brightened up.

We were standing near the piano, almost surrounded by a crescent-shaped crowd, in whose midst Lady Adela was seated. She was talking to the others volubly. "Oh! really, he is very clever," she was saying. "Prince Pelevovski recommended him to me—but the prince could not conduct the—er—seance, shall we call it; for M. Rovenski is under some sort of ban—a political emigre—you understand—and the prince's position had to be considered. But Sir Francis

Coates, luckily, is half a Russian, and he has kindly consented to be interpreter." Then she turned to me, "Do let us begin, Frank. Find out what he wants, and let us know."

I bowed to her. "M. Rovenski," said I in Russian, "they are ready. Will you open the proceedings?"

The little old man heaved a sigh. "I am unusually nervous to-night," he murmured. "I am stage-frightened, I suppose, although I should not be. Will you please ask somebody to stand forward, Sir Francis?"

I glanced around the throng. It was about equally composed of men and women. Miss Fortescue was there, and beside her—as usual—Horace Massey. He regarded me with an insolent smile; the girl was, however, looking at the Russian. I gazed at the opposite wall and recited in a sing-song voice, "Hot beans, bread and butter, ladies and gentlemen come to your supper. A-bra-ca-da-bra! Roll up, tumble up, shoal up, rumble up! Whoever wants his or her—soul (not of the foot) examined and interpreted, kindly step upon the platform, and embrace—not me unless it's a lady—but the opportunity of a lifetime!" Then I did a bit of thought-reading on my own account; for while the crowd laughed and chaffed, Helen's eyes said to me, "How can you, Frank?" and Horace Massey's, "You've missed your vocation, Coates. You were cut out for a clown." But Lady Adela was indignant. "Don't be so silly, Frank," she objected tartly. "You know quite well this is not a matter to laugh at." Then she turned to that most ponderous and humorous of asses, Lord Huxham, and commanded him to set me a serious example.

Huxham is the sort of animal who might permit himself to remark "Dear me!" if a gun were unexpectedly exploded underneath his nose. His face is so stiff and wooden that a smile would crack his cheeks. He has no nerve at all.

"What am I to do, Coates?" he demanded, approaching us.

I asked the same question of the Russian. M. Rovenski studied Huxham for a moment, then replied, "Request him to think of the last words he exchanged with someone who is dead!"

Huxham raised his brows when I had translated this message, but after a pause he solemnly announced, "Well, well."

"Let him look at me," said the Russian.

"You must gaze into M. Rovenski's eyes, Huxham!" I directed.

Huxham shrugged his shoulders and obeyed. Everyone was courteously silent during the ordeal, and even afterwards, when the little old man, with a gentle hand-wave, turned half aside, and closed his eyes. I glanced at the crowd and saw that it was attentively regarding the Russian; and no wonder, for he made a marvellously interesting picture—standing there, with both hands clenched, his forehead tightly puckered, and his whole attitude and aspect expressionful of mental strain. Suddenly, however, M. Rovenski's fixity relaxed. His eyes opened, and he said to me, "Be careful and translate me literally to your friend, Sir Francis. The words, he used were these: 'I swear it. I shall never let her want.' The person who

is dead replied, 'I trust you, Robert—trust you. You may leave me now—for I am sleepy.'"

Just as these words were uttered to me in Russian, I repeated them in English to Lord Huxham.

I am sure that never before had anyone beheld the man one tithe so shaken from his habitual marble-like stolidity. He stared at me for a full minute, his face slowly reddening until it had become one dull brick-colored mass of flesh—then he grated out between his teeth, in a voice that hurled a defiance at the world, "No man knows at what a cost I made the promise, but—by heavens—I kept it!" And with that, like one beside himself, he swung on his heel, and strode through the quickly parting throng, and from the room, speaking to none, and looking neither to left nor right.

The profound silence that succeeded was broken by Lady Adela. She was a woman who lived for social triumphs—nothing else on God's earth—and the sensation of the season had just been achieved, at her house, under her aegis. Her exultation was supreme; and no doubt her impulse was well nigh ungovernable to cackle and to clap her hands, or to get up and execute a *pas seul*. *Noblesse oblige*, however; therefore Lady Adela, instead of behaving naturally, with a greatness of mind truly admirable, affected to depreciate her victory.

