

THE ADVENTURE OF THE AMATEUR COMMISSION AGENT

Grant Allen

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MY eccentric American had assured me that if I won the great race for him I need not be 'skeert' lest he should fail to treat me well; and to do him justice, I must admit that he kept his word magnanimously. While we sat at lunch in the cosy hotel at Limburg he counted out and paid me in hand the fifty good gold pieces he had promised me 'Whether these Deutchers fork out my twenty thousand marks or not,' he said, in his brisk way, 'it don't much matter. I shall get the contract, and I shall hev gotten the advertizement!'

'Why do you start your bicycles in Germany, though?' I asked, innocently. 'I should have thought myself there was so much a better chance of selling them in England.' He closed one eye, and looked abstractedly at the light through his glass of pale yellow Brauneberger with the other. 'England? Yes, England! Well, see, miss, you hev not been raised in business. Business is business. The way to do it in Germany is to manufacture for yourself: and I've got my works started right here in Frankfort. The way to do it in England where capital's dirt cheap is, to sell your patent for every cent it's worth to an English company, and let them boom or bust on it.'

'I see,' I said, catching at it. 'The principle's as clear as mud, the moment you point it out to one. An English company will pay you well for the concession, and work for a smaller return on its investment than you Americans are content to receive on your capital!' 'That's so! You hit it in one, miss! Which will you take, a cigar or a cocoa-nut?'

I smiled. 'And what do you think you will call the machine in Europe?'

He gazed hard at me, and stroked his straw-coloured moustache. 'Well, what do you think of the Lois Cayley?' 'For Heaven's sake, no!' I cried, fervently. 'Mr. Hitchcock, I implore you!'

He smiled pity for my weakness. 'Ah, high-toned again?' he repeated, as if it were some natural malformation under which I laboured. 'Oh, ef you don't like it, miss, we'll say no more about it. I am a gentleman, I am. What's the matter with the Excelsior?'

'Nothing, except that it's very bad Latin,' I objected.

'That may be so; but it's very good business.'

He paused and mused, then he murmured low to himself, "'When through an Alpine village passed.'" That's where the idea of the Excelsior comes in; see? "It goes up Mont Blanc," you said yourself. "Through snow and ice, A cycle with the strange device, Excelsior!"

'If I were you,' I said, 'I would stick to the name Manitou. It's original, and it's distinctive.'

'Think so? Then chalk it up; the thing's done. You may not be aware of it, miss, but you are a lady for whose opinion in such matters I hev a high regard. And you understand Europe. I do not. I admit it. Everything seems to

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me to be verboten in Germany; and everything else to be bad form in England.'

We walked down the steps together. 'What a picturesque old town!' I said, looking round me, well pleased. Its beauty appealed to me, for I had fifty pounds in pocket, and I had lunched sumptuously.

'Old town?' he repeated, gazing with a blank stare. 'You call this town old, do you?'

'Why, of course! Just look at the cathedral! Eight hundred years old, at least!'

He ran his eye down the streets, dissatisfied.

'Well, ef this town is old,' he said at last, with a snap of his fingers, 'it's precious little for its age.' And he strode away towards the railway station.

'What about the bicycle?' I asked; for it lay, a silent victor, against the railing of the steps, surrounded by a crowd of inquiring Teutons.

He glanced at it carelessly. 'Oh, the wheel?' he said. 'You may keep it.' He said it so exactly in the tone in which one tells a waiter he may keep the change, that I resented the impertinence. 'No, thank you,' I answered. 'I do not require it.'

He gazed at me, open-mouthed. 'What? Put my foot in it again?' he interposed. 'Not high-toned enough? Eh? Now, I do regret it. No offence meant, miss, nor none need be taken. What I meant to in-sinuate was this: you hev won the big race for me. Folks will notice you and talk about you at Frankfort. Ef you ride a Manitou, that'll make 'em talk the more. A mutual advantage. Benefits you; benefits me. You get the wheel; I get the advertizement.'

I saw that reciprocity was the lodestar of his life. 'Very well, Mr. Hitchcock,' I said, pocketing my pride, 'I'll accept the machine, and I'll ride it.' Then a light dawned upon me. I saw eventualities. 'Look here,' I went on, innocently recollect, I was a girl just fresh from Girton 'I am thinking of going on very soon to Switzerland. Now, why shouldn't I do this try to sell your machines, or, rather, take orders for them, from anybody that admires them? A mutual advantage. Benefits you; benefits me. You sell your wheels; I get '

He stared at me. 'The commission?'

