

# Mr. Senn's Past

by **Edward Phillips Oppenheim, 1866-1946**

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**Published: 1922**  
in »International Monthly«  
and in »Pall Mall Magazine«



*The best mystery stories are those—like this one—which allow you to participate in the game. Everyone who reads this tale will feel the thrill of the chase right up to the end.*

Mr. Hugh Manders, novelist and wanderer, was engaged in the wonderful task of absorbing sunshine. He sat upon a remote seat of the Terrace at Monte Carlo, his hands folded in front of him, his rakish grey Homburg hat a little on the back of his head, his eyes half-closed, steeped in the pleasant inertia of the moment. The sky above was cloudless. The sea which spread itself out at his feet glittered with a million points of silver. An oleander-and-mimosa-perfumed air hung lazily about him. He was extraordinarily well content with himself and his surroundings.

A vaguely familiar figure amongst the stream of occasional passers-by recognised and sought him out. Manders sat up and began to take notice.

„My friend Sarson!“ he exclaimed, in some surprise.

„Sarson, at your service,“ the other remarked, as they shook hands.

Mr. Sarson, a valued myrmidon of Scotland Yard, seated himself, and the two men exchanged the usual banalities. There was nothing about the newcomer to denote in any way his profession. He was dressed in neat grey tweeds, and his shoes and gaiters had a touch of the elderly Englishman who spends his spring at Bath, the summer at Aix, and the winter on the Riviera. Only the sharp, incisive mouth and keen eyes gave any indications of a more extensive mentality.

„Business?“ the novelist enquired, after a brief pause.

The other shook his head slightly.

„This is my annual holiday.“ he declared. „Except during the war, I have spent a month down here for many years. A happy hunting ground for you, Mr. Manders, I should imagine.“

The latter gave vent to a slight grimace.

„It is a great place to collect impressions,“ he admitted, „but a very poor place for actual work. How can one reconcile oneself to one’s desk with sunshine like this?“

Mr. Sarson smiled and glanced at his watch.

„What about luncheon?“ he enquired.

„Capital!“ the other assented, rising to his feet. „We’ll try Ciro’s bar for a cocktail first. Charles is a perfect wizard on a dry martini.“

They strolled off together, mingling with the gay throng of promenaders, Manders greeting a few acquaintances, both enjoying to the full the spectacle of this conglomeration of pleasure-seekers from every part of the world. After their cocktail, they sat for a few minutes at a small round table on the Terrace. By chance, there was no one else within hearing.

„Mr. Manders,“ his companion said, lowering his voice to that smooth yet perfectly distinct undertone which indicated the discussion of an important subject. „I should like, if I might, to take you a little into my confidence.“

„Go right ahead,“ Manders invited.

„It is true that I come to Monte Carlo for my holiday every year,“ Sarson went on, „but there has always been a certain method in my coming. Do you remember the Holdsworth murder case?“

„I think so,“ his companion replied. „Sordid affair, wasn’t it—the girl was found dead in the man’s rooms and he got away?“

„That is as much as came out in the Press,“ Sarson assented, „but, as a matter of fact, in the course of our investigations we came across some very startling and sensational facts. No less than five women who had been seen at different times in Holdsworth’s company had disappeared, and have never been heard of since.“

„By Jove!“ Manders exclaimed. „As bad as that French chap.“

„I sometimes wonder,“ Sarson went on reflectively, as he lit and smoked a cigarette, „whether the members of our profession are getting more stupid or the criminal classes more astute, but it is certainly a fact that during the last two years three of the greatest criminals of the day have slipped through our fingers and escaped. Mind you, the public doesn’t know this. No need to publish our information when we can’t catch the man. But confidentially I

might tell you that there are at present eleven undiscovered crimes of a hideous character, the particulars of which have never been published because we have been unable to trace the criminal.“

„My theory is,“ the novelist declared, „that the pursuit of crime has been taken up by a more highly educated type of person. Given exceptional intelligence—above all, nerve—and the odds seem to me three to one on the criminal every time. You see, he can lay his plans beforehand, and the detective can’t.“

„Holdsworth seems to have proved your theory,“ Sarson pronounced. „The man is a gentleman by birth, public school and university, and educated for the Bar. Then he went out to the East, dabbled in drugs, came back a strange, misanthropic sort of creature, and commenced his terrible life. I spent six solid months on the case, and at the present moment I have only two clues, neither of which has been of the slightest use to me. Vet,“ the detective went on slowly, looking down at the white, dusty road, „I would be willing to retire from the profession and count my life’s work done, if I could lay my hands upon this one man.“

Manders at once felt a vastly increased interest in the subject. His vis-à-vis was an unemotional person, hard-lipped and slow of speech, yet at this moment he was moved, and moved deeply. His eyes were shining like points of steel. His lips were a little parted, showing his firm white teeth. He looked like a man whose whole life was concentrated upon the achievement of a certain object.

„Tell me,“ Manders asked, „did you ever cross this man’s path personally?“

„Unfortunately, no,“ was the stern reply. „One of his victims, though, was my niece, my sister’s only child. She was found dead in an empty flat in Mayfair; dead—and worse.“

„Brute!“

„The man is a fiend,“ Sarson continued. „Most of our lot prefer to look upon him as dead. It saves our dignity. Personally, I don’t believe it. I have a feeling that somewhere on the earth he still lives, biding his time, hoping that the years will bring forgetfulness.“

The hour for luncheon was now approaching, and little groups of people came strolling along the arcade, the sound of their light laughter and pleasant murmur of conversation filling the sunlit air. The two men finished their cocktails and rose.

„Luncheon, I think,“ Manders suggested, „and a truce to gruesome subjects.“

„By all means,“ his companion assented. An obsequious maître d’hôtel conducted them to their table. A very excellent luncheon was served, which both men thoroughly enjoyed. They chatted upon indifferent subjects, and watched their fellow-guests with interest. Towards the close of the meal, Manders pointed out a late arrival.

