



***VALENTINE
WILLIAMS***

***OKEWOOD
OF THE SECRET
SERVICE***

Valentine Williams

Okewood of the Secret Service

EAN 8596547247661

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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CHAPTER I. THE DEPUTY TURN

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Mr. Arthur Mackwayte slipped noiselessly into the dining-room and took his place at the table. He always moved quietly, a look of gentle deprecation on his face as much as to say: "Really, you know, I can't help being here: if you will just overlook me this time, by and by you won't notice I'm there at all!" That was how he went through life, a shy, retiring little man, quiet as a mouse, gentle as a dove, modesty personified.

That is, at least, how Mr. Arthur Mackwayte struck his friends in private life. Once a week, however, he fairly screamed at the public from the advertisement columns of "The Referee": "Mackwayte, in his Celebrated Kerbstone Sketches. Wit! Pathos! Tragedy!!! The Epitome of London Life. Universally Acclaimed as the Greatest Portrayer of London Characters since the late Chas. Dickens. In Tremendous Demand for Public Dinners. The Popular Favorite. A Few Dates still Vacant. 23, Laleham Villas, Seven Kings. 'Phone" and so on.

But only professionally did Mr. Mackwayte thus blow his own trumpet, and then in print alone. For the rest, he had nothing great about him but his heart. A long and bitter struggle for existence had left no hardness in his smooth-shaven flexible face, only wrinkles. His eyes were gray and keen and honest, his mouth as tender as a woman's.

His daughter, Barbara, was already at table pouring out the tea—high tea is still an institution in music-hall circles. Mr. Mackwayte always gazed on this tall, handsome

daughter of his with amazement as the great miracle of his life. He looked at her now fondly and thought how.... how distinguished, yes, that was the word, she looked in the trim blue serge suit in which she went daily to her work at the War Office.

"Rations a bit slender to-night, daddy," she said, handing him his cup of tea, "only sardines and bread and butter and cheese. Our meatless day, eh?"

"It'll do very well for me, Barbara, my dear," he answered in his gentle voice, "there have been times when your old dad was glad enough to get a cup of tea and a bite of bread and butter for his supper. And there's many a one worse off than we are today!"

"Any luck at the agent's, daddy?"

Mr. Mackwayte shook his head.

"These revues are fair killing the trade, my dear, and that's a fact. They don't want art to-day, only rag-time and legs and all that. Our people are being cruelly hit by it and that's a fact. Why, who do you think I ran into at Harris' this morning? Why, Barney who used to work with the great Charles, you know, my dear. For years he drew his ten pound a week regular. Yet there he was, looking for a job the same as the rest of us. Poor fellow, he was down on his luck!"

Barbara looked up quickly.

"Daddy, you lent him money...."

Mr. Mackwayte looked extremely uncomfortable.

"Only a trifle, my dear, just a few shillings.... to take him over the week-end.... he's getting something.... he'll repay me, I feel sure...."

"It's too bad of you, daddy," his daughter said severely. "I gave you that ten shillings to buy yourself a bottle of whiskey. You know he won't pay you back. That Barney's a bad egg!"

"Things are going bad with the profession," replied Mr. Mackwayte. "They don't seem to want any of us old stagers today, Barbara!"

"Now, daddy, you know I don't allow you to talk like that. Why, you are only just finished working.... the Samuel Circuit, too!"

Barbara looked up at the old man quickly.

"Only, four weeks' trial, my dear.... they didn't want me, else they would have given me the full forty weeks. No, I expect I am getting past my work. But it's hard on you child...."

Barbara sprang up and placed her hand across her father's mouth.

"I won't have you talk like that, Mac"—that was her pet name for him—"you've worked hard all your life and now it's my turn. Men have had it all their own way before this war came along: now women are going to have a look in. Presently' when I get to be supervisor of my section and they raise my pay again, you will be able to refuse all offers of work. You can go down to Harris with a big cigar in your mouth and patronize him, daddy..."

The telephone standing on the desk in the corner of the cheap little room tingled out sharply. Barbara rose and went across to the desk. Mr. Mackwayte thought how singularly graceful she looked as she stood, very slim, looking at him

whimsically across the dinner-table, the receiver in her hand.

Then a strange thing happened. Barbara quickly put the receiver down on the desk and clasped her hands together, her eyes opened wide in amazement.