'I don't know what commission means,' I answered, somewhat at sea as to the name; 'but I thought it might be worth your while, till the Manitou becomes better known, to pay me, say, ten per cent on all orders I brought you.'

His face was one broad smile. 'I do admire at you, miss,' he cried, standing still to inspect me. 'You may not know the meaning of the word commission; but durned ef you haven't got a hang of the thing itself that would do honour to a Wall Street operator, anyway.'

'Then that's business?' I asked, eagerly; for I beheld vistas.

'Business?' he repeated. 'Yes, that's jest about the size of it business. Advertizement, miss, may be the soul of commerce, but Commission's its body. You go in and win. Ten per cent on every order you send me!' He insisted on taking my ticket back to Frankfort. 'My affair, miss; my affair!' There was no gainsaying him. He was immensely elated. The biggest thing in cycles since Dunlop tyres,' he repeated. 'And to-morrow they'll give me advertizements gratis in every newspaper!'

Next morning, he came round to call on me at the Abode of Unclaimed Domestic Angels. He was explicit and generous. 'Look here, miss,' he began; 'I didn't do fair by you when you interviewed me about your agency last

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evening. I took advantage, at the time, of your youth and inexperience. You suggested 10 per cent as the amount of your commission on sales you might effect; and I jumped at it. That was conduct unworthy of a gentleman. Now I will not deceive you. The ordinary commission on transactions in wheels is 25 per cent. I am going to sell the Manitou retail at twenty English pounds apiece. You shall have your 25 per cent on all orders.'

'Five pounds for every machine I sell?' I exclaimed overjoyed.

He nodded. 'That's so.'

I was simply amazed at this magnificent prospect. 'The cycle trade must be honeycombed with middlemen's profits!' I cried; for I had my misgivings.

'That's so,' he replied again. 'Then just you take and be a middlewoman.'

'But, as a consistent socialist'

'It is your duty to fleece the capitalist and the consumer. A mutual benefit triangular this time. I get the order, the public gets the machine, and you get the commission. I am richer, you are richer, and the public is mounted on much the best wheel ever yet invented.'

'That sounds plausible,' I admitted. 'I shall try it on in Switzerland. I shall run up steep hills whenever I see any likely customers looking on; then I shall stop and ask them the time, as if quite accidentally.'

He rubbed his hands. 'You take to business like a young duck to the water,' he exclaimed, admiringly. 'That's the way to rake 'em in! You go up and say to them, "Why not investigate? We defy competition. Leave the drudgery of walking up-hill beside your cycle! Progress is the order of the day. Use modern methods! This is the age of the telegraph, the telephone, and the typewriter. You can no longer afford to go on with an antiquated, antediluvian, armour-plated wheel. Invest in a Hill-Climber, the last and lightest product of evolution. Is it commonsense to buy an old-style, unautomatic, single-g geared, inconvertible ten-ton machine, when for the same money or less you can purchase the self-acting Manitou, a priceless gem, as light as a feather, with all the most recent additions and improvements? Be reasonable! Get the best!" That's the style to fetch 'em!'

I laughed, in spite of myself. 'Oh, Mr. Hitchcock, I burst out, 'that's not my style at all. I shall say, simply "This is a lovely new bicycle. You can see for yourself how it climbs hills. Try it, if you wish. It skims like a swallow. And I get what they call five pounds commission on every one I can sell of them!" I think that way of dealing is much more likely to bring you in orders.'

His admiration was undisguised. 'Well, I do call you a woman of business, miss,' he cried. 'You see it at a glance. That's so. That's the right kind of thing to rope in the Europeans. Some originality about you. You take 'em on their own ground. You've got the draw on them, you have. I like your system. You'll just haul in the dollars!' 'I hope so,' I said, fervently; for I had evolved in my own mind, oh, such a lovely scheme for Elsie Petheridge's holidays.'

He gazed at me once more. 'If only I could get hold of a woman of business like you to soar through life with me,' he murmured. I grew interested in my shoes. His open admiration was getting quite embarrassing. He paused a minute. Then he went on: 'Well, what do you say to it?'

'To what?' I asked, amazed.

'To my proposition my offer.'

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'I don't understand,' I stammered out bewildered. 'The 25 per cent, you mean?'