„I wonder who this is,“ he remarked, a little abruptly. „Rather a distinguished-looking man, in his way.“

The newcomer was advancing towards an empty but zealously-guarded table within a few yards of them. He was a man apparently of between fifty and sixty years of age, dressed in dark brown clothes, a little shiny with wear, with a black satin stock, fastened with a diamond pin. His patent leather boots were cracked in places, but shone like mirrors. His black-grey hair was brushed back from an impressive forehead. His horn-rimmed monocle seemed

permanently fastened in his eye. His manner was gracious, but the manner of one accustomed to command. His features were heavy, his complexion curiously pallid, almost wax-like. He had not the air of a man in good health.

Illustration:

A late arrival entered the dining-room. The black-grey hair was brushed back from an impressive forehead. His horn-rimmed monocle seemed permanently fastened.

„I've seen him about a good many times,“ Sarson remarked.

„So have I,“ his companion assented, „but never anywhere else but here.“

The object of their interest ordered his luncheon with the air of one issuing a royal command, writing his choice of dishes down with a heavy gold pencil, and aided in his selection by the head-waiter himself and two other maîtres d'hôtel. A small carafe of red wine was placed upon his table as soon as he sat down. His habits were evidently known and appreciated. Manders took the opportunity, a few minutes later, of calling the head-waiter to his side.

„Tell me the name of that gentleman?“ he enquired.

„He is known as Mr. Senn,“ was the whispered reply.

„He is perhaps a person of consequence?“

„He is the head of a noble French family,“ the man confided, „the surviving members of which escaped to Russia at the time of the Revolution. They bought estates on the Black Sea, and lived there until the war. He was on the staff of the Grand Duke until the disintegration of Russia, and narrowly escaped with his life.“

„He is still wealthy?“

The head-waiter shrugged his shoulders.

„One fears not. He has a little flat at the back of the town, and he is generally here for four months of the year. He denies himself little, but he seldom plays now, he who was once a great gambler. He comes here but once a week. Monsieur will excuse me.“

He hastened away to greet some new arrivals. Manders was somewhat intrigued.

„Quite an interesting figure,“ he declared. „One often wonders what has become of the modern representatives of many of those noble French families.“

„Queer sort of life, to spend four months in Monte Carlo and not to gamble,“ Sarson reflected.

The meal drew pleasantly towards an end, and at its conclusion the two men loitered for some time outside over their coffee and cigars. Presently Mr. Senn, leaning rather heavily upon his ivory-topped stick, came slowly out of the restaurant and turned down the arcade. In the bright sunlight, one realised more completely the cracks in his shoes through frequent varnishing, the distinct shininess about the seams of his coat. His Homburg hat, although of the best make, was last year's shape. The cuffs of his shirt, though spotlessly clean, were frayed. At the corner he hesitated. For several moments he stood looking across towards the Casino. Manders, watching him more closely than his companion, appreciated the wistful intentness of his gaze, the sad, restless longing which eventually made him turn abruptly away and climb the hill into the little town. The novelist, when he had parted from his friend; walked

pensively back to his hotel. He found something curiously absorbing in his thoughts of Mr. Senn gazing so steadfastly towards the Casino.

The two men dined together again that evening, neither of them greatly disposed towards conversation. Sarson was in travelling clothes, and was leaving an hour or so later by the Côte d'Azur for Paris.

„I expect you're sorry to go," Manders remarked sympathetically. „It's a wonderful place for a holiday, this."

His companion nodded.

„You'll think I'm an obstinate man," he said, „but I never leave Monte Carlo without a deep sense of disappointment. For years I've fancied that some day or other I should lay my hand upon the man I was talking to you about this morning, and year after year goes by and ends ill failure."

„You haven't a lot to go on, have you?"

„I have very little to go on indeed, but on the other hand it is always easy to work backwards, and I have a very valuable fact to start upon. These things come to one's knowledge in a curious way. Holdsworth could not have the slightest idea that anyone in the world knew of his partiality for backing number fourteen whenever he was anywhere near a roulette table, and yet I know for a fact that this was almost an obsession with him. If he were here and had the money to play with, I am perfectly certain that he would back it and nothing else. That is why I have spent the greater part of my afternoon and evening, this year and for many preceding years, watching for a man who is backing number fourteen. Once or twice I have fancied that I have been on the track. I have followed several men's antecedents quite hopefully up to a certain point. The end, however, is always the same."

„Have you any description of him?" Manders enquired.

„The very vaguest, and that is twelve years old," the other acknowledged. „We know that he was of rather over medium height, inclined to be thin, and that he spoke always with a curious drawl, almost like a foreigner. He had a deformity on the third finger of his left hand, a wart, or something of the sort, which he always kept concealed under a broad gold ring. Here's his police description," he went on, drawing a paper from his pocket and passing it across the table. „You have to remember, though, that it is twelve years old. Its only real use might be a negative one."

„I see," Manders murmured. „Any finger-prints?"

„None. The trouble is that the man has never been even under the supervision of the police."

„Rather a hard nut to crack," Manders remarked.

„It is indeed," his host assented. „On the other hand, I have always looked at it from this point of view. The man got clear away, his crimes are twelve years old, and he might reasonably suppose them to have been forgotten. What is to prevent him, therefore, from beginning them again?"

„I see."

„I doubt," the detective continued thoughtfully, „whether I should ever be able now to get enough evidence to justify a warrant, but if we once got a hold on him for a new misdemeanour, I think we might possibly be able to work backwards. However, I confess that I am beginning to lose heart. He is probably in South America. I think there is no doubt that he went there some time or other after his escape from London."

