

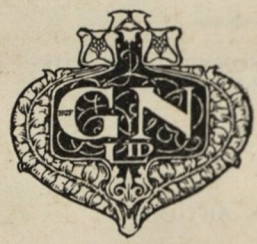
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"THUS DO I SERVE MY COUNTRY'S FOES, SAID JOLSIKOFF."

(See page 410.)



The Experience of Mrs. Patterson-Grundy.

By MORLEY ROBERTS.

HOW so pretty a woman as Mrs. Patterson-Grundy led the life she did was a marvel to her less strait-laced friends. But she had been brought up very strictly, and undoubtedly heredity was at the back of it. Mr. Patterson-Grundy, whom she married early, was the kind of man who says what everyone says, does not smoke, and exclaims "Dear me!" when the average good citizen of London would say something else. He suffered from headaches, wore buttoned boots of drab cloth, admired his wife's brilliant intellect, and went to bed when he was told to go.

The Patterson-Grundy household, with its admirable order, its two neat children, and its three neat maids, was a model for all Kensington and a rebuke to a disorderly world. Mrs. Patterson-Grundy was, it seemed to many, an incarnation of the Mrs. Grundy who rules all savage communities.

She did not approve of theatres. Nevertheless, when Mr. Smith-Jones wrote a play she accepted two stalls from him under protest,

and went to hear it with her husband and a Miss Catesby, Smith-Jones's cousin.

"So far I have heard nothing to disapprove of," said pretty Mrs. Patterson-Grundy, as the audience woke when the curtain descended upon the first act of "Mrs. Brown's Repentance."

It seemed to Mrs. Patterson-Grundy that her neighbour groaned. The man who groaned was very handsome. He had a remarkable head, a distinguished profile; he was very dark, possessed a nose which was aristocratic, and eyes which shone like stars. She noticed that his hands were long and beautiful, and subconsciously wished that her husband's were like them. But she turned to Miss Catesby and talked about "Mrs. Brown's Repentance."

It was difficult to say what Mrs. Brown had to repent of, for she had had no past, though she had once written an indiscreet letter which was spoken of in the first act, turned up in the second act, and was finally destroyed in the third. If the handsome man sitting next to Mrs. Patterson-

Grundy had not groaned at her approval of Mrs. Brown he might have groaned at the play itself.

"The moral seems to be that it is wrong to disregard, even for a moment, the laws laid down for us by Society," said Mrs. Patterson-Grundy. The handsome man twisted uneasily, and his neighbour hoped that what troubled him was not serious.

"The theatre might be made a great moral agency," went on Mrs. Patterson-Grundy.

"How?" asked Miss Catesby.

"By a censorship which insisted on the promulgation of the best opinions," said her friend. And this time the stranger thought aloud.

"Good heavens, Mrs. Grundy herself!" said the handsome man. Probably he had not meant to speak, but anguish may overcome discretion, and Sir Septimus Strange was not famous for self-restraint. His fair neighbour was not able to repress a start as she turned to him.

"Mrs. Patterson-Grundy!" she said, in her stately manner.

Undoubtedly this was a remarkable coincidence. So remarkable a coincidence would have abashed ninety-nine men out of a hundred. But Sir Septimus Strange was quite as remarkable as any coincidence and quick as lightning. He had never been abashed. He smiled delightfully.

"Of course, of course! What was I thinking of to forget? I remember that the Duchess told me especially to remember the 'Patterson'! I hope you are quite well?"

It cannot be denied that it is pleasing to have it imagined one knows a Duchess. It is the dearest ambition of South Kensington, and Mrs. Patterson-Grundy was only morally better than her neighbours. Nevertheless, she endeavoured to say that she did not know the Duchess. In another moment she would have said it, but just in the nick of time, Mr. Patterson-Grundy, who was sitting on the other side of Miss Catesby, leant across that lady and whispered, "My dear, I have a headache; I think I shall go home and go to bed."

"Yes, dear, do," said his wife. "I was afraid you were not well."

After begging Miss Catesby to forgive him he left his seat, while the handsome stranger stood up to allow him to pass. But he did not let him go without speaking to him.

"I'm sorry you're ill. I should have liked a talk with you. It's so long since we met," said Sir Septimus, pleasantly.

"Yes, it is, it is!" said Mr. Patterson-Grundy. "But, but——"

"Ah, I see you remember, I'm Septimus Strange! But don't let me keep you, pray!" said Sir Septimus.

And Mr. Patterson-Grundy disappeared, mildly wondering where he had met Sir Septimus. Then the curtain went up on the second act.

It was not, at any rate at first, an interesting act, and Mrs. Patterson-Grundy found her neighbour very interesting indeed. He had marvellous eyes; when he glanced at her with the air of one who says, "Is this play not stuff?" she felt that it was indeed twaddle. When, however, he leant forward and applauded a moral sentiment she applauded too. She wondered where they had met him. He evidently knew her husband William. She began to think she did know a duchess, after all. It was possible, even if she did not, that by knowing him she might attain such glory. And suddenly the second act finished.

What it was about she did not know, but from Miss Catesby's remarks it appeared that "Mrs. Brown's Repentance" was in an advanced stage. The indiscreet letter had turned up triumphantly, and had been partly read aloud by the villainous curate when it was snatched from him by the hero, torn in fragments and hurled at the clergyman, who unluckily caught the incriminating passage with his teeth. Mrs. Patterson-Grundy said to Miss Catesby, with a view to Sir Septimus hearing it:—

"This comes of a foolish indiscretion. I do not believe Mrs. Brown is a wicked woman, and yet see what occurs to her! My dear, I give you my solemn word of honour, I never did or said an indiscreet thing in my life!"