"Daddy," she cried, "it's the Palaceum... the manager's office... they want you urgently! Oh, daddy, I believe it is an engagement!"

Mr. Mackwayte rose to his feet in agitation, a touch of color creeping into his gray cheeks.

"Nonsense, my dear!" he answered, "at this time of night! Why, it's past eight... their first house is just finishing... they don't go engaging people at this time of day... they've got other things to think of!"

He went over to the desk and picked up the receiver.

"Mackwayte speaking!" he said, with a touch of stage majesty in his voice.

Instantly a voice broke in on the other end of the wire, a perfect torrent of words.

"Mackwayte? Ah! I'm glad I caught you at home. Got your props there? Good. Hickie of Hickie and Flanagan broke his ankle during their turn at the first house just now, and I want you to take their place at the second house. Your turn's at 9.40: it's a quarter past eight now: I'll have a car for you at your place at ten to nine sharp. Bring your band parts and lighting directions with you... don't forget! You get twenty minutes, on! Right! Goodbye!"

"The Palaceum want me to deputize for Hickie and Flanagan, my dear," he said a little tremulously' "9.40... the second house... it's... it's very unexpected!"

Barbara ran up and throwing her arms about his neck, kissed him.

"How splendid!" she exclaimed, "the Palaceum, daddy! You've never had an engagement like this before... the biggest hall in London...!!

"Only for a night, my dear"" said Mr. Mackwayte modestly.

"But if they like you, daddy, if it goes down... what will you give them, daddy?"

Mr. Mackwayte scratched his chin.

"It's the biggest theatre in London"" he mused, "It'll have to be broad effects... and they'll want something slap up modern, my dear, I'm thinking..."

"No, no, daddy" his daughter broke in vehemently "they want the best. This is a London audience, remember, not a half-baked provincial house. This is London, Mac, not Wigan! And Londoners love their London! You'll give 'em the old London horse bus driver, the sporting cabby, and I believe you'll have time to squeeze in the hot potato man..."

"Well, like your poor dear mother, I expect you know what's the best I've got" replied Mr. Mackwayte, "but it'll be a bit awkward with a strange dresser... I can't get hold of Potter at this time, of night... and a stranger is sure to mix up my wigs and things..."

"Why, daddy, I'm going with you to put out your things..."

"But a lady clerk in the War Office, Barbara... a Government official, as you might say... go behind at a music-hall... it don't seem proper right, my dear!"

"Nonsense, Mac. Where Is your theatre? Come along. We'll have to try and get a taxi!"

"They're sending a car at ten to nine, my dear!"

"Good gracious! what swells we are! And it's half-past eight already! Who is on the bill with you?"

"My dear, I haven't an idea... I'm not very well up in the London programmes' I'm afraid... but it is sure to be a good programme. The Palaceum is the only house that's had the courage to break away from this rotten revue craze!"

Barbara was in the hall now, her arms plunged to the shoulder in a great basket trunk that smelt faintly of cocoa-butter. Right and left she flung coats and hats and trousers and band parts, selecting with a sure eye the properties which Mr. Mackwayte would require for the sketches he would play that evening. In the middle of it all the throbbing of a car echoed down the quiet road outside. Then there came a ring at the front door.

At half-past nine that night, Barbara found herself standing beside her father in the wings of the vast Palaceum stage. Just at her back was the little screened-off recess where Mr. Mackwayte was to make the quick changes that came in the course of his turn. Here, since her arrival in the theatre, Barbara had been busy laying out coats and hats and rigs and grease-paints on the little table below the mirror with its two brilliant electric bulbs, whilst Mr. Mackwayte was in his dressing-room upstairs changing into his first costume.

Now, old Mackwayte stood at her elbow in his rig-out as an old London bus-driver in the identical, characteristic clothes which he had worn for this turn for the past 25 years. He was far too old a hand to show any nervousness

he might feel at the ordeal before him. He was chatting in undertones in his gentle, confidential way to the stage manager.

All around them was that curious preoccupied stillness hush of the power-house which makes the false world of the stage so singularly unreal by contrast when watched from the back. The house was packed from floor to ceiling, for the Palaceum's policy of breaking away from revue and going back to Mr. Mackwayte called "straight vaudeville" was triumphantly justifying itself.