The two men drank their coffee, seated outside the Café de Paris during what was, perhaps, the most beautiful half-hour of the day. The whole place seemed alive with the soft, thrilling call of the coming night. The Casino was a blaze of illumination. The electric lights shone mystically amidst the green of the trees and shrubs. The still, warm air was fragrant with perfumes, the perfumes of flowers and shrubs, the scent from the women's dresses and hair. A red-coated orchestra was playing light-hearted music. A few tables away sat Mr. Senn, smoking cigarette and drinking a glass of absinthe. Every now and then he looked towards the Casino. Manders pointed him out to his companion.

„That man still interests me,“ he remarked.

The detective scrutinised the silent figure of Mr. Senn, and nodded.

„A type,“ he admitted. „Monte Carlo is full of them.“

He said no more; neither did Manders. But an hour later, when the latter returned from seeing his friend off, the rather melancholy figure was still seated in his chair, his face a little whiter in the gathering darkness. He was no longer alone, however. Seated by his side was a little French girl, who was chattering to him gaily, and whose merry peals of laughter rose often above the murmur of voices. Manders seated himself near and called for another liqueur. With wonderful patience, he remained there for an hour. The girl apparently began to get a little bored with her undemonstrative companion. Once or twice he leaned towards her and said something, and his eyes gleamed strangely in the blue twilight. The girl, however, shook her head. Towards eleven o'clock Mr. Senn rose, took a somewhat abrupt farewell of her, and disappeared, climbing the hill. Manders waited until he was out of sight. Then he calmly rose, took the vacant seat opposite the girl, who seemed on the point of departure, and raised his hat.

„You will do me the honour, perhaps, Mademoiselle,“ he invited, „of taking a liqueur with me?“

Mademoiselle hesitated. She was petite, charming, and apparently very young.

„Monsieur is very kind,“ she said. „I do not like to drink so much. I will take some coffee. I would rather,“ she added, laughing up into his face, „that Monsieur gave me a hundred francs for luck to go and play with.“

Manders took out his pocket-book and slipped a hundred-franc-note into the little bag which she was carrying. She gave a cry of delight.

„Monsieur is generous!“ she exclaimed. „Ah, but I see Monsieur is English. You have all so much money that you cannot spend, eh?“

„I can't allow that,“ Manders replied; „but some of us are fortunate enough to have some to spare for a pleasant occasion like his. Tell me about the man who was talking to you? He is a resident here almost, isn't he?“

She nodded carelessly.

„I suppose so. One sees him all the time. The girls call him the Marquis. He has very beautiful manners and no money.“

„What was he asking you,“ Manders persisted, „when you kept on shaking your head?“

„Oh, la, la!“ she exclaimed. „The same old thing! There is Suzette and Amie and I. I am called Ninette. He is always asking us to go and take supper with him at his flat. But why should we go, I ask you?“ she went on, with an expressive shrug of the shoulders. „He has no money—that, or he is a miser—and he is very serious. Besides, I do not know why, but I do not think I like him

very much. Why should one go and eat a poor supper in his little flat—I ask you, Monsieur?”

„My advice to you,“ Manders said, impulsively, „would be never to go.“

She looked at him in surprise.

„But Monsieur knows him, perhaps?“

„I never saw him before this morning. I just have that kind of feeling. Where did you say his flat was?“

„In the Rue des Marguerites,“ the girl replied; „number seventeen. It is up the hill—a long climb... Now if you, Monsieur, were to ask one to take a little dinner,“ she went on, „or even a little supper at the Carlton, it would be a different thing. Monsieur knows well how to amuse himself, is it not so?“

Manders smiled. He realised that, notwithstanding her politeness, which forbade her to leave so generous an acquaintance, she was longing to be off to the Casino.

„You go in there and try your luck,“ he said good-naturedly. „We'll have that little dinner some day.“

She slid away into the darkness, waving her hand to him.

Manders ordered another fin champagne and lit a long cigar. Gambling appealed to him very little, and the thought of the hot, crowded rooms, with their strange atmosphere of patchouli and sombre hysterics, left him very well content to remain where he was, listening to the music and the light chatter of the gay crowd. Suddenly he was aware of a menacing figure before his chair. Mr. Senn had returned, and apparently in anger. His eyes were tilled with resentment, the pallor of his cheeks seemed almost ghastly, his eyebrows were drawn together in a threatening frown.

„Sir,“ he said, „I have to demand why you choose to make me the subject of conversation here in a public place with a fille de joie?“

„I have not the faintest idea what you are talking about,“ Manders replied, taken aback by the man's sudden reappearance.

„What I say is simple enough,“ the other continued, struggling to control his voice. „This morning at Ciro's you or your companion asked questions concerning me from the head-waiter. That in itself is an impertinence. To-night I overhear you again discussing me with a chance acquaintance to whom you gave money. For what purpose did you give her money?“

„I can assure you,“ Manders declared politely, „that you are taking this matter too seriously. As for money, I gave it to the little one to gamble with. Why not? Sit down and take a fin champagne with me, sir.“

Mr. Senn hesitated—and fell. He eyed almost covetously the bottle of old brandy with which a waiter immediately appeared.

„Monsieur,“ he said, „I drink to your good health and to a better understanding between us.“

„I thank you, sir,“ Manders replied.

Mr. Senn sipped his brandy with the air of a connoisseur. His companion motioned the waiter to leave the bottle upon the table.

„I plead guilty,“ Manders confessed, „to the vice of curiosity. There is never a day passes when I do not ask a question about someone, as I asked the head-waiter about you at Ciro's to-day. Your appearance interested me.“

„May I enquire what information you gathered?“ Mr. Senn demanded with the remnants of a frown still on his forehead.