Sir Septimus groaned again.

"You have a pain?" said Mrs. Patterson-Grundy.

"Severe, but it passes," replied Sir Septimus, sighing. "It is gone like the second act. I wonder how Patterson-Grundy is now!"

This familiar use of her husband's name gave her a flutter. "He must know William quite well," she thought. "Oh, he will be all right in the morning," she replied, aloud.

"I trust so," said Strange, gloomily, and she started.

"Why do you say so in that tone?"

Strange glanced at her with his hypnotic eyes.

"I have a peculiar gift," he said. "As it were I see through people. I should have been a physician, I think—or perhaps a clairvoyant in Bond Street. Patterson-Grundy

would be a puzzle to some. To me everything is clear."

"Is it—is it? Oh, what is clear?" asked the alarmed wife.

"He lives—I see it, I see it plainly—on milk and seed-cake," said Sir Septimus, sadly but firmly.

"Good heavens," replied William's wife, "you alarm me! No, he does take milk, but I have never known him to touch seed-cake—never!"

"Ah, he refuses it before you! I thought so!" He leant towards her, tapped the arm of her stall and said, "Secretly, dear madam, secretly!"

It was appalling to her to think that her William was addicted to a dreadful secret vice. Small as her imagination was, she pictured him crawling into awful dens where they sold the infamous seed-cake.

"Those headaches, the milk, that complexion," said Sir Septimus. "But"—and here he spoke cheerfully—"it *is* curable."

At this moment he lifted his eyes and saw a big man of an Hebraic cast of countenance, who was in a box, look at Mrs. Patterson-Grundy through his opera-glass.

"Curable! Oh, dear!" said Mrs. Patterson-Grundy.

"Hush," said Strange. "I heard you say to your friend (who by the way strangely reminds me of an enemy of my youth named Catesby) that you have never committed any indiscretion in your life!"

Mrs. Patterson-Grundy stared at him.

"No, sir; I never did," she said, coldly.

"Then do not now! I beg you to listen to me! Do not be angry. Keep your eyes down. You are in danger!"

"In danger! Sir!" said Mrs. Patterson-Grundy.

"Why am I here? It is fate. At the Duke's, or wherever it was (I have a treacherous memory save for faces) there was a Russian prince who saw you!"

"Yes," said Mrs. Patterson-Grundy; "was—was there?"

"He's in the theatre now. He is following you! You are in danger!"

"Good heavens, how am I in danger?"

"How indeed! He is the most powerful and unscrupulous person in Europe. He loves you!"

"Loves me! Oh, dear, oh, dear," said Mrs. Patterson-Grundy. "I don't understand!"

"How could you! You don't see yourself! He saw you! He confided in a friend of his who came to me and said, 'Save, save

Mrs. Patterson-Grundy.' I said I would, and I'm here. Now you understand."

And the curtain went up for the third act.

"Be calm and rely on me," said Sir Septimus. "I take the entire responsibility on myself, for I introduced Prince Jolsikoff to the Duchess. I came to the theatre on purpose to save you. He has laid traps for you. I suspect him of giving your husband that opportune headache. You will be seized on your way home unless you rely on me. And I beg you to distrust the lady on your left. I have every reason to believe she is in the plot! But see how calm I am! You are already saved!"

Mrs. Patterson-Grundy shivered, and looked at Miss Catesby suspiciously.

"Catesby is a bad name," whispered her neighbour; "they turn to plots by nature! Do not forget that. And do you require more than a glance to see that Jolsikoff in the stage-box is a villain? Observe he stares at you and pays no attention to this thrilling play!"

It was quite true that "Jolsikoff" stared at her, and Mrs. Patterson-Grundy shivered with something curiously akin to pleasure.

"Oh, what am I to do?" she murmured.

"Will you allow me to save you and save my friend Patterson-Grundy from a shock which might end his life?" said Sir Septimus.

"I—I will, I must," replied Mrs. Patterson-Grundy. "But—but could we not call in the police?"

"Alas, madam," said Sir Septimus, "you think that a policeman can save you—a mere constable pitted against the machinations of a Jolsikoff, who has a thousand at his command. Of course, if you desire it, I will at once rise and bring the police, but they are almost certainly in his pay. But I will obey your commands—"

"No, no," said Mrs. Patterson-Grundy; "I—I don't know what to do! Oh, what shall I do?"

"Rely on me. I have saved many," said Sir Septimus; "it is my speciality. I will now write a note and have it sent out to a friend. Against this incarnate fiend Jolsikoff one needs assistance. You must put yourself in my hands. I promise you, on the word of a gentleman, you shall be safe at home before six o'clock in the morning."

"Good heavens!" said the astounded Mrs. Patterson-Grundy. "Before six! Oh, cannot I be home earlier than that? The neighbours—my husband—"

"I will do my best," said Sir Septimus, "but as the fancy ball will not be over till

four I cannot promise to take you home till six."

"The *what* won't be over?" asked Mrs. Patterson-Grundy, faintly.

"The fancy ball, of course," said her friend, eagerly. "Oh, I see you don't understand. Unless you are in the most public places you will be seized and I shall have my throat cut. Now—now do you understand? Have I made it clear, quite clear?"