Standing in the wings, Barbara could almost feel the electric current running between the audience and the comedian who, with the quiet deliberation of the finished artist, was going through his business on the stage. As he made each of his carefully studied points, he paused, confident of the vast rustle of laughter swelling into a hurricane of applause which never failed to come from the towering tiers of humanity before him, stretching away into the roof where the limelights blazed and spluttered. Save for the low murmur of voices at her side, the silence behind the scenes was absolute. No one was idle. Everyone was at his post, his attention concentrated on that diminutive little figure in the ridiculous clothes which the spot-lights tracked about the stage.

It was the high-water mark of modern music-hall development. The perfect smoothness of the organization gave Barbara a great feeling of contentment for she knew how happy her father must be. Everyone had been so kind to him. "I shall feel a stranger amongst the top-liners of today, my dear," he had said to her in the car on their way

to the hall. She had had no answer ready for she had feared he spoke the truth.

Yet everyone they had met had tried to show them that Arthur Mackwayte was not forgotten. The stage-door keeper had known him in the days of the old Aquarium and welcomed him by name. The comedian who preceded Mr. Mackwayte and who was on the stage at that moment had said, "Hullo, Mac! Come to give us young 'uns some tips?" And even now the stage manager was talking over old days with her father.

"You had a rough but good schooling, Mac," he was saying, "but, by Jove, it gave us finished artists. If you saw the penny reading line that comes trying to get a job here... and gets it, by Gad!... it'd make you sick. I tell you I have my work cut out staving them off! It's a pretty good show this week, though, and I've given you a good place, Mac... you're in front of Nur-el-Din!"

"Nur-el-Din?" repeated Mr. Mackwayte' "what is it, Fletcher? A conjurer?"

"Good Lord' man' where have you been living?" replied Fletcher. "Nur-el-Din is the greatest vaudeville proposition since Lottie Collins. Conjurer! That's what she is, too, by Jove! She's the newest thing in Oriental dancers... Spaniard or something... wonderful clothes, what there is of 'em... and jewelry... wait till you see her!"

"Dear me"" said Mr. Mackwayte' "I'm afraid I'm a bit behind the times. Has she been appearing here long?"

"First appearance in London, old man' and she's made good from the word 'Go!' She's been in Paris and all over the Continent, and America, too, I believe, but she had to come

to me to soar to the top of the bill. I saw at once where she belonged! She's a real artiste, temperament, style and all that sort of thing and a damn good producer into the bargain! But the worst devil that ever escaped out of hell never had a wickeder temper! She and I fight all the time! Not a show, but she doesn't keep the stage waiting! But I won! I won't have her prima donna tricks in this theatre and so I've told her! Hullo, Georgie's he's finishing..."

The great curtain switched down suddenly, drowning a cascade of applause, and a bundle of old clothes, twitching nerves, liquid perspiration and grease paint hopped off the stage into the centre of the group. An electric bell trilled, the limelights shut off, with a jerk that made the eyes ache, a back-cloth soared aloft and another glided down into its place, the comedian took two, three, four calls, then vanished into a horde of dim figures scuttling about in the gloom.

An electric bell trilled again and deep silence fell once more, broken only by the hissing of the lights.

"You ought to stop behind after your turn and see her, Mac," the stage manager's voice went on evenly. "All right, Jackson! On you go, Mac!"

Barbara felt her heart jump. Now for it, daddy!

The great curtain mounted majestically and Arthur Mackwayte, deputy turn, stumped serenely on to the stage.

CHAPTER II. CAPTAIN STRANGWISE ENTERTAINS A GUEST

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It was the slack hour at the Nineveh Hotel. The last groups about the tea-tables in the Palm Court had broken up, the Tzigane orchestra had stacked its instruments together on its little platform and gone home, and a gentle calm rested over the great hotel as the forerunner of the coming dinner storm.

The pre-dinner hour is the uncomfortable hour of the modern hotel de luxe. The rooms seem uncomfortably hot, the evening paper palls, it is too early to dress for dinner, so one sits yawning over the fire, longing for a fireside of one's own. At least that is how it strikes one from the bachelor standpoint, and that is how it appeared to affect a man who was sitting hunched up in a big arm-chair in the vestibule of the Nineveh Hotel on this winter afternoon.

His posture spoke of utter boredom. He sprawled full length in his chair, his long legs stretched out in front of him, his eyes half-closed, various editions of evening papers strewn about the ground at his feet. He was a tall, well-groomed man, and his lithe, athletic figure looked very well in its neat uniform.