„That you passed as Mr. Senn,“ was the prompt reply, „but that you were really the head of an old French family, settled before the war in Russia. You served on the staff of the Grand Duke, and you have lost your estates. You live here on slender means, but you have the misfortune to preserve, naturally enough, the expensive tastes of your upbringing. You lunch once a week chez Ciro.“

„And the rest of the week nowhere at all,“ the other remarked bitterly. „Your information is correct... And now as regards the little Ninette?“

„Sir,“ Mr. Manders acknowledged, „my curiosity here was perhaps less pardonable. I gathered only that you had invited her to supper, but that her knowledge of your finances had rendered the invitation unattractive.“

Mr. Senn drained the contents of his glass, which his companion promptly refilled.

„That seems harmless,“ the other muttered. „But the money?“

„I simply gave it to the child to gamble with,“ Manders explained. „I do not play much myself, but it gives me pleasure to see others who enjoy it.“

There was a strange intensity in the gaze of the man, who sat for a moment as though shivering with emotion. He looked at his companion as at some unfamiliar thing.

„You do not gamble?“ he said in a low voice. „You do not feel the lure of that strange paradise yonder? The click of the ball, the limitless wealth to be gained there, mean nothing to you? You have never felt the thrill of watching with straining eyes, watching while the wheel runs down and the little ball sits there in your number, your beloved number, and there come to you across the table the sheaves of bills, the pile of golden plaques, the price of a thousand luncheons at Ciro’s, the price of Ninette’s white arms and pouting lips, the price of all the elegance and softness and luxury of life...“

Manders shook his head.

„I’m afraid I am entirely without the gambler’s instinct,“ he confessed. „I have all the money I require in life.“

„Ah!“

The monosyllable was electric, amazingly expressive. Mr. Senn let the old brandy travel slowly down his throat while he looked across at his host with envious, hating eyes.

„You have already all the money you need for these things,“ he muttered.

„That is so,“ Manders assented.

„You have the advantage of me,“ his companion observed presently. „You know the name under which I choose to live. And yours?“

Manders produced a card. His companion read it out in the uncertain light, peering through his horn-rimmed glass:

MR. HUGH MANDERS,  
176, CURZON STREET,  
LONDON, W.

„It sounds opulent,“ was his grudging comment.

„I am comfortably off,“ Manders told him. „I also earn a little money, writing novels. Perhaps this accounts for my curiosity concerning people.“

Mr. Senn put the card in his waistcoat pocket. Whatever suspicions he might have entertained, they had apparently disappeared.



„I once was wealthy,“ he confided. „Every penny of which I was possessed in the world has been lost to me in Russia. You wonder how I live, then, eh?“

Manders watched the ash on his cigar for a moment.

„Sir,“ he admitted, „I have pleaded guilty to an unjustifiable amount of personal curiosity. I do wonder how you live.“

Mr. Senn drew his chair a little nearer. He leaned over the marble-topped table.

„There is an old lady,“ he said, „who keeps a café in one of the back streets up on the hill there. It is a café not as you or I would understand such a place, but a place for the cochers, chauffeurs, the ouvriers. She does a good business, and she is alone in the world. I keep her books. I get there occasional food and drink. I pay the rent of my apartment—a simple, ugly room. Once a week I lunch at Ciro’s.“

„It is a tragedy,“ Manders declared.

„My life,“ the other assented, „has been a thousand tragedies rolled into one.“

Manders gazed across at the Casino.

„And yet,“ he murmured, „that attracts you still?“

His companion’s face was suddenly Satanic.

„It tears at my heart-strings,“ he confessed. „To-night, as usual, I turned my back upon it. At the top of the hill I looked around, and back I came like a brainless moth. It was thus I heard your questioning of Mademoiselle.“

There was another silence, rather a longer one this time. Manders threw away the end of his cigar and lit a fresh one. Then he uncrossed his legs and leaned over the table.

„Mr. Senn,“ he said, „I am in the broadest sense of the word an adventurer. I go up and down the world looking for places and people that interest me. Would you accept from me the loan of five thousand francs and try your luck behind the lights there?“

There are expressions even of joy which are horrible. Manders shivered, and he had a queer fancy that he sat hobnobbing with a wolf, leaping at its prey.

„You mean it?“ his companion demanded raspingly.

„Certainly!“

Mr. Senn’s left hand was upon the table—the hand of an aristocrat, but lean at the knuckle and talon-like at the finger-tips. He wore a broad band of gold upon the third finger.

„Give me the money,“ he begged fiercely.

It was a few minutes after ten o’clock when the two men entered the Casino. From the moment they crossed the threshold of the Rooms proper, Mr. Senn seemed to become absolutely oblivious of the presence of his companion. He watched a spin at each of the tables by the door, and then passed on into one of the further rooms. At the most remote table he paused to whisper to the croupier for information as regards the voisins of the last number. The reply apparently did not please him, for he turned back to a table which he had previously passed, hesitated for a moment, and then grudgingly drew out his roll of notes. For the first time he seemed to become aware of his benefactor’s proximity.

„If you watch me,“ he enjoined in a hard tone, „do not criticise. I play in a method of my own. There is no logic in it, but neither is there any logic in fate. Chance and inspiration are first cousins. I play a game of chance, and inspiration alone directs me.“

„Pray don't worry about me," Manders begged. „I'll just watch a spin or two and be off."

„If you watch two spins," was the reply. „I shall know whether you bring me luck or not. If I lose—go."

Manders nodded. His companion had leaned over the table, obtained some change in gold plaques, and sank into a vacant place near the head of the board. Manders, who was watching with only simulated indifference, felt a sudden throb of his pulses. His protégé was backing fourteen, en plein, carrés, and chevaux. He arranged his stake with deliberate care. Again Manders became aware of that broad band of gold upon his third finger.

Illustration:

Manders felt a sudden throb of his pulses. Senn, arranging his stake with deliberate care, placed it upon number fourteen. And again Manders became aware of that broad band of gold upon his third finger.

„Vingt-quatre, rouge, pair et passe," the croupier murmured, a moment or two later.

Mr. Senn watched his stake swept away with unmoved countenance, repeated it, and sat nervously attentive. Again he lost. This time he looked around and waved his companion to depart.