And Mrs. Patterson-Grundy murmured faintly that he had. By this time she was prepared to admit anything. For nearly thirty years (this very month she was twenty-nine) she had lived in flat security, without surprise, without adventure. No one had made illegal love to her; even her husband's courtship had been done for him by his mother; she had had no experiences of her own, and had steadfastly refused to read the experiences of others. Experience was, in fact, immoral, while want of it was virtue. Yet deep within her—so deep, indeed, that she was now alarmed to recognize it—lay all a woman's love of romance, and this stranger, who knew her and her husband, appeared to her like a magician. His interest in her was flattering, and for the Russian prince, who was at once the most powerful and unscrupulous man in Europe, to be desperately in love with her completed her conquest. She fell into a tremble, lost any nerve she had, and in the semi-darkness of the auditorium was ready to cling to Sir Septimus.

"Be not alarmed," whispered that gentleman. "All shall go well, or I will perish in defending you. Do not trust Miss Catesby."

He took out a small memorandum-book and wrote three short letters with great rapidity, dark as it was. He folded them up, addressed them, and leaving his seat, much to Mrs. Patterson-Grundy's alarm, gave them with half a crown to one of the attendants and returned to his place.

"I have written to a friend who will help us, to a theatrical costumier who will supply the costumes, and to my chauffeur who is round the corner. All is prepared," said Sir Septimus.

Even in the pulped state to which Mrs. Patterson-Grundy was now reduced she would have given much to see what was in the notes her friend and deliverer had just sent away. One of them was addressed to a certain St. John Howell. Its contents would have surprised her, for it surprised even its recipient. It read thus: "You shall have an opportunity to be as mad as you please, St. John, and I know you are very mad, a

genius at it. Do not be surprised at the fact that Jinkson, the costumier, will send round a woman with another costume. She will arrive in a few minutes with a dress for a lady who will attend the ball with us. Be dressed when we arrive. The lady is being chased by Prince Jolsikoff, a notorious Russian villain, who is absolutely unscrupulous. He has planned to carry her off to-night. I am saving her. Her name (for your information only) is Mrs. Patterson-Grundy. Treat her, as I shall do, with the utmost respect. The poor thing never had an adventure in her life. I intend, with your assistance, to give her as many as one night will hold. Her husband lives on milk, and has a vice. He takes seed-cake secretly. He has left the theatre with a headache. If I mention anyone called Catesby, you will remark that all of that name are villains. I rely on your alert intelligence to supply any links in this information. You may even be afraid of Jolsikoff yourself. But you wear a sword for this night only.—Yours, SEPTIMUS."

The play came to its conclusion, and Mrs. Patterson-Grundy grew more and more excited. The audience sighed, applauded perfunctorily or heartily, according to their position, in the pit or stalls, raked for their hats, and stood up. "Jolsikoff" in the box took a last look at Mrs. Patterson-Grundy and made her shiver delightfully.

"Oh, what am I do with Miss Catesby?" she whispered to her champion.

"Lose her in the crowd!" he answered, promptly. "I'll see to that. I love seeing to things. Rely on me."

Mrs. Patterson-Grundy, whose Christian name was Millicent, did rely on him.

She moved in the wake of Sir Septimus.

"I'll get behind you," said he. "When I do you must go on; do not wait. I will obstruct the Catesby. She is already signalling to Jolsikoff."

He stepped behind Millicent and dropped his hat. He took time to pick it up, and kept six people, including Miss Catesby, waiting. Then he went on rapidly, managing to get several people between him and her, and found Millicent Patterson Grundy again. On her right was an empty box. He stepped into it, pulled her after him, and shut the door.

"The first step," said Strange, coolly; "so far we have done well. Turn your opera-cloak inside out. Put the hood over your head. Good! You were green before; you are pink now! It's an omen—a glorious omen. Green is innocence; pink is the flush



"PUT THE HOOD OVER YOUR HEAD. GOOD! YOU WERE GREEN BEFORE; YOU ARE PINK NOW!"

of virtuous triumph. Stay here. I will see to the Catesby."

Again he was behind Miss Catesby, who was hurrying to find her friend. At the door the crush was severe, but she got out and found Sir Septimus at her elbow.

"Your friend has gone," said Sir Septimus.

"Gone, gone!" said Miss Catesby.

"It seems you offended her," said the baronet, "or your cousin did. Let me find you a cab. There's one. Get in. All right, cabman, drive to West Kensington. I'm sure this lady lives there. Good-night."

And the cabman drove off as Sir Septimus waltzed back into the theatre. He found Millicent trembling.

"Have you seen Jolsikoff?" he asked.

"He didn't dare come while I was away?"

"Oh, no," said Millicent. "But I'm alarmed. It's all so very peculiar!"

"In London, yes; in St. Petersburg, no,"

said Strange. "You would be carried off there on an average once a week. Your type of beauty is so rare, so taking to a Russian; but Miss Catesby has gone. I said you were offended with her cousin and would not speak to her till she renounced him and his works, especially 'Mrs. Brown's Repentance.' Come on. -All goes well. My motor is at the door. Look down; make no sign. If we meet anyone I know I shall say you are Lady Strange, and deaf and dumb."

She went with him like the traditional lamb, which is like no lamb in nature, and found herself in the car without being introduced to anyone as Lady Strange.

"Where are we going now?" asked Millicent.

"To my rooms," said Strange. "There you will meet my friend, St. John Howell, a brilliant secret agent of the British Government, who pretends to be a poet and keeps up his

pose by publishing poems which I write for him. He will, I think, be dressed as a Cavalier. I shall dress as Mephistopheles. You will be Queen Mary. A young woman will be there to dress you."

"Good heavens!" said Millicent Patterson-Grundy. "But why am I to be Queen Mary?"