A pretty little woman who sat at one of the writing desks in the vestibule glanced at him more than once. He was the sort of man that women look at with interest. He had a long, shrewd, narrow head, the hair dark and close-cropped, a big, bold, aquiline nose, and a firm masterful chin, dominated by a determined line of mouth emphasised by a

thin line of moustache. He would have been very handsome but for his eyes, which, the woman decided as she glanced at him, were set rather too close together. She thought she would prefer him as he was now, with his eyes glittering in the fire-light through their long lashes.

But what was most apparent was the magnificent physical fitness of the man. His was the frame of the pioneer, the man of the earth's open spaces and uncharted wilds. He looked as hard as nails, and the woman murmured to herself, as she went on with her note, "On leave from the front."

Presently, the man stirred, stretched himself and finally sat up. Then he started, sprang to his feet, and strode easily across the vestibule to the reception desk. An officer was standing there in a worn uniform, a very shabby kit-bag by his side, a dirty old Burberry over his arm.

"Okewood!" said the young man and touched the other on the shoulder, "isn't it Desmond Okewood? By Jove, I am glad to see you!"

The new-comer turned quickly.

"Why, hullo," he said, "if it isn't Maurice Strangwise! But, good heavens, man, surely I saw your name in the casualty list... missing, wasn't it?"

"Yep!" replied the other smiling, "that's so! It's a long story and it'll keep! But tell me about yourself... this," he kicked the kit-bag with the toe of his boot, "looks like a little leave! Just in from France?"

He smiled again, baring his firm, white teeth, and looking at him Desmond suddenly remembered, as one recalls a

trifle, his trick of smiling. It was a frank enough smile but... well, some people smile too much.

"Got in just now by the leave train," answered Desmond.

"How much leave have you got?" asked Strangwise.

"Well," said the other, "it's a funny thing, but I don't know!"

"Say, are they giving unlimited leave over there now?"

Desmond laughed.

"Hardly," he replied. "But the War Office just applied for me to come over and here I am! What they want me for, whether it's to advise the War Council or to act as Quartermaster to the Jewish Battalion I can't tell you! I shan't know until tomorrow morning! In the meantime I'm going to forget the war for this evening!"

"What are you going to do to-night?" asked Strangwise.

Desmond began to check off on his fingers.

"Firstly, I'm going to fill the biggest bath in this hotel with hot water, get the biggest piece of Pears' soap in London, and jump in: Then, if my tailor hasn't betrayed me, I'm going to put on dress clothes, and whilst I am dressing summon Julien (if he's maitre d'hotel here) to a conference, then I'm going to eat the best dinner that this pub can provide. Then..."

Strangwise interrupted him.

"The bath is on you, if you like," he said, "but the dinner's on me and a show afterwards. I'm at a loose end, old man, and so are you, so we'll hit up together! We'll dine in the restaurant here 7.30, and Julien shall come up to your room so that you can order the dinner. Is it a go?"

"Rather," laughed Desmond, "I'll eat your dinner, Maurice, and you shall tell me how you managed to break out of the casualty list into the Nineveh Hotel. But what do all these anxious-looking gentry want?"

The two officers turned to confront a group of four men who were surveying them closely. One of them, a fat, comfortable looking party with grizzled hair, on seeing Desmond, walked up to him.

"Hullo!" said Desmond, "it's Tommy Spencer! How are you, Spencer? What's the betting in Fleet Street on the war lasting another five years? Have you come to interview me?"

The tubby little man beamed and shook hands effusively.

"Glad to see you looking so well, Major," he said, "It's your friend we want..."

"What? Strangwise? Here, Maurice, come meet my friend Tommy Spencer of the "Daily Record," whom I haven't seen since we went on manoeuvres together down at Aldershot! Captain Strangwise, Tommy Spencer! Now, then, fire away; Spencer!"

Strangwise smiled and shook his head.

"I'm very pleased to know your friend, Desmond," he said, "but, you know, I can't talk! I had the strictest orders from the War Office... It's on account of the other fellows, you know..."

Desmond looked blankly at him. Then he—turned to Spencer.

"You must let me into this, Spencer," he said, "what's old Maurice been up to? Has he been cashiered for wearing shoes or what?"

Spencer's manner became a trifle formal.

