

CHAPTER XI

AT THE MURLAND

AS the taxi containing the lady of the miniature glided forward Charles Rowley tried to attract his own driver's attention, and so far succeeded in doing so that a moment later the man drew up by the side of the kerb, and, leaving his seat, opened the door.

"Yes, sir?"

Rowley looked up the road. There were several taxi-cabs ahead, but which was the particular one in which he was interested he had not the faintest notion. Recognizing the uselessness of attempting any pursuit, he gave the man a perfunctory explanation.

"You can drive on to Crispi's. I wanted to speak to a lady, but she is out of sight now."

"I am sorry, sir. Of course, I didn't understand. But why didn't you use the tube?"

He pointed to a speaking-tube, an invention with which Charles Rowley had no previous acquaintance, and not liking to confess his ignorance of its uses the Colonial answered evasively:

"Oh, I didn't think of it."

Having exculpated himself from blame, the driver returned to his steering wheel, and the journey was resumed. Three minutes later Charles Rowley once more rang the bell at Signor Crispi's, but whatever hopes he had built on this second call were doomed to disappointment.

The man who had previously admitted him answered his ring again, but now he had discarded

his uniform, and before the caller could speak he said abruptly :

"Signor Crispi is not at home."

"When will he be?" asked Rowley quickly, as the man showed signs of closing the door.

"I do not know, sir. Not for a week at the least. He has gone to Paris, and when the Signor goes to Paris he is uncertain, Paris being so gay a city."

For one moment Charles Rowley hesitated, then he produced the miniature.

"Can you tell me who that is?" he asked. "It was painted by your master, and I am anxious to learn the lady's name."

The man took the miniature, and pretended to look at it with care. Instead, through his long lashes, he scrutinized the man who asked the question. Rowley was quite conscious of that scrutiny, but did not remark on it. Instead he watched the porter's face for any sign of recognition of the miniature; but found none.

The man's features were like a mask, and when he shook his head it was only what his questioner was expecting.

"No, sir! I can't. I have not been here long."

Instinctively Charles Rowley knew that he was lying. He felt in his pocket, and, producing a sovereign, held it towards the man.

"Have you ever seen any one like the miniature. I mean any one who might be mistaken for its original?"

The man looked at the sovereign; for perhaps three seconds he hesitated. Then he shook his head.

"No, sir, I cannot say I have."

Charles Rowley had noticed the hesitation, and

wondered what lay behind it; but the stubborn look which had settled on the man's face forced him to recognize the uselessness of further questions, so he turned abruptly away, and entered his taxi once more.

For his part the other man promptly closed the door, and walking straight to the telephone, rang up the exchange and gave a number. After a moment he began to speak.

"Is that you, Mr. Shapland? Yes, sir. The man whom you rang up about a few minutes ago has just been here, inquiring about Miss Selby's miniature. I told him that I could not recognize the lady, and he has gone away. Yes, sir. I will see that he does not get to know. Ten pounds? Yes, M.. Shapland, that will be quite satisfactory. The man offered me a sovereign, but of course I did not take it. Yes, sir. That will be quite all right——"

Unconscious that his second visit had been anticipated by the man whom he had left at the club, Charles Rowley sat in his taxi running westward, with a perplexed frown upon his face.

"That man at the door was lying," he thought to himself. "He knew, and he was determined to tell me nothing. And that other man who took me to his club—Shak—Shapland—was he lying, too? In any case he was mistaken. The lady is in London, and apparently there is some one who is determined that I shall not meet her. Who can it be?" He frowned at the back of the chauffeur for a moment, then he answered his own question. "The man who lost the miniature, of course. He is afraid of the discovery of his guilt, and either he is in London, and has given instructions himself, or he has a friend doing the work for him. He thinks

if I find the lady I shall find him through her. And I will."

His task, as he knew, was not an easy one, but he had a clue that, if he were able to take it to the police, would be an invaluable one. He knew that; but for the present he had no intention of so using it. He would endeavour to find the lady first, and later he could take what course of action seemed to be best.