"Lord Huxham is, I should say, a facile subject!" she remarked; mendaciously, because she hadn't an idea upon the matter, although perhaps, she had struck the truth—by accident. "What we need for a test," she continued, "is a difficult person, a complex person, a person whose mind it would be truly hard to read."

"A woman, in fact," I suggested.

Lady Adela scornfully ignored me. "A great financier like Mr. Stelfox-Steel," she declared decidedly.

"Hurrah!" cried Reggie Horne. "Trot him out, Lady Adela, and make him think of paying stocks; then we'll all have spent a profitable evening."

During the laughter that followed, M. Rovenski pressed my arm. "Will you tell your hostess that at half-past twelve I must surely leave. It only wants a quarter-hour!" he muttered in my ear.

Lady Adela, thus admonished, turned to the financier with her sweetest smile. "You would confer an obligation on us all," she urged.

Stelfox-Steel grumblingly came forward. He was a big man, with an iron jaw, eyes like those of an eagle, and a mouth like a guillotine. M. Rovenski, whom I watched keenly, appeared to become uneasy under the financier's piercing regard; but after a moment or two he bowed, and, turning to me, said in a low, yet resolute voice, "This man is a liar, Sir Francis, and he possesses great powers of self-command. He must be outwitted, for he intends to discredit me. Ask him to look into my eyes, then when, but not before, he follows your direction, say to him, and quickly, 'Think of the action you are most ashamed of.'"

My interest and my sympathy being thoroughly aroused —for the financier makes me feel creepy whenever he comes near me—I did as I was bidden, exactly. And the curious, nay the extraordinary, result was this. The little old man closed his eyes within a second of my speech, and, stepping backward, leaned heavily upon the edge of the

piano. Mr. Stelfox-Steel shut his jaws with a snap, and swept first me and then the gathering with a glance of fire. He seemed to be correcting us for the impertinence of having countenanced the Russian's insolent demand. A few seconds later, however, recovering his composure, he smiled quite genially and muttered in a stage whisper, "But then everybody knows that I'm a villain!" It was, really, very well done; and I yielded him a meed of admiration, for his position had been embarrassing until he spoke. I was just about to hazard a look at Miss Fortescue, when M. Rovenski stood erect. His expression was sombre, even sad. "Tell, this man," he said to me, "that I shall keep his secret if he wishes, or inform him of it privately."

Mr. Stelfox-Steel, when this message was translated, played deftly to the gallery. "I have no secrets that do not relate—to stocks!" he said, and bowed to Reggie Horne. Everybody smiled; but when, a moment later, I bade the old Russian unmask his battery he frowned and replied in an undertone. "Whisper this question to him; whisper, so that none can overhear, 'Where is your mother?'"

I did not like the task at all, but I was committed, having gone so far, and so I accomplished it—after first apologising to the company and Lady Adela. Mr. Stelfox-Steel did not turn a hair, but he looked me in the eye and muttered, "I take you for a gentleman, Coates!"

Then he turned to Lady Adela and bowed low. "I have to admit myself a believer in the esoteric powers of your marvel, Lady Adela," he said gravely. "He has reminded me of a ceaselessly regretted incident of my youth, wherein it was my misfortune to have caused the death of a lad

through an act of carelessness—while hunting. It—er—" He paused dramatically, then went on, after a most artistic gulp, "It has rather upset me—I confess—and I'm sure you'll excuse me if I now retire—Sir Francis Coates, no doubt, will supply you with the details of the story—if you wish to hear them."

"No—no—no!" cried everybody.

The financier bowed to the assembly—then once again to Lady Adela, and, without deigning me a glance, was gone, it was a superlatively fine bit of acting, and my admiration of the actor eclipsed my resentment at the fashion in which he had tricked me into upholding his brilliantly-concocted lie. There was nothing left for me to do but nod mysteriously while the crowd assailed me with inquiring glances and half-uttered questions. I was therefore greatly relieved when M. Rovenski claimed my attention. "He has not given me the lie, then?" he asked quietly.