"Captain Strangwise has escaped from a prisoners' of war camp in Germany, Major," he said, "we've been trying to get hold of him for days! He's the talk of London!"

Desmond turned like a shot.

"Maurice!" he cried, "'pon my soul, I'm going to have an interesting evening... why, of course, you are just the sort of fellow to do a thing like that. But, Spencer, you know, it won't do... fellows are never allowed to talk to the newspaper men about matters of this kind. And if you're a good fellow, Spencer, you won't even say that you have seen Strangwise here... you'll only get him into trouble!"

The little man looked rather rueful.

"Oh, of course, Major, if you put it that way," he said.

"... And you'll use your influence to make those other fellows with you drop it, will you, Spencer? And then come along to the bar and we'll have a drink for old times' sake!"

Spencer seemed doubtful about the success of his representations to his colleagues but he obediently trotted away. Apparently, he succeeded in his mission for presently he joined the two officers alone in the American Bar.

"I haven't seen Strangwise for six months, Spencer," said Desmond over his second cocktail. "Seeing him reminds me how astonishing it is the way fellows drop apart in war. Old Maurice was attached to the Brigade of which I am the Brigade Major as gunner officer, and we lived together for the best part of three months, wasn't it, Maurice? Then he goes back to his battery and the next thing I hear of him is that he is missing. And then I'm damned if he doesn't turn up here!"

Spencer cocked an eye at Strangwise over his Martini.

"I'd like to hear your story, despite the restrictions," he said.

Strangwise looked a trifle embarrassed.

"Maybe I'll tell you one day," he replied in his quiet way, "though, honestly, there's precious little to tell..."

Desmond marked his confusion and respected him for it. He rushed in to the rescue.

"Spencer," he said abruptly, "what's worth seeing in London? We are going to a show to-night. I want to be amused, mark you, not elevated!"

"Nur-el-Din at the Palaceum," replied the reporter.

"By Jove, we'll go there," said Desmond, turning to Maurice. "Have you ever seen her? I'm told she's perfectly marvelous..."

"It's an extraordinarily artistic turn," said Spencer, "and they're doing wonderful business at the Palaceum. You'd better go and see the show soon, though, for they tell me the lady is leaving the programme."

"No!" exclaimed Strangwise so suddenly that Desmond turned round and stared at him. "I thought she was there for months yet..."

"They don't want her to go," answered Spencer, "she's a perfect gold-mine to them but I gather the lady is difficult... in fact, to put it bluntly she's making such a damn nuisance of herself with her artistic temperament that they can't get on with her at all."

"Do you know this lady of the artistic temperament, Maurice?" asked Desmond.

Strangwise hesitated a moment.

"I met her in Canada a few years ago," he said slowly, "she was a very small star then. She's a very handsome and attractive girl, in spite of our friend's unfavorable verdict. There's something curiously real about her dancing, too, that you don't find in this sort of show as a rule!"

He stopped a moment, then added abruptly:

"We'll go along to the Palaceum to-night, if you like, Desmond," and Desmond joyfully acquiesced. To one who has been living for weeks in an ill-ventilated pill-box on the Passchendaele Ridge, the lights and music and color of a music-hall seem as a foretaste of Paradise.

And that was what Desmond Okewood thought as a few hours later he found himself with Maurice Strangwise in the stalls of the vast Palaceum auditorium. In the unwonted luxury of evening clothes he felt clean and comfortable, and the cigar he was smoking was the climax of one of Julien's most esoteric efforts.

The cards on either side of the proscenium opening bore the words: "Deputy Turn." On the stage was a gnarled old man with ruddy cheeks and a muffler. a seedy top hat on his head, a coaching whip in his hand, the old horse bus-driver of London in his habit as he had lived. The old fellow stood there and just talked to the audience of a fine sporting class of men that petrol has driven from the streets, without exaggerated humor or pathos. Desmond, himself a born Cockney, at once fell under the actor's spell and found all memories of the front slipping away from him as the old London street characters succeeded one another on the stage. Then the orchestra blared out, the curtain

descended, and the house broke into a great flutter of applause.

Desmond, luxuriating in his comfortable stall puffed at his cigar and fell into a pleasant reverie.

He was contrasting the ghastly nightmare of mud and horrors from which he had only just emerged with the scene of elegance, of civilization; around him.