"I cannot now go into the reasons," said Strange, "but I know I am right. Some would have said Queen Elizabeth, but they would be wrong. I am necessarily Mephistopheles, but I look almost saintly in that costume. Still, it will frighten Jolsikoff. Rely on me and the poet!"

She relied on him and the poet. She could by now have entered a balloon with him or gone down a coal-mine. She was no longer Mrs. Patterson-Grundy with a mild husband given to headaches, and with two neat children and three neat maids; she had, by sheer force of suggestion, become a

shrinking beauty flying from Jolsikoff, who represented the devil himself.

The car stopped: he sprang out, handed her into the hall of some flats, put her in the lift and worked it himself.

They went up to the second storey and got out. He had his key ready.

"Quick! Here we are," he said, and he slammed the door. He shook his fist at it.

"Foiled, Jolsikoff, foiled! But not yet beaten. What ho, St John!"

And a long, thin gentleman in the costume of a Cavalier, with a plume in his hat and a sword by his side, sprang out on them.

"Thank heavens!" said Strange. "Let me present you to Mrs. Patterson-Grundy.

This, madam, is my great friend, St. John Howell."

He was a lean, blithe personality, and yet sweetly melancholy, with a poet's eye. He gloomed and smiled over Millicent till she felt she almost loved him, or could love him. It was the strangest sensation she had ever had. She leant on Strange and admired him, but in St. John Howell she felt there was something indeed romantic. The costume, the plumed hat, the long sword, woke her subdued and flattered soul. For that moment she would have defied South Kensington. The sword made her feel safe. She commenced to enjoy herself.

"But we have no time to lose," said Strange.

"Jolsikoff is on our track. I told you, St. John, that this lady has excited in Jolsikoff's amorous bosom a passion which he calls love. By an unparalleled series of coincidences I got upon his track and discovered all. We can rely upon you?"

"To the death," said Howell.

"Kneel and kiss Mrs. Patterson-Grundy's hand," said Strange. And Howell did so very gracefully. Millicent blushed. She grew happy and wonderfully pretty.

"Yet stay," cried Strange. "We must not call her by her name. That would be fatal! You are to be Queen Mary. I shall therefore call you Molly. So will St. John Howell. Have you any objection?"

"No," said Molly; "not in the least."

"I feel it is disrespectful," said St.



"KNEEL AND KISS MRS. PATTERSON-GRUNDY'S HAND," SAID STRANGE."

John Howell, taking his plumed hat to his heart.

"Don't mention it," said Queen Mary. "But—but, where is my costume? I never wore a fancy dress in my life."

"The tiring-woman waits in the next room," said St. John. "Come, Molly; I mean, your Majesty!"

"In the meantime I become Mephistopheles," said Strange.

Mrs. Patterson-Grundy found an ancient tiring-woman, once a dresser at Drury Lane, awaiting her with a really magnificent costume. At the very sight of it her heart leapt, as any woman's would have done.

"How lovely!" she exclaimed.

"It is, madam. But so are you," said the woman, "if you'll forgive me for saying so."

She was forgiven graciously, and Mrs. Patterson-Grundy put on the dress and its accessories with more pleasure than she had ever put on any gown, though it was acknowledged that she dressed remarkably well. In the meantime Strange became Mephisto, and looked divinely diabolic. St. John begged for information and got very little.

"Who is she?" he demanded.

"I'm educating her," said Strange; "she's a South Kensington person with Puritan leanings, an essential Mrs. Grundy, who never had a good time in her life. She has never lived till now. Her husband lives on milk and seed-cake."

"And who is Jolsikoff? Tell me, tell me," said Howell.

"He's a Russian prince, a scoundrel. He will appear at the ball. I'll telephone to him directly. He'll come for two guineas, I know it."

"You're mad," said St. John Howell.

"Villain, you are a secret agent of the British Government, and pretend to be a poet. I told her I wrote your poetry for you. We are going to supper at the Lion d'Or. Do I look as I should?"

"You are a diabolic divinity," said his friend. And indeed Strange as Mephistopheles was absolutely splendid. He had the figure of an athlete, an olive skin, and shining eyes that brimmed with jests. "But won't you help me?" asked St. John.

"No, I won't," said Strange. "I rely on your genius. Now for the telephone. I shall call up my Jolsikoff."

"Who the deuce is he?" asked St. John.

The one-sided conversation was extraordinary.

"You are Villiers? Are you sober? . . . Do you want two guineas? . . . I thought

you would. . . . Go to Jinkson's, to whom I will 'phone, and be a very rich Russian prince, so wear a fur coat. . . . You are a villain, of course. . . . Yes, you must then come to the Lion d'Or and have supper. . . . You will see me. . . . You are not to know me. . . . Yes, you are in love with the lady with me and want to carry her off. . . . Afterward you will come to the fancy dress ball in pursuit. . . . I shall give you opportunities. You will speak to her passionately, wildly, gigantically. . . . Yes, if you can't be gigantic under three guineas and half a bottle of whisky you shall have three. . . . In the ball-room I shall knock you down. . . . What do you say—not for three guineas and expenses? . . . Very well, four guineas. What do you say? . . . I understand; if I trip you up it will be four; if I knock you down it will be five. If I injure you severely, or if St. John Howell, who is with us as a Cavalier, runs you through, the damages shall be settled by a court of arbitration. Good-bye."

He hung up the receiver, while St. John Howell roared with laughter.

"Silence! Here she comes!" said Strange. And Molly, or Millicent, came into the passage.

"Oh, ain't it lovely!" said the dresser who followed her.

"You are splendid, Molly," said Mephistopheles.