„To-morrow," he muttered, „at midday."

Manders nodded, and turned away. He left the rooms, and made his way to the telegraph-office.

It was just before noon on the following morning when Manders, approaching the cheerful little company who were dotted about at the round tables outside the Café de Paris, heard himself addressed by name. Seated only a few yards away was a transformed Mr. Senn, with Ninette on one side and her friend on the other.

„My benefactor!" the former exclaimed graciously. „Sir," he added, „if I do not at once restore your five thousand francs, it is merely a matter of superstition."

„You won, then?" Manders observed, raising his hat to the young ladies and drawing up a chair.

Mr. Senn smiled the rapturous smile of a man whose brain is flooded with pleasant memories.

„I played, so far as I can remember," he said, "thirty coups. Out of these, fourteen turned up nine times, thirteen eleven, twelve and sixteen once each, and fifteen twice. I won a matter of a hundred thousand francs. Manders, you will do me the honour of drinking with me?"

Manders hesitated, but refusal was an impossibility. While his prospective host gave orders to the waiter, and Ninette chattered away, telling him that she too had been fortunate in a small way, Manders studied him thoughtfully. Something of the man's dignity seemed to have vanished with his shabbiness. His new patent boots were almost too glossy, the brown clothes, although in the best taste and miraculously well-fitting considering that they must have been bought ready-made, still lacked the distinction of his older habiliments. The man seemed new and glossy all over. His amiability, too, sat upon him like an unusual garment. The saturnine attraction of his ill-humour had departed.

„Monsieur is truly wonderful,“ Ninette declared, edging her chair a little nearer to Manders and a little farther away from her new patron. „His money carries charm. Many long days have passed since I gained anything, but last night I, too, won—well, nearly a thousand francs. And Monsieur never plays himself?“

„Very seldom,“ Manders acknowledged. „If you are going to the Rooms this morning,“ he added, „I shall be delighted to try my fortune with you.“

Mr. Senn intervened with a flamboyant gesture.

„Mlle. Ninette,“ he announced, „does me the honour to take luncheon with me shortly. I have ordered a table in the café. We shall lay our plans for the afternoon.“

Ninette pouted.

„Would there not be time to accompany Monsieur first for a few minutes?“ she ventured.

„Impossible!“ Mr. Senn pronounced. „I am a man of regular habits. I lunch at half an hour after mid-day. It is now within twenty minutes of the time. We will take a small apéritif, dear child. This after noon we may visit the tables together.“

She laid her fingers upon Manders’s sleeve with a little grimace.

„I think that he is a mascot,“ she said, „this big English gentleman.“

Manders looked at her with a kindly though rather a doubtful smile.

„I wonder,“ he murmured.

A man and woman passed by, exchanging greetings with Manders. Senn turned around in his chair and gazed after them. There was a little sparkle in his eyes.

„That woman!“ he exclaimed eagerly, as soon as they were out of earshot. „You know her? How does she call herself? What is her name?“

„She is a Mrs. Preston,“ Manders told him. „That was her husband, Major Preston, with her.“

Senn shook his head.

„No, no!“ he protested, with an air of superior knowledge. „She has another name. I saw her in New York. Her pictures were in the newspapers. She called herself then Valia Dene.“

Manders nodded.

„That’s right,“ he admitted. „What do you know about her?“

„Not enough,“ the other muttered. „She is a very wonderful medium. I attended one of her séances in Brooklyn. It was amazing. I would give anything in the world—but that is folly!“

„Are you a spiritualist?“ Manders asked curiously.

Mr. Senn picked up his ivory-topped walking-stick and rose to his feet.

„It is time we took luncheon, little one,“ he said to Ninette. „As to that,“ he added, turning towards Manders, „who knows? I have seen strange things in my life—things which have made me wonder. Who knows?“

Late that afternoon, Manders came across Ninette, seated on one of the cushioned benches in the Casino. She was looking dejected and a little forlorn, but she cheered up at his approach.

„Ah, monsieur!“ she exclaimed. „I looked for you all the time this afternoon.“

Manders smiled.

„Been losing, eh?“

She shook her head.

„No, I have gained a little, yet I have not the heart to play. I am nervous. Look, monsieur.“

He followed the motion of her head. Exactly opposite, seated at the nearest table, was Senn. The electric light threw a strange shade upon his colourless face, his hard black eyes, his indrawn lips. He sat in his usual place, as near as possible to his magical number, and there was something a little arresting in his immovability.

„Senn,“ Manders muttered. „I wonder how he’s doing.“

„Winning,“ she answered tremulously. „He wins now all the time. But I do not know. More and more I grow afraid of him. Who is he? You knew him before, perhaps?“

Manders shook his head.

„I saw him for the first time yesterday.“

„I am foolish, perhaps,“ the girl went on. „He is generous, he has the manner, he speaks of serious things. And yet, I am afraid. I do not understand myself. To-night he has asked me to go to supper with him, not at the Carlton or the Café de Paris, but up at his apartment, up on the hill. And I do not know. Something tells me that I foolish, and yet I do not wish to go.“

Manders sat down by her side.

„My child,“ he said slowly, „I know nothing of Mr. Senn, but I’d like to tell you this. There may be something in that instinct of yours. If you will take the advice of an elderly man, lunch with him, dine with him, sup with him where he pleases, entertain him in your own flat, if you will, but do not visit his apartment.“

„An elderly man! Oh, lá, lá!“ she mocked. „Yet,“ she went on, suddenly serious, „it is strange that you should advise me thus. You know something; is it not so?“

„Nothing at all,“ Manders assured her. „By the bye,“ he went on, „you have noticed the very broad gold ring he wears on the third finger of his left hand?“

„Beyond a doubt,“ she assented. „It is strangely shaped.“

„I have an idea,“ Manders went on, „that he wears it to conceal some disfigurement. If you should discover that to be so, will you tell me?“

She laughed gaily.