'No, the de-votion of a lifetime,' he answered, looking sideways at me. 'Miss Cayley, when a business man advances a proposition, commercial or otherwise, he advances it because he means it. He asks a prompt reply. Your time is valuable. So is mine. Are you prepared to consider it?'

'Mr. Hitchcock,' I said, drawing back, 'I think you misunderstand. I think you do not realise '

'All right, miss,' he answered, promptly, though with a disappointed air. 'Ef it kin not be managed, it kin not be managed. I understand your European ex-clusiveness. I know your prejudices. But this little episode need not antagonise with the normal course of ordinary business. I respect you, Miss Cayley. You are a lady of intelligence, of initiative, and of high-toned culture. I will wish you good day for the present, without further words; and I shall be happy at any time to receive your orders on the usual commission.' He backed out and was gone. He was so honestly blunt that I really quite liked him. Next day, I bade a tearless farewell to the Blighted Fraus. When I told those eight phlegmatic souls I was going, they all said 'So!' much as they had said 'So!' to every previous remark I had been moved to make to them. So' is capital garnishing: but viewed as a staple of conversation, I find it a trifle vapid, not to say monotonous.

I set out on my wanderings, therefore, to go round the world on my own account and my own Manitou, which last I grew to love in time with a love passing the love of Mr. Cyrus Hitchcock. I carried the strict necessary before me in a small waterproof bicycling valise; but I sent on the portmanteau containing my whole estate, real or personal, to some point in advance which I hoped to reach from time to time in a day or two. My first day's journey was along a pleasant road from Frankfort to Heidelberg, some fifty-four miles in all, skirting the mountains the greater part of the way; the Manitou took the ups and downs so easily that I diverged at intervals, to choose side-paths over the wooded hills. I arrived at Heidelberg as fresh as a daisy, my mount not having turned a hair meanwhile a favourite expression of cyclists which carries all the more conviction to an impartial mind because of the machine being obviously hairless. Thence I journeyed on by easy stages to Karlsruhe, Baden, Appenweier, and Offenburg; where I set my front wheel resolutely for the Black Forest. It is the prettiest and most picturesque route to Switzerland; and, being also the hilliest, it would afford me, I thought, the best opportunity for showing off the Manitou's paces, and trying my prentice hand as an amateur cycle-agent. From the quaint little Black Eagle at Offenburg, however, before I dashed into the Forest, I sent off a letter to Elsie Petheridge, setting forth my lovely scheme for her summer holidays. She was delicate, poor child, and the London winters sorely tried her; I was now a millionaire, with the better part of fifty pounds in pocket, so I felt I could afford to be royal in my hospitality. As I was leaving Frankfort, I had called at a tourist agency and bought a second-class circular ticket from London to Lucerne and back I made it second-class because I am opposed on principle to excessive luxury, and also because it was three guineas cheaper. Even fifty pounds will not last for ever, though I could scarce believe it. (You see, I am not wholly free, after all, from the besetting British vice of prudence.) It was a mighty joy to me to be able to send this ticket to Elsie, at her lodgings in Bayswater, pointing out to her that now the whole mischief was done, and that if she would not come out as soon as her summer vacation began 'twas a point of honour with Elsie to say vacation, instead of holidays to join me at Lucerne, and stop with me as my guest at a mountain pension, the ticket would be wasted. I love burning my boats; 'tis the only safe way for securing prompt action.

Then I turned my flying wheels up into the Black Forest, growing weary of my loneliness for it is not all jam to ride by oneself in Germany and longing for Elsie to come out and join me. I loved to think how her dear pale cheeks would gain colour and tone on the hills about the Brunig, where, for business reasons (so I said to myself with the conscious pride of the commission agent), I proposed to pass the greater part of the summer.

From Offenburg to Hornberg the road makes a good stiff climb of twenty-seven miles, and some 1200 English feet in altitude, with a fair number of minor undulations on the way to diversify it. I will not describe the route, though it is one of the most beautiful I have ever travelled rocky hills, ruined castles, huge, straight-stemmed

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pinces that clamber up green slopes, or halt in sombre line against steeps of broken crag; the reality surpasses my poor powers of description. And the people I passed on the road were almost as quaint and picturesque in their way as the hills and the villages the men in red-lined jackets; the women in black petticoats, short-waisted green bodices, and broad-brimmed straw hats with black-and-crimson pompons. But on the steepest gradient, just before reaching Hornberg, I got my first nibble strange to say, from two German students; they wore Heidelberg caps, and were toiling up the incline with short, broken wind; I put on a spurt with the Manitou, and passed them easily. I did it just at first in pure wantonness of health and strength; but the moment I was clear of them, it occurred to the business half of me that here was a good chance of taking an order. Filled with this bright idea, I dismounted near the summit, and pretended to be engaged in lubricating my bearings; though as a matter of fact the Manitou runs in a bath of oil, self-feeding, and needs no looking after. Presently, my two Heidelbergers straggled up hot, dusty, panting. Woman-like, I pretended to take no notice. One of them drew near and cast an eye on the Manitou.