"Am I?" she murmured.

"You are divine, Molly!" said the Cavalier.

"And now for supper," said Strange.

"You will wear a mask and this domino till we are at the ball. But we require strengthening, and supper comes first. I have just heard over the telephone that Jolsikoff is spending money like water. He has a yacht with the steam up lying off Temple steps. Come."

He put the domino over her shoulders and helped her to adjust the mask. Then they took the lift and descended to the ground-floor. Strange's car was in waiting. He looked around him cautiously.

Mrs. Patterson-Grundy's brain whirled. So did the wheels of the car, and in a few minutes it drew up outside the Lion d'Or, where the fancy dress ball was to be held.

"The street is comparatively empty," said Strange, looking out cautiously. "Perhaps we have eluded Jolsikoff for the time. Come, Molly, dear."

And Molly came out trembling but delighted. She felt that Mrs. Patterson-Grundy was asleep in South Kensington, safe by the side of William, but that her disembodied, romantic soul, so sternly repressed

all her life, was at once a Queen and "dear Molly," and the object of a frightful passion which stopped at nothing.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"In Soho," replied Strange. "You see we come to head-quarters."

"In other words, we strike at the heart," said St. John Howell. "But hasten! By St. James, I see a myrmidon of Jolsikoff's yonder! Into the Lion d'Or!"

The door was swung open by a gilded porter, to whom Strange spoke in French.

"He's in my pay," said Strange; "but I daresay he takes money from Jolsikoff too. We walk in a difficult path. Do you speak French? Let me recommend Zola and Anatole France to you. This way!"

And they entered the dining-room, where most tables were already occupied. The proprietor bowed low to Strange and ushered them to a table in the corner. The room was full of people in fancy dress who were going to the ball. A few of the women wore masks, and "Molly" was glad to see they did. There were Pierrots among the men, gentlemen of Queen Anne's time, a pirate, a brigand, and a small Mephistopheles, who seemed a mean devil beside the diabolic splendour of Sir Septimus.

"Jolsikoff is not here," said St. John; "but no doubt, he will come."

"The menu and the wine list," said Strange. "You are hungry, Molly?"

"No," said Molly. "Oh, no! How can I be?"

"You are. You must be. We have much to do and to endure," replied her host. "The supper, Jacques; and a bottle of Heidsieck. Quick, or I shall kill you."

The waiter ran, smiling. He knew Strange, and anticipated, not without reason, a tip such as waiters dream of when they rest from their labours. The supper appeared like magic, and Molly, to her surprise, found hunger in the plate, and with it enjoyment.

"Yet it's all so surprising," she said, innocently.

"Rely on us," said St. John Howell. "You are our queen, and also our dear Molly. There will probably be other surprises for you. But if Jolsikoff succeeds, it will be over my corpse."

"And mine," said Strange. "But this soup is excellent. The fish is also sure to be good, little as one would expect it. Ha!"

He said "Ha!" so suddenly that Molly dropped her spoon.

"What?" she cried.

"Be brave! It is Jolsikoff who enters," said Strange. "He is bold as a lion—as a Lion d'Or, or one of brass."

And Molly saw a big man in evening dress and a fur overcoat enter the room. Her heart went pit-a-pat.

"Oh," she said. "But now he doesn't look like a Jew."



"MOLLY SAW A BIG MAN IN EVENING DRESS AND A FUR OVERCOAT ENTER THE ROOM."

"True," said Strange. "In the theatre he was disguised as one. Now he is not disguised, or imagines he is not. But we see through any disguise. Don't we, St. John?"

"Easily," said St. John.

But Molly's eyes, gleaming through her mask, were engaged in watching Jolsikoff. She could not help thinking that he was a very big, fine man. Indeed, Montmorency Villiers was over six feet and weighed fourteen stone. In his overcoat (or in Jinkson's overcoat) he looked nearly three feet broad and very formidable. He also wore a formidable frown, and, playing up to what Strange demanded of him—though the demand was vague—he looked reckless and ferocious.

"He's handsome," said Molly.

"Thousands of poor women have thought so. His path is strewn with broken hearts," said Strange. "In such a man there is no soul, is there, St. John?"

"No," said St. John, "but I have a soul. I adore Molly."

"So do I," said Strange, coolly, "but she shall be back in South Kensington before the milkman goes his rounds, and back safe, or I'll know the reason why. If you say a disrespectful word to her, St. John, I will kill you with a—with a—soup-tureen."

"Oh, dear," said Molly. "But I'm sure Mr. Howell didn't mean to be disrespectful."

"Not in the least," said St. John.

Montmorency Villiers was hungry, and as he was now eating at Strange's expense he ate like a Tartar, and kept up the gorgeous reputation of a Russian prince. And ever and anon he glared at the table where the three sat. Once he caught Molly's eye upon him and he kissed his hand to her. She shivered and looked away. And suddenly the clock in the restaurant struck twelve.

"The crisis approaches," said Strange.

"Madam, a small glass of champagne with you I drink to your honourable safety and to the success of our enterprise. Do not forget when you are once more in security that we shall still be in danger. A foiled Jolsikoff will always be dangerous."

"He will," said St. John Howell, "especially as he seems to be drinking Chianti in tumblers. Chianti is a prodigious wine. It causes most of the crime in Italy. I never drink it without experiencing a passionate desire to turn an organ or to sell ice-creams."

"Now," said Strange, "it is time to pay the bill. Molly, you will wonder at my daring, but I am going to insult Jolsikoff by paying his as well. I shall thus strike him in his tenderest spot and disturb his mental

balance for the rest of the evening. This will result in our favour!"