As he reached his hotel, a new idea came to him. The man-servant at Crispi's had changed his clothes and discarded his uniform. That probably meant that he was going out, and in his absence it would be easy to find out whether the artist had really gone away or not. Scarcely had the thought occurred to him, than leaving the hotel, he called a fresh taxi and for the third time drove to St. John's Wood, giving the man instructions to drive past Crispi's gate and pull up at a church door a few yards beyond.

As they went slowly down the street, a smart electric brougham glided by them, and drew up at the artist's gate. Watching, Rowley saw no one step out of it, and instantly divined that it was waiting for some one, perhaps for the artist himself. He determined to watch for a little while, and as his vehicle halted at the place appointed he gave himself up to doing so. Presently his patience was rewarded, for the house door opened, and a man came out. His hair was long and fluffy, he wore a velvet coat and a butterfly tie, and had artist written all over him. Rowley jumped from his taxi, and began to walk quickly, but before he reached him, the man had entered the waiting brougham, which began to glide away. The Colonial shouted, but the chauffeur took no notice, and run-

ning back to his taxi, Rowley ordered the driver to follow the brougham.

The man took up the task with spirit, and after some time, pulled up in a street to which his fare was a complete stranger.

"The man in the brougham has gone in there, sir," he said, indicating a particular building. "I saw him go, an' the brougham's still waiting there."

"All right," said Rowley, "I'll follow him. You wait here."

Stepping from the vehicle, he walked to the building indicated, which was the home of a famous Arts Club. He rang the bell, and as the porter answered it said brusquely: "A gentleman—an artist went in here just now. Can you tell me his name?"

The doorkeeper gave him a stony British stare, and did not immediately reply. Rowley instantly produced a sovereign.

"His name, quick."

The sovereign was persuasive in its eloquence. "The gentleman, sir, was Signor Crispi, the miniature painter!"

"Ah, I knew it! I want to see him."

The doorkeeper fingered his chin. "Have you an appointment, sir?"

"No, but it is a matter of great importance."

The man shook his head. "Can't be done, sir. It's as much as my place is worth. The signor is just a walking firework, an' he's liable to go off on the least provocation. Never knew so much pepper in so little a man."

"Oh, but you can take a message in for me."

His words were met by another shake of the head.

"No, sir! I couldn't risk it. There's a com

mittee sitting, an' I'd be fired as sure as daylight, if I interfered. You don't know these artist gentlemen, they're the very dickens for temper."

"How long will the committee last?"

"Can't tell you, sir. Depends whether they get talking about pictures! If they do it'll be midnight as like as not. Not that Signor Crispi will stop till then. He's never here one moment after 7.15, because he's due at Donatello's restaraunt at 7.45 every night to dine. They set the clocks there by him, an' he never misses unless he's out of town."

"Where is this place?"

The doorkeeper gave him the directions, and then Rowley asked: "You think he is sure to go there?"

"I'll bet a month's screw on it, sir! But to make sure, if you like, I'll ask his man."

He stepped across the wide walk and talked for a minute with Signor Crispi's chauffeur.

"Yes, sir," he said when he returned. "He's due at Donatello's at his usual time. You'll be safe to catch him there, and it will be better than waiting in the street here, for if he happens to be on time he wouldn't stop to speak to you—not if you was the Prince of Wales."

Rowley looked at his watch, considered a moment, then nodded his head. "I daresay you are right, I'll take your advice. If Signor Crispi is the sort of man you say——"

"He's all that, sir, an' more. A tin of mustard is money beside him."

His interrogator laughed. "Then I'd better wait until he has dined. Thank you, my man."

He returned to his hotel, and later drove to the Soho restaurant which sets its clocks by Signor Crispi. He arrived there at twenty minutes to

eight, and five minutes later, just as the clock struck the quarter, had the satisfaction of seeing the miniature painter enter. Unfortunately he was not alone; with him was another gentleman and two ladies, who had plainly come to dine with him.

As they walked up the room to a reserved table, accompanied by an obsequious head-waiter, Charles Rowley watched them with a little dismay. It would not be easy for him to intrude on such a party; particularly if the artist were of as irascible a temperament as the club-porter had indicated; but still an opportunity might be afforded and he determined to wait and watch for it.