Suddenly, his attention became riveted on the stage. The atmosphere of the theatre had changed. Always quick at picking up "influences," Desmond instantly sensed a new mood in the throngs around him. A presence was in the theatre, an instinct-awakening, a material influence. The great audience was strangely hushed. The air was heavy with the tent of incense. The stringed instruments and oboes in the orchestra were wandering into [Updater's note: a line appears to be missing from the source here] rhythmic dropped.

Maurice touched his elbow.

"There she is!" he said.

Desmond felt inclined to shake him off roughly. The interruption jarred on him. For he was looking at this strangely beautiful girl with her skin showing very brown beneath a wonderful silver tiara-like headdress, and in the broad interstices of a cloth-of-silver robe with short, stiffly wired-out skirt. She was seated, an idol, on a glittering black throne, at her feet with their tapering dyed nails a fantastically attired throng of worshipers.

The idol stirred into life, the music of the orchestra died away. Then a tom-tom began to beat its nervous pulse-stirring throb, the strident notes of a reed-pipe joined in and

the dancer, raised on her toes on the dais, began to sway languorously to and fro. And so she swayed and swayed with sinuously curving limbs while the drums throbbed out faster with ever-shortening beats, with now and then a clash of brazen cymbals that was torture to overwrought nerves.

The dancer was the perfection of grace. Her figure was lithe and supple as a boy's. There was a suggestion of fire and strength and agility about her that made one think of a panther as she postured there against a background of barbaric color. The grace of her movements, the exquisite blending of the colors on the stage, the skillful grouping of the throng of worshipers, made up a picture which held the audience spellbound and in silence until the curtain dropped.

Desmond turned to find Strangwise standing up.

"I thought of just running round behind the scenes for a few minutes," he said carelessly.

"What, to see Nur-el-Din? By Jove, I'm coming, too!" promptly exclaimed Desmond.

Strangwise demurred. He didn't quite know if he could take him: there might be difficulties: another time... But Desmond got up resolutely.

"I'll be damned if you leave me behind, Maurice," he laughed, "of course I'm coming, too! She's the most delightful creature I've ever set eyes on!"

And so it ended by them going through the pass-door together.

CHAPTER III. MR. MACKWAYTE MEETS AN OLD FRIEND

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That night Nur-el-Din kept the stage waiting for five minutes. It was a climax of a long series of similar unpardonable crimes in the music-hall code. The result was that Mr. Mackwayte, after taking four enthusiastic "curtains," stepped off the stage into a perfect pandemonium.

He found Fletcher, the stage manager, livid with rage, surrounded by the greater part of the large suite with which the dancer traveled. There was Madame's maid, a trim Frenchwoman, Madame's business manager, a fat, voluble Italian, Madame's secretary, an olive-skinned South American youth in an evening coat with velvet collar, and Madame's principal male dancer in a scanty Egyptian dress with grotesquely painted face. They were all talking at the same time, and at intervals Fletcher muttered hotly: "This time she leaves the bill or I walk out of the theatre!"

Then a clear voice cried:

"Me voila!" and a dainty apparition in an ermine wrap tripped into the centre of the group, tapped the manager lightly on the shoulder and said:

"Allons! I am ready!"

Mr. Mackwayte's face creased its mask of paint into a thousand wrinkles. For, on seeing him, the dancer's face lighted up, and, running to him with hands outstretched, she cried:

"Tiens! Monsieur Arthur!" while he ejaculated:

"Why, it's little Marcelle!"

But now the stage manager interposed. He whisked Madame's wrap off her with one hand and with the other, firmly propelled her on to the stage. She let him have his way with a merry smile, dark eyes and white teeth flashing, but as she went she said to Mr. Mackwayte:

"My friend, wait for me! Et puis nous causerons! We will 'ave a talk, nest-ce pas?"

"A very old friend of mine, my dear," Mr. Mackwayte said to Barbara when, dressed in his street clothes, he rejoined her in the wings where she stood watching Nur-el-Din dancing. "She was an acrobat in the Seven Duponts, a turn that earned big money in the old days. It must be... let's see... getting on for twenty years since I last set eyes on her. She was a pretty kid in those days! God bless my soul! Little Marcelle a big star! It's really most amazing!"

Directly she was off the stage, Nur-el-Din came straight to Mr. Mackwayte, pushing aside her maid who was waiting with her wrap.