"Oh, will it?" asked Molly.

"Certainly it will," said St. John. "If any one pays my bills, I like it. But I'm not an ostentatious Jolsikoff. It will wound his vanity dreadfully."

"Waiter," said Strange, "take for that big gentleman over there as well."

"Yessir," said the waiter, looking much surprised, "for Monsieur Villiers, sir?"

"Ha, ha, is that what he calls himself?" said Strange. "Yes, for him. Now, Molly, you go outside with St. John Howell, and I shall speak plainly to the Prince. I wish him to know where he is and whom he has to meet!"

And Molly and the Cavalier went out into the hall as Strange walked over to Jolsikoff, who was eating gigantically.

"I say, what's my name?" said Jolsikoff, eagerly.

"Jolsikoff, Prince Jolsikoff," replied Strange, "and you're rich and unscrupulous. You are in love with that lady, and mean to carry her off to Russia."

"Right. I love her madly," said Jolsikoff, with his mouth full.

"Gigantically," said Strange.

"For three guineas, gigantically! But what am I to do?"

"Anything that occurs to you. You shall have a chance at the ball. I and Howell will disappear for a moment. You will then make love to her. Say we are the scoundrels. Urge her to fly. Say what you like. Adieu!"

"Stop," said Jolsikoff. "About this knocking-down. I don't quite like the idea."

"You'll have to like it. Who's doing the paying, you or I?" asked Strange.

"Make it ten guineas, and I'll pay the exes myself," said Jolsikoff.

"Very well," said Strange. "Good-bye till we meet in ten minutes. There's your ball ticket." And he went away, laughing in a Mephistophelean manner, which was very alarming even to Jolsikoff, who grew a little pensive.

"However, ten guineas are ten guineas," said Jolsikoff, "and I'll do my best. But I wish he'd told me what I'm to do if I do carry her off."

By the time he had come to the coffee and brandy, Strange and St. John Howell and Molly were in the ball-room, which was already crowded. Molly thought she had never seen so strange a sight in her life, and it's true that South Kensington rarely offers such a spectacle. "It's—it's a dream," she

said, as she clung to her cavaliers. She considered which she liked best. They were both so wonderful and romantic.

"You dance?" asked Strange.

"Sometimes," said Molly.

"You must dance now or you'll be conspicuous, and to be conspicuous is death," declared Strange. "Come! This is a waltz. You shall dance it with me. Let us enjoy ourselves while we can, for I may be dead and you in a fast and powerful steam yacht ere the day breaks."

"Oh, William!" said Molly. Was it possible that William slept peacefully, or did any fearful dream break his repose? What would he say if he knew her danger? How could she explain to him that it was necessary to dance or die?

"I never can explain," said Molly. But she danced, and danced well. So did Strange. She began to enjoy herself wonderfully, and Strange talked to her all the time.

"You've had wrong ideas of life, my child," said her partner; "very wrong ideas. Life is not milk and seed-cake, nor is South Kensington the ultimate refuge for humanity. Life is strange and mad. We are surrounded by Jolsikoffs; the universe itself is Jolsikoffian. There is no escape from the nature of things. Ask St. John Howell. Inquire of Jolsikoff himself when he speaks to you."

"Oh, will he speak?" asked Molly.

"He must. He will," said Strange. "You cannot quite escape him. If we do not permit him so much he will lose hope, and if Jolsikoff loses hope we are all lost."

"Oh! How?"

"It is a secret of the British Government," said Strange. "I dare not reveal it. In fact, I haven't the least idea. Nevertheless it is true. Here comes Jolsikoff now. I grow excited. I am happy. So are you, are you not?"

"Ye—es," said Molly.

"Did you ever enjoy yourself so much?"

"I—I don't think so!" murmured Molly.

"You are beautiful—very beautiful, and I doubt if you ever knew it till now, when you are masked and cannot be seen. Tell me, and speak the truth, for if you don't I can't save you; did you ever enjoy yourself before?"

"Oh, never," said Molly; "never!"

"Is this an indiscretion? What would South Kensington say?"

"They wouldn't understand," cried Molly.

"They've no notion of what the world is. I see that now."

"Then you are practically saved," said Strange, fervently. "You perceive that the

cold moral judgments you have been accustomed to distribute among your friends are as little related to actual life as cold crumpets, say, are to the facts of good digestion?"

"Yes, I do," said Molly.

"You thought you would now be at home and asleep, as you meant to be, and you are here, long after midnight, being saved from an unparalleled disaster by two philanthropists. What would South Kensington think of it?"

"They must never, never know," said Molly.

"They shall not. But a truce to idle discussion. The crisis approaches. I shall leave you here, apparently at the mercy of Jolsikoff; but fear not. St. John Howell and I shall be close to you."

And before Queen Mary could remonstrate she found herself leaning against a pillar all by herself. And Jolsikoff approached. A voice (it was that of St. John Howell) hissed in her ear: "Be firm, we are at hand!" When she turned she saw no one. But Jolsikoff came on.

Prince Montmorency Villiers Jolsikoff had taken a good supper. After a prolonged period of abstinence due to want of appreciation on the part of theatrical managers and the public, he felt he needed it. The task before him was prodigious, and he felt that he lacked the "cues" on which actors are accustomed to rely. Still he meant to do his best, and the supper helped him.

"I love you," he said. He hissed it into her ear in the most approved manner.

"Oh, please," said Molly, jumping.

Now, if she had said, "You scoundrel, my friends are at hand!" he could have replied easily. And in melodrama the heroine never jumped.