Almost three-quarters of an hour passed before anything remotely resembling an opportunity arose. The meal was ended, and the two ladies had gone to the cloak-room, when the artist, in the act of lighting a cigarette, suddenly leaned back in his chair, and broke into hearty laughter at some remark of his companion's. The Signor was plainly in a good mood; and to the watching man this seemed the golden moment. Rising from his seat he walked across to the artist's table, carrying the locket in his hand.

"Sir," he said, addressing the artist, whose laughter had dried up as he halted at the table, "I should be grateful if I could have a word with you."

"A word with me! A word with me!" said the little man with sudden irascibility. "You appear to be having it, sir."

"I am sorry if I intrude——"

"You do, sir. Most infernally."

"But——"

The artist waved his hand excitedly. "Go away! You would not spoil my digestion, would you?"

"No—sir; but I have a miniature here that I should like to ask you about. I have come across the world——"

"If you had come from the moon I would not suffer interruption at this hour."

"But it is a matter of life and death——"

"So is my digestion. Go away, man, before I send for the management. No matter is so important to me as my duodenum. See me to-morrow if you must—I would sooner you did not—but in God's name go away now, sir!"

Charles Rowley recognized that to persist would be in vain. Nothing was to be done with the artist in his present mood; and he was forced to accept defeat.

"Then, sir, I will see you to-morrow."

"I hope not," said the artist testily, "I hope not!" Then as the ladies of his party reappeared, he rose from his seat and abruptly walked away, without so much as another look at Rowley.

The young man looked after him with wrathful eyes, then a little laugh at his elbow made him turn round. The man who had dined with the artist was regarding him with merry eyes.

"You've trod on Crispi's toes," he said, "or rather on his duodenum, which you ought to know is a very sensitive place. But from the look of you I should say your business is tremendously serious."

"As I said just now, it is literally a matter of life and death."

"Then see him to-morrow. Get an appointment fixed up by telephone, and go along about five o'clock."

"Thank you," said Rowley, "I will."

"If I get a chance I'll put a word in for you. If you can tel' me your name——"

"Rowley, sir—Charles Rowley!"

The man laughed. "I shall not forget that," he said, "though you do not suggest the Merry Monarch. But there's Crispi waving. I must go."

The man moved away, and, a little mollified, Rowley watched the four make their departure, and shortly afterwards left the restaurant himself. He was still feeling a little sore at the Signor's behaviour to him, but presently the absurd aspect of the interview struck him, and he broke into a laugh.

"The little coxcomb!" he thought. "With his duodenum—whatever that may be. But anyway it is of no importance. A few hours do not greatly matter."

As the evening was still young, not knowing what else to do with himself, he drove to one of the houses of entertainment in Leicester Square, where one of the popular revues was being presented. Having lived his life in wild places, he had never seen anything like it before, but notwithstanding that fact, before the end was reached he found himself nodding, and rising left the place and went back to his hotel, where he immediately retired.

Put sleep, which in the heavy atmosphere of the music-hall had threatened to overcome him, now eluded him. He tossed from side to side, altered the pillows, and threw off some of the bed-clothing, all in vain. Tired though he was, slumber he could not. He heard the ordinary noises of the hotel—the passage of feet up the corridor, the light laughter of men and women, and the slamming of doors—die down into silence, and still he could not sleep. Somewhere outside a great clock struck three.

He counted the ponderous strokes, heard other clocks chime the hour, and a minute later, the sleep that he had wooed in vain overtook him.

He slept but a short while, and then awoke coughing and gasping. The room was full of a penetrating odour. He found it difficult to breathe, and whatever it was that occasioned all this stung his eyes smartly so that they watered. He was still wondering, when his ear caught a sound that he instantly recognized—the crackling of burning wood, and in the same moment he heard a hoarse cry of alarm sound down the corridor.

He jumped quickly out of bed, unlocked the door, and looked into the corridor. It was thick with smoke, and at one end yellow tongues of flame were flickering. The hotel was on fire.

Doors began to open, and men and women, half-dressed, appeared in the corridor, some of them in a distraught condition. One of the men rushed down the corridor in the direction of the leaping flames—the direction of the great staircase. He came back in a minute, his hair singed, and beating his dressing-gown, which was smouldering.