'That's a new machine, Fraulein,' he said, at last, with more politeness than I expected.

'It is,' I answered, casually; 'the latest model. Climbs hills like no other.' And I feigned to mount and glide off towards Hornberg.

'Stop a moment, pray, Fräulein,' my prospective buyer called out. 'Here, Heinrich, I wish you this new so excellent mountain-climbing machine, without chain propelled, more fully to investigate.'

'I am going on to Hornberg,' I said, with mixed feminine guile and commercial strategy; 'still, if your friend wishes to look '

They both jostled round it, with aches innumerable, and after minute inspection, pronounced its principle wunderschön. 'Might I essay it?' Heinrich asked.

'Oh, by all means,' I answered. He paced it down hill a few yards; then skimmed up again. 'It is a bird!' he cried to his friend, with many guttural interjections. 'Like the eagle's flight, so soars it. Come, try the thing, Ludwig!'

'You permit, Fraulein?'

I nodded. They both mounted it several times. It behaved like a beauty. Then one of them asked, 'And where can man of this new so remarkable machine nearest by purchase himself make possessor?'

'I am the Sole Agent,' I burst out, with swelling dignity. 'If you will give me your orders, with cash in hand for the amount, I will send the cycle, carriage paid, to any address you desire in Germany.'

'You!' they exclaimed, incredulously. 'The Fraulein is pleased to be humorous!'

'Oh, very well,' I answered, vaulting into the saddle; 'if you choose to doubt my word ' I waved one careless hand and coasted off. 'Good-morning, meine Herren.'

They lumbered after me on their ramshackled traction-engines. 'Pardon, Fraulein! Do not thus go away! Oblige us at least with the name and address of the maker.'

I perpended like the Herr Over-Superintendent at Frankfort. 'Look here,' I said at last, telling the truth with frankness, 'I get 25 per cent on all bicycles I sell. I am, as I say, the maker's Sole Agent. If you order through me, I touch my profit; if otherwise, I do not. Still, since you seem to be gentlemen,' they bowed and swelled visibly, 'I will give you the address of the firm, trusting to your honour to mention my name' I handed them a card 'if you decide on ordering. The price of the palfrey is 400 marks. It is worth every pfennig of it.' And before they could

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say more, I had spurred my steed and swept off at full speed round a curve of the highway.

I pencilled a note to my American that night from Hornberg, detailing the circumstance; but I am sorry to say, for the discredit of humanity, that when those two students wrote the same evening from their inn in the village to order Manitous, they did not mention my name, doubtless under the misconception that by suppressing it they would save my commission. However, it gives me pleasure to add per contra (as we say in business) that when I arrived at Lucerne a week or so later I found a letter, poste restante, from Mr. Cyrus Hitchcock, inclosing an English ten-pound note. He wrote that he had received two orders for Manitous from Hornberg; and 'feeling considerable confidence that these must necessarily originate' from my German students, he had the pleasure of forwarding me what he hoped would be the first of many similar commissions. I will not describe my further adventures on the still steeper mountain road from Hornberg to Triberg and St. Georgen how I got bites on the way from an English curate, an Austrian hussar, and two unprotected American ladies; nor how I angled for them all by riding my machine up impossible hills, and then reclining gracefully to eat my lunch (three times in one day) on mossy banks at the summit. I felt a perfect little hypocrite. But Mr. Hitchcock had remarked that business is business; and I will only add (in confirmation of his view) that by the time I reached Lucerne, I had sown the good seed in fifteen separate human souls, no less than four of which brought forth fruit in orders for Manitous before the end of the season. I had now so little fear what the morrow might bring forth that I settled down in a comfortable hotel at Lucerne till Elsie's holidays began; and amused myself meanwhile by picking out the hilliest roads I could find in the neighbourhood, in order to display my steel steed's possibilities to the best advantage.