"I mean to carry you off," said Jolsikoff, loudly; "you cannot escape me thus."

"You cannot escape me thus," touched a chord in his memory, and he grew fluent.

"Yonder in the south (I mean the north) there are orange groves by a sunlit sea. I own a villa there by the Mediterranean (I mean the frozen Neva), and it waits for you—its lovely mistress. I have pursued you in all the cities of the world. Wrapped in icy calm and this fur coat I have concealed the ravages of passion, but now the crisis has approached. I—I adore you!"

"I'm—I'm married! Oh, please go away!" said Molly.

"I know you are married. Or you were. For this night I slew your husband in the gardens of the Marquis," said Jolsikoff. This

was out of another play in which he had had great success.

"Oh, you didn't," said Molly; "you didn't!"

"The fool drew on me," replied Jolsikoff, "when I was apparently unarmed, but I shot him like a dog, and now he lies, face upwards, beneath the cypresses. Therefore he stands between us no longer. Come! You are beautiful, lovely, divine, and I am your lover

—I, Jolsikoff, the powerful and unscrupulous, who never spared a man in ambition or a woman in love."

He grasped her by the arm. It was a supreme moment for the object of his passion. She felt then she must run or scream to Strange for assistance. But every woman knows that to be pursued for her beauty alone is even better than frocks from Paris or a dozen hats at five guineas apiece.

"Oh, sir," said Molly, "you are mistaken, quite mistaken. My friends——"

"H a, y o u r friends!" said Jolsikoff, with that awful laugh which is the special characteristic of a Russian prince, and is heard from no one else, "your friends! Do you know who they are?"

"N o," said Mollie. It was a weak admission, and even Montmorency Villiers felt he could improvise upon what she gave him.

"They are notorious villains. The man who calls himself Sir Septimus Strange is a burglar. St. John Howell, whose real name is Matthew Tubbs, is a coiner and forger. He was expelled from Oxford for forging a poem and coining new phrases which were

rightly looked on as treachery to the language. Now he lives by getting rid of bad half-crowns. I trust you haven't changed one for him?"

"I don't believe it," said Molly. "They're both splendid."

"You don't believe me? I will prove it to you. On board my yacht I have the proof. Come! If you will not, I shall carry you."

"I—I won't be carried. I defy you!" said Molly.

It was unlucky for her that "I defy you" was burnt into Jolsikoff's memory as a cue. Answering to it almost mechanically, he said, "Ha, ha!" and, seizing hold of her, lifted her to his shoulder and bore her off.

Mrs. Patterson-Grundy, *alias* Queen Mary, *alias* Milly or Molly, had never been accustomed to scream. She was too well behaved to do anything of the kind, and her quiet life had not been such as to lead her to make trial of her throat in so natural a feminine exercise. But scream she did. It was a feeble effort, for she found her head lower than she liked. And, as it happened, the band made an extra effort at that very moment. An unmusical ear might have thought her scream some discord intended by the conductor or a



"SEIZING HOLD OF HER, HE LIFTED HER TO HIS SHOULDER AND BORE HER OFF."

mere accident of the brass. As it was, Strange and Howell, who were behind some scenery which hid the wings of the theatre, missed it, and when they did at last peer round the corner they missed Molly too.

"Great Scot!" said Strange, who had been in America. "She's gone!"

"By all that's romantic, she has!" said St. John. Now you've done it, Strange!"

"I'll murder Jolsikoff in reality," roared Strange. "Come, we must find her!"

And St. John Howell, seeing that Strange was actually alarmed, did as he was told; but just as he ran the music stopped, and they heard a scream from behind.

"That's she, or I'm a Dutchman," said Strange, and St. John came with him. They presently discovered the door of a dressing-room. It was locked.

"Listen!" said Strange.

"'Tis Jolsikoff and she," said St. John. "What the deuce is he up to?"

They heard Prince Jolsikoff rattle off a speech, for poor Molly had said, "Oh, sir, I entreat you," and this was a powerful cue in a melodrama in which Montmorency Villiers had played the part of a pirate. Nothing could stop him now, for it came in so pat.

"'Tis useless, my beautiful one," said the pirate, "for my gallant ship awaits you. Say, will you be mine, or shall I do a deed which will thrill even me with horror?"

"Let me in," said Strange, "or I'll murder you!"

"Ha, ha!" said Montmorency Villiers; "this is fate! Once more I ask you——"

He asked her to fly to that southern isle, and asked it in language that would have brought tears to the eyes of a modern dramatist, and roars from a gallery filled with boys who longed to be pirates and could not be.

"I'll break in the door," cried Strange. "Courage, Molly! We are here! Come, St. John, burst the door in! Jolsikoff's got past a joke."

The time, the night, that splendid supper, and the excitement of playing both a prince and a pirate had indeed wrought Montmorency Villiers up to and beyond concert pitch. He felt heroic, felt that he loved Molly dearly and was prepared to risk everything for her.

"Come in!" he roared. "Fear not, lovely one, they that tear you from me must eat and drink be-lud before they do."

And down came the door with a crash, with St. John Howell and Strange upon it. They were thus at a disadvantage compared with the gigantic Jolsikoff, who was indeed as strong as a bull and prepared to do his theatrical duty in a lavish manner. He felt that Strange should have his money's worth and he also felt that he had never played as he did now. He seized St. John as he rose and hurled him across Strange, and both went down with a crash.

"Thus do I serve my country's foes," said Jolsikoff, who had done just the same in a patriotic drama. "See, Patricia, how the cravens are foiled."