„What vanity! I will tell you, of course. But see—he rises. That means that he has lost for three coups following. He changes his table always then. Look at him, monsieur, and tell me why I am afraid.“

Mr. Senn came towards them, erect, distinguished, with a curious air of abstraction which seemed to enfold him as a dream. He passed them by as though he never saw them, studied the tables in the farther room for a moment, took a vacant seat and began to play. Ninette shook her head.

„He is uncanny,“ she decided. „I shall be his friend no longer.“

„Find out for me,“ Manders said, as he rose to his feet, „what is underneath that ring, and I will start you on your way to fortune with a thousand-franc note.“

She looked up at him with petulant gratitude.

„If you were only he!“ she murmured.

Manders had the fancy to retire early that evening. At eleven o’clock, however, a little note was brought into his salon, a note enclosed in a mauve

envelope which smelt of perfume, and addressed with characteristic and scratchy indistinctness. He opened it and read—

Cher Monsieur,—I have seen underneath the ring. There is a brown mole or wart, very ugly. No wonder he conceals it!

Cher monsieur, his luck is wonderful. He has now half-a-million francs. To-night I have promised to sup with him in his apartment, but still I fear it; but still I tremble at the thought.

Till to-morrow, dear friend.

Ninette.

Then Manders began to see visions. Slowly the hideous story which Sarson had told him began to unwind itself once more before his eyes. He saw the little house in Sydenham which had been the scene of Holdsworth's crime, with its tangled waste of garden, its cheerful lights inside, masking the horror that dwelt there. He heard the laughter of unsuspecting victims changing into the stifled cry of death; saw Ninette striving to drown her vague fears with tumblers of champagne; heard her throbbing, pitiful little cry come down to him from somewhere behind the town. Manders abandoned all hope of an early night. He thrust something hard and ugly into his hip pocket, took up a cane with a heavy malachite knob, and descended once more into the vortex of life.

At Ciro's he found Pierre, the chief maitre d'hôtel, busy, but willing enough to spare a moment to so good a patron.

„I am in some difficulty, Pierre,“ Manders explained. „The gentleman whom I asked you about yesterday morning—Mr. Senn, you called him—invited me up to his apartment this evening, but forgot to tell me his address. I wonder whether you know it?“

Pierre smiled with the ready pleasure of one able to oblige.

„There is a saddler's shop, the last building in the Rue des Marguerites,“ he said. „Monsieur Senn has rooms above it and behind. It is a very small place, but Monsieur will find it without trouble.“ Manders gave the maître d'hôtel occasion to congratulate himself upon his memory, and sallied out once more upon his quest. A carriage took him to the corner of the Rue des Marguerites, a vehicle which, upon reflection, he left to await his return. It was a small, outflung thoroughfare, some of the buildings of which were as yet unfinished. The saddler's shop at the end was closed and dark, but by the side of the door leading into the shop itself was another, evidently used by the tenant.

Manders paused for a few minutes, with his fingers playing around the bell. There was no sound from within, no light above. The salon was without doubt upon the ground floor behind the shop. Manders decided upon strategy. The street ended abruptly at the outside wall of the saddler's shop, and he stepped over a low paling into what appeared to be a small violet farm, turned to the left at the corner of the house, stooped underneath an iron railing, and found himself in a trim little garden, in which were several chairs, some statues, and a small fountain. Opening out upon the strip of lawn were the French windows of Mr. Senn's salon, closed now, and concealed by a heavy curtain, through the chinks of which, however, came a gleam of light. The intruder drew nearer and nearer. Then he heard a sound which filled him at first with immense relief, but which a moment afterwards made him feel like a fool. It was the shrill, yet not

unmusical, laughter of Ninette, followed by the popping of a cork and the sound of her host's measured tone...

Manders stood with his back to the wall and deliberated. Before him, the quaint little strip of garden stretched into the blackness of a pine wood, and high above gleamed unexpected lights from the small villas and peasants' dwellings dotted about on the slope. The smell of the violets from the field close at hand was almost intoxicating. It was still early. The girl might very well remain where she was for hours to come. Manders sighed and glanced at his watch, which he was easily able to discern by the light of the yellow moon. It was barely half-an-hour after midnight. He decided to wait until one o'clock... The minutes passed with incredible slowness. A slight breeze crept down from the hills, discovering the presence of a little grove of cypresses on the border of the violet farm. There was something soothing in the pleasant tranquillity of the night.

For the last time Manders glanced at his watch. It was five minutes past one. He had already overstayed his appointed time. Reluctantly he turned to depart. The voices inside were still careless and light-hearted. Still Ninette laughed, and still her companion apparently shared her light-heartedness. Manders reached the corner of the house and had barely turned towards the street when he heard the curtains drawn back and the little French windows opened. He stood still, out of sight though only a few feet away.

„Look, little one,“ he heard Senn say in his deep voice. „You see here my little demesne, where it is pleasant to sit when the sun shines. And beyond, the wood is asleep.“

„I do not like it!“ Ninette exclaimed querulously. „Let us go in. The night air is cold.“

Senn laughed softly, and when the listener heard that laugh he was glad he had come. He heard something which was almost like a sob from Ninette.

„You frighten me,“ she faltered. „Let go my wrist. I shall go away if you are not kinder.“

Again the laugh.

„But, little one, I might not choose to let you go,“ Senn expostulated. „I might choose to keep you here always. You do not love my wood. That is, perhaps, because of its name. They call it, you know, the Cemetery Wood. You would not wish to be buried there?“

Ninette's little cry seemed to come with a curiously muffled sound.