By the end of July, little Elsie joined me. She was half-angry at first that I should have forced the ticket and my hospitality upon her. 'Nonsense, dear,' I said, smoothing her hair, for her pale face quite frightened me. 'What is the good of a friend if she will not allow you to do her little favours?' 'But, Brownie, you said you wouldn't stop and be dependent upon me one day longer than was necessary in London.'

'That was different,' I cried. 'That was Me! This is You! I am a great, strong, healthy thing, fit to fight the battle of life and take care of myself; you, Elsie, are one of those fragile little flowers which 'tis everybody's duty to protect and to care for.'

She would have protested more; but I stifled her mouth with kisses. Indeed, for nothing did I rejoice in my prosperity so much as for the chance it gave me of helping poor dear overworked, overwrought Elsie.

We took up our quarters thenceforth at a high-perched little guest-house near the top of the Brunig. It was bracing for Elsie; and it lay close to a tourist track where I could spread my snares and exhibit the Manitou in its true colours to many passing visitors. Elsie tried it, and found she could ride on it with ease. She wished she had one of her own. A bright idea struck me. In fear and trembling, I wrote, suggesting to Mr. Hitchcock that I had a girl friend from England stopping with me in Switzerland, and that two Manitous would surely be better than one as an advertisement. I confess I stood aghast at my own cheek; but my hand, I fear, was rapidly growing 'subdued to that it worked in.' Anyhow I sent the letter off, and waited developments.

By return of post came an answer from my American.

'DEAR Miss By rail herewith please receive one lady's No. 4 automatic quadruple-g geared self-feeding Manitou, as per your esteemed favour of July 27th, for which I desire to thank you. The more I see of your way of doing business, the more I do admire at you. This is an elegant poster! Two high-toned English ladies, mounted on Manitous, careering up the Alps, represent to both of us quite a mint of money. The mutual benefit, to me, to you, and to the other lady, ought to be simply incalculable. I shall be pleased at any time to hear of any further developments of your very remarkable advertising skill, and I am obliged to you for this brilliant suggestion you have been good enough to make to me. Respectfully, 'CYRUS W. HITCHCOCK.' 'What? Am I to have it for nothing, Brownie?' Elsie exclaimed, bewildered, when I read the letter to her.

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I assumed the airs of a woman of the world. 'Why certainly, my dear,' I answered, as if I always expected to find bicycles showered upon me. 'It's a mutual arrangement. Benefits him; benefits you. Reciprocity is the groundwork of business. He gets the advertisement; you get the amusement. It's a form of handbill. Like the ladies who exhibit their back hair, don't you know, in that window in Regent Street.'

Thus inexpensively mounted, we scoured the country together, up the steepest hills between Stanzstadt and Meiringen. We had lots of nibbles. one lady in particular often stopped to look on and admire the Manitou. She was a nice-looking widow of forty-five, very fresh and roundfaced; a Mrs. Evelegh, we soon found out, who owned a charming chalet on the hills above Lungern. She spoke to us more than once: 'What a perfect dear of a machine!' she cried. 'I wonder if I dare try it!'

'Can you cycle?' I asked.

'I could once,' she answered. 'I was awfully fond of it. But Dr. Fortescue-Langley won't let me any longer.' 'Try it!' I said dismounting. She got up and rode. 'Oh, isn't it just lovely!' she cried ecstatically.

'Buy one!' I put in. 'They're as smooth as silk; they cost only twenty pounds; and, on every machine I sell, I get five pounds commission.'

'I should love to,' she answered; 'but Dr. Fortescue-Langley '

'Who is he?' I asked. 'I don't believe in drug-drenchers.'

She looked quite shocked. 'Oh, he's not that kind, you know,' she put in, breathlessly. 'He's the celebrated esoteric faith-healer. He won't let me move far away from Lungern, though I'm longing to be off to England again for the summer. My boy's at Portsmouth.'

'Then, why don't you disobey him?'

Her face was a study. 'I daren't,' she answered in an awe-struck voice. 'He comes here every summer; and he does me so much good, you know. He diagnoses my inner self. He treats me psychically. When my inner self goes wrong, my bangle turns dusky.' She held up her right hand with an Indian silver bangle on it; and sure enough, it was tarnished with a very thin black deposit. 'My soul is ailing now,' she said in a comically serious voice. 'But it is seldom so in Switzerland. The moment I land in England the bangle turns black and remains black till I get back to Lucerne again.'