It was surprising to be called Patricia, but by now Mrs. Patterson-Grundy was prepared for anything. She was, in fact, desperate, and when she saw the enchanting Cavalier used to knock down the fascinating Mephistopheles, who had entirely changed her views of life, she found a strange rage in her beating heart. A towel suspended from a nail was close at hand. She seized it with both hands, threw it over Prince Jolsikoff's head, and as he was haughtily surveying the scene of his victory she pulled hard and brought him down backwards. In a moment Strange and Howell were upon the desperado and, despite his struggles, kept him on the floor.

"By Jove, you're a plucky woman," said Strange, "and you've saved us all. Now, Jolsikoff, lie still or I'll murder you, stamp upon you, reduce you to the condition of a pancake."

"Strange, Strange," said Montmorency, who was indeed being choked in a realistic manner not usual on the stage. "I'll charge you twenty guineas for this!"

"Silence!" cried Strange. "That's his way of saying he's had enough, Molly. Shall I kill him or not?"

"Oh, no," said Molly. "Don't, don't!"

"She loves me still," said the undaunted actor, unable to resist a cue in any situation; "and while she loves me I am happy, though I go to the scaffold; and so, beloved Maria, I say farewell!"

He lay quite still. Strange rose.

"Come," said Strange, "this is the end, and we have won. Yet one more dance with me and St. John Howell, Molly, and the time comes for you to return home."

"But—but is he really dead?" asked Molly, wringing her hands.

"I fear you love him," said Strange, gloomily.

"I don't, I don't," said Molly, wildly; "but is he—is he dead?"

"Would that he were," said Strange, "but it takes more than this to kill Jolsikoff."

And Jolsikoff groaned again. He thought it was indicated by the situation, and that he owed it to Strange.

"You see, the villain lives," cried Strange. "We must tie him up while we escape."

It is almost impossible in real life, when it becomes exciting, to use three words which are not a melodramatic cue, which shows how near melodrama often comes to the

facts. "While we escape" was such a cue, and it brought fresh life to Montmorency Villiers. He bounded to his feet in the liveliest manner, and once more seized Molly after sending St. John staggering. When Strange leapt in he was received with a clout that drove him headlong.

"Confound you," he roared angrily. But by this time Jolsikoff was disappearing through the doorway with Molly in his arms. And Strange did not catch him up till they were once more in the ball-room, where they were received with a roar of applause from the assembled crowd.

"Stop him," said Strange; "stop him. The man is mad!"

By Strange's side Howell ran. The entire rout of dancers and mummers followed, while Molly clutched wildly at the air. Jolsikoff carried her like a feather, but by now the cue was exhausted, and he was reduced to his own inspiration. He ran three times round the room and finally slipped. As he went down Strange caught Molly; she heard him say, "All is well," and then, in Homeric language, darkness veiled her eyes as all the lights of the theatre went out like a shower of sparks. Mrs. Patterson-Grundy had fainted for the first time in her life.

When she came to, which she did very shortly, she could not think what had happened or where she was. It seemed to her that she was being whirled through space. She was being carried off somewhere—somewhere! She uttered a feeble scream, and then found she was being supported by the admirable Strange.

"Where am I? What has happened?" she cried.

"Hush! You are in my car. I fear Jolsikoff still pursues us," said Strange, "but by speed we shall elude him. If he does not catch us we shall be safe!"

And Strange's chauffeur, urged by his master, broke every regulation ever heard of.

Molly clutched him tight as the car charged space wildly. Strange put his head outside the car.

"South Kensington, Smith," he cried, and then he turned to her again.

"Your clothes will come to-morrow by parcel post or Carter Paterson's. You will never see me again. If you do, ignore me. It will be dangerous to bow to me. But you are, I know, a better woman than you were."

"A better woman!" murmured Molly.

"Far, far better," said Strange. "You have committed your first indiscretion, and have seen things as they are, or as they are not, it matters little which. You have forgotten South Kensington, and have drunk of the cup of romance. There is no woman in London, not even the wisest, who would not envy you what you have gone through to-night."

"Oh, how can I thank you!" said Molly, tearfully.

"By being what I am—a missionary," said Strange, solemnly.

"A missionary!" cried Molly.

"Yes," replied Strange. "Teach South Kensington and even Earl's Court what life is. I teach life regularly. To-morrow I abduct a millionaire, and shall show him the worst parts of London. After doing this I shall injure him severely, and have him attended to in the casualty ward of the London Hospital. Whatever happens I shall do my duty. But here, at last, is South Kensington and your street. This is your house. I kiss your hands. Hurry, hurry! here's the dawn and the milkman. Adieu!"

He opened her gate, pushed her in, shut it, jumped into his car, and was gone.

"Oh, dear!" said Mrs. Patterson-Grundy. She felt very sad and lonely. Romance—wild-eyed darling of the gods—had left her on a chilly doorstep, and the dawn was watching her coldly. Tears filled her eyes as she opened the door. Strange had been wonderful; St. John Howell adorable; and Jolsikoff dreadful! And here was the house of every day, and William, who drank milk and ate seed-cake in secret.

"Oh, it's been wonderful!" she said, as she slipped off the robes of Queen Mary and hid them in the deepest drawer she had, as if she were renouncing a throne. Then she went quietly, still trembling, into the room where her good man slept the deep sleep of the just who know not Romance. Yet he half woke up as she entered.

"I hope you enjoyed it all, my dear?" he murmured.

She replied in a whisper:—

"Wonderfully, wonderfully!"

"I'm so glad," said William. He fell asleep as she crept into bed and held Romance close to her beating heart.