“The stairs are gone,” he yelled. “There’s nothing for it but the fire-escape.”

“Where is it?” cried another, and as one man shouted something and darted off towards the other end of the corridor the rest followed him, the men hoarse with fear, the women shrieking in terror.

Charles Rowley saw them bunch like panic-stricken sheep in the corridor, then quite coolly he turned into his own room, put on an overcoat, slipped the locket with the miniature round his neck, took a bundle of papers from a bag and carefully stowed them into his pocket, and that done went out into the corridor again. The smoke was

thicker, the flames were closer, and the roar of the fire made itself heard above the hubbub of frightened men and women at the far end of the corridor, where there appeared to be an unaccountable delay.

"For heaven's sake, hurry up," a man cried fearfully, as he walked towards the crowd.

"What is it?" he asked of one who yet retained his self-possession. "Why don't they get out?"

"The bolt of the door is stuck, rusted in, and it gives out to the fire-ladders. The door can't have been opened since it was last painted. Ah, there it goes!"

A shout of relief from the frightened men and women told that at last the door was opened. Men who for the last few moments had been almost insane with fear, took a fresh grip of their tottering manhood.

"The women first!"

One man disregarded the cry, and rushed towards the escape, but strong hands seized him and literally flung him back. He fell sprawling at Rowley's feet, babbling curses in bastard Spanish. The young man recognized him for a Mexican whom he had heard discussed by visitors at the hotel, and who was reported to be enormously wealthy. He gave him one glance, and then turned at a sudden crescendo of sound behind him.

The fire was roaring forward. The opening of a door had set up a strong current of air, and the flames drove up the corridor as if it had been a flue. There was further trouble at the ladder. A woman had fainted and had fallen down to the landing below, and a man had gone down to carry her.

Charles Rowley measured the distance which

the flames had to travel, and saw that if the crowd did not thin more quickly the corridor would become a place of tragedy. He saw something else also. Two yards from where he stood a bedroom door opened, and a girl appeared, her beautiful hair in disorder, her eyes still heavy with sleep.

"What is it? Why——"

He stared at her for a moment, too stunned to reply. It was the girl of whom he had had a fleeting glimpse that afternoon, whom he had crossed the world to find, and whose portrait was even now against his heart. Then his amazement passed, and he answered quietly :

"The hotel is on fire, and the stairs are burning. Don't be afraid. Slip on a dressing-gown as quick as you can."

He saw the girl's eyes look down the blazing corridor, and then towards the huddle of people who again were beginning to lose self-control. Terror leapt in the grey eyes, the beautiful face blanched with fear, and suddenly she sank to the floor in a dead faint.

He sprang to her, and as he did so a great tongue of flame leapt down the corridor, and licked the door jamb. He picked her up, carried her into the room, and flung the door to behind him. The corridor, as he recognized, was becoming impossible.

Still holding her in his arms, he went to the window, and gave a gasp of relief as, looking down, he saw that the escape-ladder reached the next landing immediately below the window. He saw men tumbling down the ladder in haste, and heard the roar of the flames outside. Already the door was beginning to crackle, and he knew that even now escape that way was barred. Quickly he placed the senseless girl on a settee, and going to the bed,

stripped it, and began to knot sheets and blankets together. He worked quickly and tested each knot as it was made. When the improvized rope was finished, he wheeled the bed to the window, fastened the knotted sheets to the rail, and after throwing open the sash, went to the girl. She was still unconscious, and as he took her in his arms his heart beat tumultuously. By this time smoke was rolling into the room, and tiny jets of blue flame were spurting up the door panels. He had not a moment to lose, for the draught created by the open sash sucked the flames into the room.

Getting out of the window with his burden was the greatest difficulty, and as he climbed out, he was conscious of a hundred faces far below, faces of people who had been watching the escape of others down the safety ladders, and who had seen the improvized rope drop from the window. Once safely out, the difficulty lessened. Many a time he had scaled the wild cliffs of Papua by means of a rope made of the liana creeper, and to go down a rope with a burden was a far simpler thing than to go up. The flames were already running up the curtains of the window through which he had climbed.