"No," I replied. "On the contrary, he has given you the reputation of a Mirlin." Then I explained the financier's astute avoidance of the challenge. But M. Rovenski made no remark thereon, and presently, armed with Lady Adela's gracious permission, I escorted the little old man down the stairs.

I don't know why on earth I did it; but, as well as that, I helped him on with his cloak—to the shuddering horror of two hulking footmen; and then, to crown all, I was officious enough to assist him into his cab. And the quaint thing was this, M. Rovenski accepted my attentions without comment, as if they had been his right; and he rewarded me with

nothing but a kindly smile. He did not even say, "Good night!"

As I entered the house again, one of the footmen (still shuddering a little) handed me a card that was inscribed on one surface with the legend "Mr. J. Stelfox-Steel," on the other with these words, "Will Sir F. C. favor me with a call at his earliest convenience?"

I winked at the footman and gave him half-a-crown. He did not return the wink, but in consideration of the tip he condescended to stop shuddering.

A second later a sweet voice said to me, in low, reproachful tones. "You haven't been near me once to-night!" I looked down into the lovely eyes of Helen Fortescue and thanked God for my stature.

Horace Massey has always to look up to her—in every way—I spiritually alone. He stood about five feet away, holding her cloak and chewing his moustache. Now, if he had been holding someone else's cloak, I daresay I might have acted differently. As it was, I screwed up one side of my face and depressed the other. "It has given me a pain here to keep away," I groaned, and, putting my hands on my shirt front, I bent double. Naturally, when I had recovered my perpendicular, she was half-way down the steps. I had a yarn with the milkman that morning—we reached the street door of my lodgings together. He was an awfully decent fellow; he paid my cabby for me and gave me a glass of milk that had real cream floating on the top. He took it from a special can.

CHAPTER II.

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About midday a persistent rapping on the panels of my door aroused me. My greatest treasures at that time were perfect health and a joyous disposition. Naught I could do or leave undone seemed able to impair the former, and I had already successfully defied two sorts of ruin to rob me of the latter. I awoke, therefore, nothing to my surprise, with a clear head and a gay heart. I thought the knocker, without, a creditor, so I lay still for a great while, wagering right hand against left in vast sums as to how long it would take to tire him. But it was I that tired in the end; and, calling all bets off, I got up and donned dressing-gown and slippers.

He was a messenger boy. "You young imp!" I remarked severely, "a nice hour to call respectable citizens from their beds. What d'ye mean by it?"

The youngster grinned. "Are you Sir Francis Coates, sir? If you are I have a letter for you, sir. I am to wait and take back an answer, sir."

The letter ran as follows:—

> "Dear Sir Francis Coates,—If you have ten minutes to spare this afternoon between the hours of two and four, you might employ them to your own advantage by spending them with me.
>
> Yours faithfully,
>
> J. Stelfox-Steel"

Having mastered the plain sense of this effusion, a whimsical impulse induced me to reply to the great American financier, as follows:—

"Dear Mr. Stelfox-Steel,—It is so rarely an opportunity occurs for a pauper to patronise a millionaire that, in common gratitude, I cannot refrain from answering your letter.—I am, dear Sir,

Yours leisurely,

Francis Coates."

When the boy had gone, I bathed and dressed and examined my pass-book. I was overdrawn, of course, but I doubt if that circumstance troubled me as much as it did my banker, judging from a letter that the postman brought a moment later; for I had all of ten sovereigns saved up against a rainy day reposing snugly in my dressing-case. When the milkman came I tossed him doubles or quits, and he won. Thus went the first sovereign. The milkman, a true sport, offered to go on, but a spasm of prudence saved me from the workhouse for the time; and four o'clock found me in the Park, still, comparatively speaking, a rich man.

My star being in the ascendant, I was presently seated in Gloria Hammond's victoria. She is about the only American woman English married I know who hasn't a title; but to compensate, she owns a hundred thousand pounds a year and the best chef in London. "I was just dying to meet you, Frank," she announced.