„You must not make a noise, little one,“ Senn went on. „There are no neighbours near, but those on the other side of the road might be curious. A man living alone, entirely alone, must be careful.“

It took Manders precisely three long paces to get once more back into the street, and a matter of a couple of seconds for his finger to find the bell. With his other hand he undid one of the studs of his shirt, thrust his hat on one side, ruffled his hair, dragged his tie a little on one side, and listened intently. The throbbing of the bell drowned all sounds, yet he had fancied when first he pressed it that he had heard something—a stifled cry, or was it a shriek? Still the bell pealed and throbbed.

There were footsteps, soon enough really, although the time had seemed long to the expectant visitor. The door was thrown open. Mr. Senn stood peering out, a sinister-looking figure indeed. And behind him Manders could see, stealing down the passage, her great eyes shining with terror and hope, Ninette.

„What the devil do you want?“ Senn muttered.

Then it became apparent that Manders was very drunk. He smiled fatuously, and endeavoured to pat Mr. Senn on the back.

„Fourteen!“ he exclaimed. „Eleven times at the centre table! The croupier—friend of mine, that croupier—he whispered to me, ‘Monsieur,’ he said, ‘if fourteen comes up centre table, within an hour fourteen comes up eleven times last table on left. The one great superstition of the place—always comes out right.’ So here I am. Got a little fiacre at the corner. Come along down and break the bank.“

Mr. Senn was very still, but there was a strange light in his eyes.

„How did you know where to find me?“ he demanded.

Manders tapped his forehead and shook his head.

„Sorry,“ he confided; „fact is, I met a few of the boys. Can’t remember anything as clearly as I’d like... Why, bless my soul,“ he added, „there’s little Ninette!“

### Illustration

Ninette came running out, as pale as death

Ninette came running out, as pale as death. Senn, however, still blocked the way.

„You’d better come in and have a drink,“ he said to his unwelcome visitor.

„I’ll drink while you make a fortune,“ Mr. Manders replied. „We’ll all three go down together. Come along, Ninette.“

So the three walked down together towards the fiacre at the corner of the street, and both Ninette’s hands were clasped around Manders’s arm. She clung to him like a child, and Manders’s one little downward smile of encouragement was not in the least the smile of a drunken man.

They drove to the Casino, and without taking the least notice of his companions, with the light in his eyes of a man who goes to great things, Senn hastened in. Manders pretended to be sonic time finding money for the cocher. When he had paid him, he drew Ninette away and made her sit down with him before one of the tables at the café. She was still white, almost to the lips.

„That awful man!“ she sobbed. „It was the good God who sent you.“

Manders patted her hand.

„Listen, little one,“ he said; „there has been no run on fourteen, as he will soon find out. Your note frightened me. I have a grave suspicion concerning that man, so I followed you up the hill. You understand?“

„Yes,“ she faltered. „Oh, thank you—thank God!“

„Listen again,“ Manders went on. „Can you be a brave little woman for the sake of others who are not so fortunate as you?“

„I will do everything that you tell me,“ she promised, gulping the brandy which the waiter brought. „Down here I am not so afraid. But up there—it is a horrible thought, but there was murder in his eyes.“

„Continue to listen, my child,“ her companion begged. „Show no fear of the man. Follow him in to the Casino. Forget your terror in his apartment. Laugh at yourself. Speak of me as very, very drunk. Go nowhere alone with him, but humour him. You understand?“

„But is it that you are of the police, then?“ the girl faltered.

Manders shook his head.

„I am a friend of one who is,“ he told her. „He is on the way here. He arrives to-morrow morning. You will do all that I have asked? You will say that you have seen me to the hotel?“

„Rest assured of it, my benefactor,“ she promised, as they parted.

Mr. Hugh Manders on the following morning showed every sign of having recovered from his debauch. His sunburnt cheeks showed no trace of pallor. He was as carefully dressed and distinguished as ever. He swung across the Square to where he saw Senn sitting in grim solitude.

„My friend,“ he said, pausing in front of him, „I have come to present my apologies.“

Mr. Senn scowled.

„There was no run on number fourteen last night,“ he declared. „You came to me with a lie.“

„Isn't that rather a hard word?“ Manders protested soothingly. „I don't know whether I showed any signs of it, but I will admit that I had had too much to drink. I was, in fact, compelled to submit to the indignity of being put to bed by the hall-porter.“

Mr. Senn made inarticulate sounds which might have been taken to mean that he accepted the other's explanation.

„It cost me twenty-five thousand before I found out,“ he muttered.

„I am heartily sorry.“ was the apologetic reply. „Where is the little Ninette? I fear that she, too, has cause for anger with me.“

„You broke up my supper-party, confound you!“ Senn grumbled. „Ninette's all right, but she wouldn't come back again. You brought me down here on a fool's errand.“

„I will atone,“ Manders promised. „To-day you will lunch with me. I have a table at Ciro's. I shall challenge Pierre to produce of his best. There is burgundy, not in the wine list—Chamberlin; brandy—Arrmignac. Pierre shall produce his treasures.“

„I will lunch with you,“ Mr. Senn agreed, a little mollified. „At twelve-thirty precisely I shall be there,“ Mr. Senn promised.

Manders called upon his friends the Prestons at the Hotel Metropole, and spent some time in conversation with them. Afterwards he made his way to the station and met Sarson, who had travelled by the night train from Paris. At twelve-thirty he made his way along the Arcade to Ciro's, and when Mr. Senn appeared he found himself one of a little party of guests.

„Mrs. Preston, allow me to present my friend, Mr. Senn,“ Manders said genially. „Senn, this is Major Preston and Mr. Sarson. To-day I am not insulting you with a cocktail. We are going to drink wine.“

Senn, after a moment's hesitation, accepted the presence of other guests with equanimity. From the first he attached himself to Mrs. Preston. They sat side by side, and soon their conversation became more and more earnest. Every now and then they drew apart and joined reluctantly in the general conversation—an obvious concession to good manners, for at the first opportunity Senn, in particular, turned back to his neighbour, eager to renew their more intimate tête-à-tête. Towards the close of the meal he leaned a little back in his chair, drinking his wine with the slow appreciation of the gratified epicure. To his neighbour he talked with rapidity, apparently with eloquence. His contributions to the general conversation, however, remained scanty. It was only just towards



the end, after the arrival of that dust-covered bottle of Armagnac, that he seemed to thrust aside his reserve and throw any light upon the subject of that secret conversation.