"My friend," she cooed in her pretty broken English, "I am so glad, so glad to see you. And this is your girl... ah! she 'as your eyes, Monsieur Arthur, your nice English gray eyes! Such a big girl... ah! but she make me feel old!"

She laughed, a pretty gurgling laugh, throwing back her head so that the diamond collar she was wearing heaved and flashed.

"But you will come to my room, hein?" she went on. "Marie, my wrap!" and she led the way to the lift.

Nur-el-Din's spacious dressing-room seemed to be full of people and flowers. All her little court was assembled amid

a perfect bower of hot-house blooms and plants. Head and shoulders above everybody else in the room towered the figure of an officer in uniform, with him another palpable Englishman in evening dress.

Desmond Okewood thought he had never seen anything in his life more charming than the picture the dancer made as she came into the room. Her wrap had fallen open and beneath the broad bars of her cloth-of-silver dress her bosom yet rose and fell after the exertions of her dance. A jet black curl had strayed out from beneath her lofty silver head-dress, and she thrust it back in its place with one little brown bejeweled hand whilst she extended the other to Strangwise.

"Tiens, mon capitaine!" she said. Desmond was watching her closely, fascinated by her beauty, but noticed an unwilling, almost a hostile tone, in her voice.

Strangwise was speaking in his deep voice.

"Marcelle," he said, "I've brought a friend who is anxious to meet you. Major Desmond Okewood! He and I soldiered together in France!" The dancer turned her big black eyes full on Desmond as she held out her hand to him.

"Old friends, new friends," she cried, clapping, her hands like a child, "I love friends. Capitaine, here is a very old friend," she said to Strangwise as Mr. Mackwayte and Barbara came into the rooms, "Monsieur Arthur Mackwayte and 'is daughter. I 'ave know Monsieur Arthur almos' all my life. And, Mademoiselle, permit me? I introduce le Capitaine Strangwise and 'is friend... what is the name? Ah, Major Okewood!"

Nur-el-Din sank into a bergere chair beside her great mirror.

"There are too many in this room," she cried, "there is no air! Lazarro, Ramiro, all of you, go outside, my friends!"

As Madame's entourage surged out, Strangwise said:

"I hear you are leaving the Palace, Marcelle!"

He spoke so low that Mr. Mackwayte and Barbara, who were talking to Desmond, did not hear. Marcelle, taking off her heavy head-dress, answered quickly:

"Who told you that?"

"Never mind," replied Strangwise. "But you never told me you were going. Why didn't you?"

His voice was stern and hard now, very different from his usual quiet and mellow tones. But he was smiling.

Marcelle cast a glance over her shoulder. Barbara was looking round the room and caught the reflection of the dancer's face in a mirror hanging on the wall. To her intense astonishment, she saw a look of despair, almost of terror, in Nur-el-Din's dark eyes. It was like the frightened stare of some hunted beast. Barbara was so much taken aback that she instinctively glanced over her shoulder at the door, thinking that the dancer had seen something there to frighten her. But the door was shut. When Barbara looked into the mirror again, she saw only the reflection of Nur-el-Din's pretty neck and shoulders. The dancer was talking again in low tones to Strangwise.

But Barbara swiftly forgot that glimpse of the dancer's face in the glass. For she was very happy. Happiness, like high spirits, is eminently contagious, and the two men at her side were supremely content.

Her father's eyes were shining with his little success of the evening: on the way upstairs Fletcher had held out hopes to him of a long engagement at the Palace while as for the other, he was radiant with the excitement of his first night in town after long months of campaigning.

He was thinking that his leave had started most propitiously. After a man has been isolated for months amongst muddy masculinity, the homeliest woman will find favor in his eyes. And to neither of these women, in whose presence he so unexpectedly found himself within a few hours of landing in England, could the epithet "homely" be applied. Each represented a distinct type of beauty in herself, and Desmond, as he chatted with Barbara, was mentally contrasting the two women. Barbara, tall and slim and very healthy, with her braided brown hair, creamy complexion and gray eyes, was essentially English. She was the typical woman of England, of England of the broad green valleys and rolling downs and snuggling hamlets, of England of the white cliffs gnawed by the restless ocean. The other was equally essentially a woman of the South. Her dark eyes, her upper lip just baring her firm white teeth, spoke of hot Latin or gypsy blood surging in her veins. Hers was the beauty of the East, sensuous, arresting, conjuring up pictures of warm, perfumed nights, the thrumming of guitars, a great yellow moon hanging low behind the palms.