"Everybody is talking about your clever old darling of a Russian and the cute way you and he roped in everybody

last night at Lady Adela's. I could just lean back and pass away, I'm so angry I wasn't there. But never mind, you shall tell me all about it and exactly how you worked the oracle."

I found that I had been unconsciously anticipating this verdict of society on my connection with M. Rovenski. Ever since I retired from Eton for elevating baccarat to the dignity of an inexact science, society had been laboriously picking my most innocent actions to pieces and discovering in the process almost diabolically ingenious underlying motives. It was one of the penalties I paid for having translated a Russian novel into English in my teens. Society never completely trusts a person, it suspects of brains.

"Look here, Gloria," I responded (calmly, because I had long ago recognised the futility of resenting misconstruction—and it is my habit to sit silent when accused of doing anything but good), "what have you ever done for me that I should bare my soul to you?"

She pursed up her pretty lips and gave me a sidelong glance that would have floored me five years earlier. "Oh!" she gasped. "The ungrateful creatures that men are! Haven't I done my best to marry you a dozen times to——"

"To other girls!" I interrupted gloomily. "D'ye expect me to be grateful for that?"

She laughed, but her eyes brightened, and she gave a gushing bow to Helen Fortescue, who cantered past us, attended by a groom.

"You're a base deceiver, Frank," she said. "But you're not going to put me off with blarney. I insist that you shall tell me all about it."

"Well," said I, "if I must, I must. But first tell me what folks say. I've only left my diggings half an hour ago, and have seen no one."

She bowed to a Cabinet Minister and his wife. "Oh," she answered airily. "That you supplied the old sorcerer with the information necessary. We are all wondering, though, how you obtained it. Lord Huxham, for instance, is so notoriously close. Who was she—that woman—Frank? My word, you are a deep one! They say Huxham has left town and gone abroad. But really, Frank, I never dreamed that you could be so terribly malicious. Poor Huxham wouldn't hurt a fly. Why ever do you hate him, Frank?"

With something of an effort I refrained from fainting.

"My dear Gloria," said I, "I like the fellow—but I have my reputation to consider. People have been quite neglecting me of late, and I had to shake them up or go under. It was a mere fluke that Huxham was my first victim. Almost anybody would have done."

Mrs. Hammond's look of startled wonderment faded into a loving smile as she nodded to a female enemy. "What an atrocious hat," she muttered; then aloud, and with a shocked expression, "but how did you know about him and the woman?"

"Oh!" I answered glibly, "that's easy. I happened quite by chance to be under the bed when Huxham's brother lay dying (Huxham never had a brother) and—er—of course ——"

But Gloria stopped the carriage instantly. "Thank you," she said freezingly, "that's quite enough for one afternoon—Sir Francis. Good-bye!"

"Good evenin', ma'am!" I replied. "Sorry I can't suit you to-day. Some other day; good day!" And I hopped out upon the footpath, narrowly escaping a collision with a cyclist as I did so. When I looked back Gloria was abandonedly laughing, and the carriage hadn't moved. She waved her hand and I went up to the wheel. Gloria is an insatiably curious daughter of Eve, but she has the saving grace of humor.

"I've just thought of something," she announced. "Mr. Stelfox-Steel dines with us to-night. Are you game to come?"

"Game? Have you just hired a new cook?"

"Brute!" she said, then added, "Till eight!" and drove away.

I lit a cigarette, for the suggestion of dinner had given me an appetite, and sauntered on, chewing the cud of my reflections, that is to say, puffing vigorously. A moment later I met Lady Harris, Huxham's sister, and—she gave me the dead cut, in the most approved and fashionable style, looking straight into my left eye. Then someone coming up behind me linked his arm with mine. It was Reggie Horne. "There's the deuce and all to pay over that business of last night, Frank," he began at once. "You are the talk of London. Everyone swears that the old Russian was your catspaw. I can tell you I am tired of wagging my tongue in your defence."

"Everybody's awfully good to me," I hummed softly. "Don't bother to defend me, Reggie. The thing will make my fortune if only people won't forget it too quickly and stop