„Whether in fear or hope,“ he pronounced, „the greatest desire mortal man has, is to see what is on the other side of the veil. There are some to whom the very thought must be agony, some who must dread the thought of a hereafter. Yet their thirst for knowledge is at least equal to the thirst of those who have preserved hope.“

„I am not sure that I agree with you,“ his host declared. „I can understand the white man, who has nothing to fear from a hereafter, longing for some assurance concerning it. But take the case of a great criminal, now. What has he to gain? If there is a hereafter, it is governed by supernatural laws, and it isn't reasonable to suppose that the criminal is going to be accepted on the same basis as the righteous man.“

Senn leaned eagerly forward.

„You miss the point,“ he protested. „Can't you see that the fear of the criminal and the hope of the just man both result in the same emotion—curiosity? One desires to solve the matter of his hopes, the other the matter of his fears.“

Manders shrugged his shoulders.

„You may be right,“ he admitted. „Personally, I am well content to wait.“

„I am not,“ was the muttered reply.

Major Preston swung the brandy reverently around in his huge glass.

„If you take my advice, all of you,“ he said, „you'll abandon all serious conversation and devote yourselves to the brandy. Mr. Manders, I salute you as a prince of hosts.“

They drank Manders's health, and in due course the party broke up. Senn and Mrs. Preston, however, wandered away together.

„We are going for a little walk along the promenade,“ the latter observed, as she nodded farewell to her host. „I shall be in the Club presently.“

The three men sat down together outside the Café de Paris. Manders fanned himself with his hat, for the day was warm.

„I suppose the idea's all right,“ Major Preston observed, „but it seems to me a little melodramatic. Why can't you go the straight ticket, Manders?“

The latter shook his head.

„There are eleven impenetrable years,“ he pointed out, „a great gulf, on the other side of which, as Sarson will tell you, the clue disappears.“

„What you are aiming at is a confession, then?“ Sarson observed.

Manders nodded.

„It is the novelist's point of view as against the detective's,“ he declared. „My theory is that the man is without doubt insane.“

„But the little lady here whom you rescued?“

Manders went over to where Ninette was seated, a little distance away, and brought her back to the two men. She was still very pale and subdued.

„Ninette,“ he begged, „will you tell these gentlemen about last night when you were alone with Mr. Senn?“

„There is nothing to tell,“ she replied, „except—except that I know he meant to kill me.“

„Did you see any weapons?“ Sarson asked. „Did he threaten you at all?“

She shook her head.

„What I know, I know,“ she said firmly. „I saw it come into his eyes, the thought that he would kill me. They went red, and he looked at me like a wild beast. I tell you that I saw murder.“

Major Preston moved uneasily in his chair. The detective, notwithstanding the warm sunshine, shivered.

„You see, gentlemen,“ Manders observed, „here is evidence which is no evidence. I think that our way is the best.“

The end of these things contained certain phenomena which, notwithstanding his profound disbelief in all supernatural manifestations, nevertheless left a poignant and lifelong impression upon Manders's mind. For the three days following his luncheon party. Mrs. Preston was an altered woman, Gradually she seemed to lose her air of superb health and her cheerful woman-of-the-world poise. Her cheeks seemed to grow thinner, and her eyes larger. She abandoned her visits to the Sporting Club just as Senn abandoned the Casino. They sat together in quiet places and talked, and when she was invisible he took long walks into the country and came back covered with dust and with black rims of fatigue under his eyes. He was like an uneasy shadow, waiting for the hour to come.

In the end, the mise-en-scène was changed. They met one evening in the large salon occupied by the Prestons at the Hotel Metropole, but three minutes after they had taken their places, Mrs. Preston had turned on the lights.

„It is impossible,“ she declared. „There is an atmosphere here which is like a wall. Nothing can go out from me or can come to me. We must find a small, plain room and open space beyond.“

The next night they drove up the hill and trooped silently into Senn's strange apartment. Mrs. Preston stretched herself upon a sofa behind a screen, and the French windows were thrown open to the cloudy night. Sarson, Major Preston and Manders were seated around the table, and facing the window, Senn. They sat on in darkness. Outside a wind was blowing, and there was the occasional patter of rain. Time passed, and then a voice from behind the screen.

„There is someone coming. There is someone coming for a man here whom no one knows, whose name—but no, I cannot hear his name... Wait! There are more than one. There are seven. One comes first... Wait!“

At this point Manders began to lose hold of himself, for out of that windy darkness it seemed to him that a shape approached the window. By his side he heard the breath of agony come whistling through the lungs of the man next to him, a sound like a sigh, and then a low voice.

„Is it you who have dared to call me back; William Holdsworth, I, the first of your victims? I am here. The others are coming.“

Manders could have sworn that there was the vision of a white face, a sob, and disappearance. The man by his side had risen, had stood for a moment with hands outstretched towards the window. And then suddenly the gurgling of his breath ceased. They saw him through the darkness, his face as white as ashes, his eyes glaring and transfixed with horror. Then he sank down in a crumpled heap.

#### Illustration

Through the darkness they saw Senn, his face white as ashes, his eyes glaring and transfixed with horror, his

fingers clawing the air.

„Tell me, Ninette,“ Manders asked, three days later, „you spoke once of that moment when you saw murder come into his face. It was in the little salon?“

She sipped her liqueur and nodded.

„He was seated at the round table facing the window. Suddenly he rose to his feet, he looked across at me, and I seemed to see his fingers coming.“

Manders took off his hat as though by accident, and rested it upon his knee.

„He died like that,“ he muttered.