"Barbara!" called Nur-el-Din from the dressing table. Mr. Mackwayte had joined her there and was chatting to Strangwise.

"You will stay and talk to me while I change n'est-ce pas? Your papa and these gentlemen are going to drink a

whiskey-soda with that animal Fletcher... quel homme terrible... and you shall join them presently."

The men went out, leaving Barbara alone with the dancer. Barbara noticed how tired Nur-el-Din was looking. Her pretty, childish ways seemed to have evaporated with her high spirits. Her face was heavy and listless. There were lines round her eyes, and her mouth had a hard, drawn look.

"Child," she said, "give me, please, my peignoir... it is behind the door,... and, I will get this paint off my face!"

Barbara fetched the wrapper and sat down beside the dancer. But Nur-el-Din did not move. She seemed to be thinking. Barbara saw the hunted look she had already observed in her that evening creeping over her face again.

"It is a hard life; this life of ours, a life of change, ma petite! A great artiste has no country, no home, no fireside! For the past five years I have been roaming about the world! Often I think I will settle down, but the life holds me!"

She took up from her dressing-table a little oblong plain silver box.

"I want to ask you a favor, ma petite Barbara!" she said. "This little box is a family possession of mine: I have had it for many years. The world is so disturbed to-day that life is not safe for anybody who travels as much as I do! You have a home, a safe home with your dear father! He was telling me about it! Will you take this little box and keep it safely for me until... until... the war is over... until I ask you for it?"

"Yes, of course," said Barbara, "if you wish it, though, what with these air raids, I don't know that London is particularly safe, either."

"Ah! that is good of you," cried Nur-el-Din, "anyhow, the little box is safer with you than with me. See, I will wrap it up and seal it, and then you will take it home with you, n'est-ce pas?"

She opened a drawer and swiftly hunting among its contents produced a sheet, of white paper, and some sealing-wax. She wrapped the box in the paper and sealed it up, stamping the seals with a camel signet ring she drew off her finger. Then she handed the package to Barbara.

There was a knock at the door. The maid, noiselessly arranging Madame's dresses in the corner opened it.

"You will take care of it well for me," the dancer said to Barbara, and her voice vibrated with a surprising eagerness, "you will guard it preciously until I come for it..." She laughed and added carelessly: "Because it is a family treasure, a life mascotte of mine, hein?"

Then they heard Strangwise's deep voice outside.

Nur-el-Din started.

"Le Capitaine is there, Madame," said the French maid, "e say Monsieur Mackwayte ask for Mademoiselle!"

The dancer thrust a little hand from the folds of her silken kimono.

"Au revoir, ma petite," she said, "we shall meet again. You will come and see me, nest-ce pas? And say nothing to anybody about..." she pointed to Barbara's bag where the little package was reposing, "it shall be a secret between us, hein? Promise me this, mon enfant!"

"Of course, I promise, if you like!" said Barbara, wonderingly.

At half-past eight the next morning Desmond Okewood found himself in the ante-room of the Chief of the Secret Service in a cross and puzzled mood. The telephone at his bedside had roused him at 8 a.m. from the first sleep he had had in a real bed for two months. In a drowsy voice he had protested that he had an appointment at the War Office at 10 o'clock, but a curt voice had bidden him dress himself and come to the Chief forthwith. Here he was, accordingly, breakfastless, his chin smarting from a hasty shave. What the devil did the Chief want with him anyhow? He wasn't in the Secret Service, though his brother, Francis, was.

A voice broke in upon his angry musing.

"Come in, Okewood!" it said.

The Chief stood at the door of his room, a broad-shouldered figure in a plain jacket suit. Desmond had met him before. He knew him for a man of many questions but of few confidences, yet his recollection of him was of a suave, imperturbable personality. To-day, however, the Chief seemed strangely preoccupied. There was a deep line between his bushy eyebrows as he bent them at Desmond, motioning him to a chair. When he spoke, his manner was very curt.

"What time did you part from the Mackwaytes at the theatre last night?"

Desmond was dumbfounded. How on earth did the Chief know about his visit to the Palace? Still, he was used to the omniscience of the British Intelligence, so he answered promptly:

"It was latish, sir; about midnight, I think!"

"They went home to Seven Kings alone!"