When she had gone, I said to Elsie, 'That is odd about the bangle. State of health might affect it, I suppose. Though it looks to me like a surface deposit of sulphide.' I knew nothing of chemistry, I admit; but I had sometimes messed about in the laboratory at college with some of the other girls; and I remembered now that sulphide of silver was a blackish-looking body, like the film on the bangle. However, at the time I thought no more about it. By dint of stopping and talking, we soon got quite intimate with Mrs. Evelegh. As always happens, I found out I had known some of her cousins in Edinburgh, where I always spent my holidays while I was at Girton. She took an interest in what she was kind enough to call my originality; and before a fortnight was out, our hotel being uncomfortably crowded, she had invited Elsie and myself to stop with her at the chalet. We went, and found it a delightful little home. Mrs. Evelegh was charming; but we could see at every turn that Dr. Fortescue-Langley had acquired a firm hold over her. 'He's so clever, you know,' she said; 'and so spiritual! He exercises such strong odylic force. He binds my being together. If he misses a visit I feel my inner self goes all to pieces.'

'Does he come often?' I asked, growing interested.

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'Oh, dear, no,' she answered. 'I wish he did: it would be ever so good for me. But he's so much run after; I am but one among many. He lives at Chateau d'Oex, and comes across to see patients in this district once a fortnight. It is a privilege to be attended by an intuitive seer like Dr. Fortescue–Langley.'

'Mrs. Evelegh was rich 'left comfortably,' as the phrase goes, but with a clause which prevented her marrying again without losing her fortune; and I could gather from various hints that Dr. Fortescue–Langley, whoever he might be, was bleeding her to some tune, using her soul and her inner self as his financial lancet. I also noticed that what she said about the bangle was strictly true; generally bright as a new pin, on certain mornings it was completely blackened. I had been at the chalet ten days, however, before I began to suspect the real reason! Then it dawned upon me one morning in a flash of inspiration. The evening before had been cold, for at the height where we were perched, even in August, we often found the temperature chilly in the night, and I heard Mrs. Evelegh tell Cecile, her maid, to fill the hot–water bottle. It was a small point, but it somehow went home to me. Next day the bangle was black, and Mrs. Evelegh lamented that her inner self must be suffering from an attack of evil vapours.

I held my peace at the time, but I asked Cecile a little later to bring me that hot–water–bottle. As I more than half suspected, it was made of india–rubber, wrapped carefully up in the usual red flannel bag. 'Lend me your brooch, Elsie,' I said. 'I want to try a little experiment.'

'Won't a franc do as well?' Elsie asked, tendering one. 'That's equally silver.'

'I think not,' I answered. 'A franc is most likely too hard; it has base metal to alloy it. But I will vary the experiment by trying both together. Your brooch is Indian and therefore soft silver. The native jewellers never use alloy. Hand it over; it will clean with a little plate–powder, if necessary. I'm going to see what blackens Mrs. Evelegh's bangle.'

I laid the franc and the brooch on the bottle, filled with hot water, and placed them for warmth in the fold of a blanket. After dejeuner, we inspected them. As I anticipated, the brooch had grown black on the surface with a thin iridescent layer of silver sulphide, while the franc had hardly suffered at all from the exposure.

I called in Mrs. Evelegh, and explained what I had done. She was astonished and half incredulous. 'How could you ever think of it?' she cried, admiringly.

'Why, I was reading an article yesterday about india–rubber in one of your magazines,' I answered; 'and the person who wrote it said the raw gum was hardened for vulcanising by mixing it with sulphur. When I heard you ask Cecile for the hot–water–bottle, I thought at once: "The sulphur and the heat account for the tarnishing of Mrs. Evelegh's bangle."'

'And the franc doesn't tarnish! Then that must be why my other silver bracelet, which is English make, and harder, never changes colour! And Dr. Fortescue–Langley assured me it was because the soft one was of Indian metal, and had mystic symbols on it symbols that answered to the cardinal moods of my sub–conscious self, and that darkened in sympathy.'

I jumped at a clue. 'He talked about your subconscious self?' I broke in.

'Yes,' she answered. 'He always does. It's the keynote of his system. He heals by that alone. But, my dear after this, how can I ever believe in him?'

'Does he know about the hot–water–bottle?' I asked.

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'Oh, yes; he ordered me to use it on certain nights; and when I go to England he says I must never be without one. I see now that was why my inner self invariably went wrong in England. It was all just the sulphur blackening the bangles.'