Three minutes after, he was standing in the courtyard of the hotel, and there was a surge of people towards him. But a lady in a dressing-gown reached him first.

"Janet," she cried: "Janet, my daughter!"

The girl's eyes opened, and she looked round bewilderingly. Her eyes met those of the man in whose arms she was still folded, and a look of wonder came in them, then the colour came back to her face in a flush of modesty.

"Come this way, ladies! the stentorian voice of a police-inspector commanded. "There are taxis

which will run you to the *Hartington*. We are bringing ladders into the yard. As quick as you can, please!"

The girl looked at her bare feet. Charles Rowley looked also.

"You can't walk," he said with a sudden short laugh, "and having carried you so far, I can carry you so much further."

He did not wait for permission, but instantly lifted, and moved in the direction the inspector indicated, Mrs. Selby running by his side. He did not relinquish her until the taxi was reached, and as she crowded with her mother and others, she tried to thank him.

"I do not know how to——" She got no further.

"Ready!" cried a voice almost in Rowley's ear, and the vehicle glided forward, and for the second time in twenty-four hours the girl whom he had come so far to seek, and had twice found, was whisked from his sight.

He stood staring after the disappearing taxi, then he turned quickly to the police-inspector, who was signalling to another taxi.

"Can you tell me who that young lady is?"

"Haven't the slightest idea, sir! But you may learn if you go along to the *Hartington*, though I wouldn't recommend you to at this moment. They'll be busy enough there. Excuse me, sir."

He stepped forward to shepherd another party of ladies into the taxi which he had signalled, and turning aside, Rowley considered his suggestion, and dismissed it.

"No use at this hour," he decided. "And in any case I shall learn who she is to-morrow, if I can get that interview with Crispi."

But in that he was doomed to disappointment, for though in the morning he made an appointment as suggested, by telephone, when he went to keep it in the afternoon, it was to find that Signor Crispi was not at home.

"When will he be at home?" he asked the trim maid-servant who answered his inquiry. "I have an appointment with him at this hour."

The maid smiled. "He's gone to Rome, sir, so he must have forgotten your appointment, but that's nothing new for the Signor, sir. He's always doing that sort of thing."

Rowley looked at the girl. Her manner was simple and open, and he had not the slightest doubt that he was hearing the truth.

"When will he be back?" he inquired.

"There's no telling, sir! He left no word, and I don't believe he knew he was going at breakfast time this morning. He makes up his mind suddenly—and off he goes like a rocket. He'll come back just the same way. You never know what he'll be up to!"

Rowley thanked her and took his departure. Through the day he had built so much upon the promised interview that he was bitterly disappointed, nevertheless he did not despair. Evidently Crispi lived up to the reputation that every one seemed to give him, and he might have to wait some time before he would be able to avail himself of any information that the artist might be disposed to give him.

"But the girl's in London," he thought to himself. "I have seen her twice, and what I did last night will be a sufficient excuse for approaching her. I'll go down to the *Hartington* and inquire."

But at the *Hartington* a further disappointment

awaited him, for the girl whom he interviewed was not able to assist him.

"Even if you knew the lady's name, sir, I am afraid I could not help you. There was such a crush last night that we did not register those who came in from the *Murland*. Indeed, most of them stayed no more than an hour whilst arrangements were being made for their accommodation elsewhere."

"And you do not recognize that as the portrait of any one now staying in the hotel?"

The girl glanced again at the miniature which he had placed in front of her on making his original inquiry.

"No, sir! And indeed I am quite sure that the lady is not here. I could not but have noticed her if she had been."

The young man agreed that was likely, and after thanking the girl turned away. As he stepped into the street there was a thoughtful baffled look upon his face, a look which presently gave way to one of determination.

"There's nothing else for it," he declared to himself. "I'll ask Nancarrow if he's seen the girl. He goes everywhere, knows every one, and it is possible he has met her. He'll laugh at me because I can't tell him the story—yet. But what does that matter? I simply must find her, and I will."

And the look in his eyes was one of such determination that it was very clear he must succeed in his purpose.