I reflected. 'A middle-aged man?' I asked. 'Stout, diplomatic-looking, with wrinkles round his eyes, and a distinguished grey moustache, twirled up oddly at the corners?'

'That's the man, my dear! His very picture. Where on earth have you seen him?'

'And he talks of sub-conscious selves?' I went on.

'He practises on that basis. He says it's no use prescribing for the outer man; to do that is to treat mere symptoms: the sub-conscious self is the inner seat of diseases.'

'How long has he been in Switzerland?'

'Oh, he comes here every year. He arrived this season late in May, I fancy.'

'When will he visit you again, Mrs. Evelegh?'

'To-morrow morning.'

I made up my mind at once. 'Then I must see him, without being seen,' I said. 'I think I know him. He is our Count, I believe.' For I had told Mrs. Evelegh and Elsie the queer story of my journey from London.

'Impossible, my dear! Im-possible! I have implicit faith in him!'

'Wait and see, Mrs. Evelegh. You acknowledge he duped you over the affair of the bangle.'

There are two kinds of dupe: one kind, the commonest, goes on believing in its deceiver, no matter what happens; the other, far rarer, has the sense to know it has been deceived if you make the deception as clear as day to it. Mrs. Evelegh was, fortunately, of the rarer class. Next morning, Dr. Fortescue-Langley arrived, by appointment. As he walked up the path, I glanced at him from my window. It was the Count, not a doubt of it. On his way to gull his dupes in Switzerland, he had tried to throw in an incidental trifle of a diamond robbery.

I telegraphed the facts at once to Lady Georgina, at Schlangenbad. She answered, 'I am coming. Ask the man to meet his friend on Wednesday.'

Mrs. Evelegh, now almost convinced, invited him. On Wednesday morning, with a bounce, Lady Georgina burst in upon us. 'My dear, such a journey! alone, at my age but there, I haven't known a happy day since you left me! Oh, yes, I got my Gretchen unsophisticated? well h'm that's not the word for it: I declare to you, Lois, there isn't a trick of the trade, in Paris or London not a perquisite or a tip that that girl isn't up to. Comes straight from the remotest recesses of the Black Forest, and hadn't been with me a week, I assure you, honour bright, before she was bandolining her yellow hair, and rouging her cheeks, and wearing my brooches, and waging gloves with the hotel waiters upon the Baden races. And her language: and her manners! Why weren't you born in that station of life, I wonder, child, so that I might offer you five hundred a year, and all found, to come and live with me for ever? But this Gretchen her fringe, her shoes, her ribbons upon my soul, my dear, I don't know what girls are coming to nowadays.'

'Ask Mrs. Lynn-Linton,' I suggested, as she paused. 'She is a recognised authority on the subject.'

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The Cantankerous old Lady stared at me. 'And this Count?' she went on. 'So you have really tracked him? You're a wonderful girl, my dear. I wish you were a lady's maid. You'd be worth me any money.'

I explained how I had come to hear of Dr. Fortescue–Langley.

Lady Georgina waxed warm. 'Dr. Fortescue–Langley!' she exclaimed. 'The wicked wretch! But he didn't get my diamonds! I've carried them here in my hands, all the way from Wiesbaden: I wasn't going to leave them for a single day to the tender mercies of that unspeakable Gretchen. The fool would lose them. Well, we'll catch him this time, Lois: and we'll give him ten years for it!'

'Ten years!' Mrs. Evelegh cried, clasping her hands in horror. 'Oh, Lady Georgina!'

We waited in Mrs. Evelegh's dining–room, the old lady and I, behind the folding doors. At three precisely Dr. Fortescue–Langley walked in. I had difficulty in restraining Lady Georgina from falling upon him prematurely. He talked a lot of high–flown nonsense to Mrs. Evelegh and Elsie about the influences of the planets, and the seventy–five emanations, and the eternal wisdom of the East, and the medical efficacy of sub–conscious suggestion. Excellent patter, all of it quite as good in its way as the diplomatic patter he had poured forth in the train to Lady Georgina. It was rich in spheres, in elements, in cosmic forces. At last, as he was discussing the reciprocal action of the inner self upon the exhalations of the lungs, we pushed back the door and walked calmly in upon him.

His breath came and went. The exhalations of the lungs showed visible perturbation. He rose and stared at us. For a second he lost his composure. Then, as bold as brass, he turned, with a cunning smile, to Mrs. Evelegh. 'Where on earth did you pick up such acquaintances?' he inquired, in a well–simulated tone of surprise. 'Yes, Lady Georgina, I have met you before, I admit; but it can hardly be agreeable to you to reflect under what circumstances.'

Lady Georgina was beside herself. 'You dare?' she cried, confronting him. 'You dare to brazen it out? You miserable sneak! But you can't bluff me now. I have the police outside.' Which I regret to confess was a lighthearted fiction.

'The police?' he echoed, drawing back. I could see he was frightened. I had an inspiration again. 'Take off that moustache!' I said, calmly, in my most commanding voice.

He clapped his hand to it in horror. In his agitation, he managed to pull it a little bit awry. It looked so absurd, hanging there, all crooked, that I thought it kinder to him to remove it altogether. The thing peeled off with difficulty; for it was a work of art, very firmly and gracefully fastened with sticking–plaster. But it peeled off at last and with it the whole of the Count's and Dr. Fortescue–Langley's distinction. The man stood revealed, a very palpable manservant.

Lady Georgina stared hard at him. 'Where have I seen you before?' she murmured, slowly. 'That face is familiar to me. Why, yes; you went once to Italy as Mr. Marmaduke Ashurst's courier! I know you now. Your name is Higginson.'

It was a come–down for the Comte de Laroche–sur–Loiret, but he swallowed it like a man at a single gulp.

'Yes, my lady,' he said, fingering his hat nervously, now all was up. 'You are quite right, my lady. But what would you have me do? Times are hard on us couriers. Nobody wants us now. I must take to what I can.' He assumed once more the tone of the Vienna diplomat. 'Que voulez–vous, madame? These are revolutionary days. A man of intelligence must move with the zeitgeist!'

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Lady Georgina burst into a loud laugh. 'And to think,' she cried, 'that I talked to this lackey from London to Malines without ever suspecting him! Higginson, you're a fraud but you're a precious clever one.'

He bowed. 'I am happy to have merited Lady Georgina Fawley's commendation,' he answered, with his palm on his heart, in his grandiose manner.

'But I shall hand you over to the police all the same! You are a thief and a swindler!'

He assumed a comic expression. 'Unhappily, not a thief,' he objected. 'This young lady prevented me from appropriating your diamonds. Convey, the wise call it. I wanted to take your jewel-case and she put me off with a sandwich-tin. I wanted to make an honest penny out of Mrs. Evelegh; and she confronts me with your ladyship, and tears my moustache off.'

Lady Georgina regarded him with a hesitating expression. 'But I shall call the police,' she said, wavering visibly.

'De grace, my lady, de grace! Is it worth while, pour si peu de chose? Consider, I have really effected nothing. Will you charge me with having taken in error a small tin sandwich-case value, elevenpence? An affair of a week's imprisonment. That is positively all you can bring up against me. And,' brightening up visibly, 'I have the case still; I will return it to-morrow with pleasure to your ladyship!'

'But the india-rubber water-bottle?' I put in. You have been deceiving Mrs. Evelegh. It blackens silver. And you told her lies in order to extort money under false pretences.'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'You are too clever for me, young lady,' he broke out. 'I have nothing to say to you. But Lady Georgina, Mrs. Evelegh you are human let me go! Reflect; I have things I could tell that would make both of you look ridiculous. That journey to Malines, Lady Georgina! Those Indian charms, Mrs. Evelegh! Besides, you have spoiled my game. Let that suffice you! I can practise in Switzerland no longer. Allow me to go in peace, and I will try once more to be indifferent honest!' He backed slowly towards the door, with his eyes fixed on them. I stood by and waited. Inch by inch he retreated. Lady Georgina looked down abstractedly at the carpet. Mrs. Evelegh looked up abstractedly at the ceiling. Neither spoke another word. The rogue backed out by degrees. Then he sprang downstairs, and before they could decide was well out into the open.

Lady Georgina was the first to break the silence. 'After all, my dear,' she murmured, turning to me, there was a deal of sound English common-sense about Dogberry!'

I remembered then his charge to the watch to apprehend a rogue. 'How if 'a will not stand?'

'Why, then, take no note of him, but let him go; and presently call the rest of the watch together, and thank God you are rid of a knave.' When I remembered how Lady Georgina had hob-nobbed with the Count from Osten to Malines, I agreed to a great extent both with her and with Dogberry.