

The Wedding Guest

Simon Carne, #1

by Guy Boothby, 1867-1905

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ONE bright summer morning Simon Carne sat in his study, and reflected on the slackness of things in general. Since he had rendered such a signal service to the State, as narrated in the previous chapter, he had done comparatively nothing to raise himself in his own estimation. He was thinking in this strain when his butler entered, and announced "Kelmare Sahib." The interruption was a welcome one, and Carne rose to greet his guest with every sign of pleasure on his face.

"Good-morning, Kelmare," he said, as he took the other's outstretched hand; "I'm delighted to see you. How are you this morning?"

"As well as a man can hope to be under the circumstances," replied the new arrival, a somewhat *blasé* youth, dressed in the height of fashion. "You are going to the Greenthorpe wedding, of course. I hear you have been invited."

"You are quite right; I have," said Carne, and presently produced a card from the basket, and tossed it across the table.

The other took it up with a groan.

"Yes," he said, "that's it, by Jove! And a nice-looking document it is. Carne, did you ever hate anybody so badly that it seemed as if it would be scarcely possible to discover anything you would not do to hurt them?"

"No," answered Carne, "I cannot say that I have. Fate has always found me some way or another in which I might get even with my enemies. But you seem very vindictive in this matter. What's the reason of it?"

"Vindictive?" said Kelmare, "of course I am; think how they have treated me. A year ago, this week, Sophie Greenthorpe and I were engaged. Old Greenthorpe had not then turned his business into a limited liability company, and my people were jolly angry with me for making such a foolish match; but I did not care. I was in love, and Sophie Greenthorpe is as pretty a girl as can be found in the length and breadth of London. But there, you've seen her, so you know for yourself. Well, three months later, old Greenthorpe sold his business for upwards of three million sterling. On the strength of it he went into the House, gave thirty thousand to the funds of his party, and would have received a baronetcy for his generosity, had his party not been shunted out of power.

"Inside another month all the swells had taken them up; dukes and earls were as common at the old lady's receptions as they had been scarce before, and I began to understand that, instead of being everybody to them as I had once been, the old fellow was beginning to think his daughter might have done much better than become engaged to the third son of an impecunious earl.

Illustration:

Dukes and earls were common at the old lady's receptions.

"Then Kilbenham came upon the scene. He's a fine-looking fellow, and a marquis, but, as you know as well as I do, a real bad hat. He hasn't a red cent in the world to bless himself with, and he wanted money—well—just about as badly as a man *could* want it. What's the result? Within six weeks I am thrown over, and she has accepted Kilbenham's offer of marriage. Society says—'What a good match!' and, as if to endorse it, you received an invitation to the ceremony."

"Forgive me, but *you* are growing cynical now," said Carne, as he lit a fresh cigar.

"Haven't I good cause to be?" asked Kelmare. "Wait till you've been treated as I have, and then we'll see how you'll feel. When I think how every man you meet speaks of Kilbenham, and of the stories that are afloat concerning him, and hear the way old Greenthorpe and his pretensions are laughed at in the clubs, and sneered at in the papers, and am told that they are receiving presents of enormous value from all sorts and conditions of people, from Royalty to the poor devils of

workmen he still under-pays, just because Kilbenham is a marquis and she is the daughter of a millionaire, why, I can tell you it is enough to make any one cynical."

"In the main, I agree with you," said Carne. "But, as life is made up of just such contradictions, it seems to me absurd to butt your head against a stone wall, and then grumble because it hurts and you don't make any impression on it. Do you think the presents are as wonderful as they say? I want to know, because I've not given mine yet. In these days one gives as others give. If they have not received anything very good, then a pair of electroplated entrée dishes will meet the case. If the reverse—well—diamonds, perhaps, or an old Master that the Americans are wild to buy, and can't."

"Who is cynical now, I should like to know?" said Kelmare. "I was told this morning that up to the present, with the superb diamonds given by the bride's father, they have totalled a value of something like twenty thousand pounds."

"You surprise me," answered Carne.

"I am surprised myself," said Kelmare, as he rose to go. "Now, I must be off. I came in to see if you felt inclined for a week's cruise in the Channel. Burgrave has lent me his yacht, and somehow I think a change of air will do me good."

"I am very sorry," said Carne, "but it would be quite impossible for me to get away just now. I have several important functions on hand that will keep me in town."

"I suppose this wedding is one of them?"

"To tell the honest truth, I had scarcely thought of it," replied Carne. "Must you be off? Well, then, good-bye, and a pleasant holiday to you."

WHEN Kelmare had disappeared, Carne went back to his study, and seated himself at his writing-table. "Kelmare is a little over-sensitive," he said, "and his pique is spoiling his judgment. He does not seem to realize that he has come very well out of a jolly bad business. I am not certain which I pity most—Miss Greenthorpe, who is a heartless little hussy, or the Marquis of Kilbenham, who is a thorough-paced scoundrel. The wedding, however, promises to be a fashionable one, and—"

He stopped midway, rose, and stood leaning against the mantelpiece, staring into the empty fireplace. Presently he flipped the ash off his cigar, and turned round. "It never struck me in that light before," he said, as he pressed the button of the electric bell in the wall beside him. When it was answered, he ordered his carriage, and a quarter of an hour later was rolling down Regent Street.

Reaching a well-known jeweller's shop, he pulled the check string, and, the door having been opened, descended, and went inside. It was not the first time he had had dealings with the firm, and as soon as he was recognised the proprietor hastened forward himself to wait upon him.

"I want a nice wedding present for a young lady," he said, when the other had asked what he could have the pleasure of showing him. "Diamonds, I think, for preference."

A tray containing hairpins, brooches, rings, and aigrettes set with stones was put before him, but Carne was not satisfied. He wanted something better, he said—something a little more imposing. When he left the shop a quarter of an

hour later he had chosen a diamond bracelet, for which he had paid the sum of one thousand pounds. In consequence, the jeweller bowed him to his carriage with almost Oriental obsequiousness.

As Carne rolled down the street, he took the bracelet from its case and glanced at it. He had long since made up his mind as to his line of action, and having done so, was now prepared to start business without delay. On leaving the shop, he had ordered his coachman to drive home; but on second thoughts he changed his mind, and, once more pulling the check string, substituted Berkeley Square for Park Lane.

"I must be thoroughly convinced in my own mind," he said, "before I do anything, and the only way to do that will be to see old Greenthorpe himself without delay. I think I have a good and sufficient excuse in my pocket. At any rate, I'll try it."

On reaching the residence in question, he instructed his footman to inquire whether Mr. Greenthorpe was at home, and if so, if he would see him. An answer in the affirmative was soon forthcoming, and a moment later Carne and Greenthorpe were greeting each other in the library.

"Delighted to see you, my dear sir," the latter said as he shook his guest warmly by the hand, at the same time hoping that old Sir Mowbray Mowbray next door, who was a gentleman of the old school, and looked down on the plutocracy, could see and recognise the magnificent equipage standing before his house. "This is most kind of you, and indeed I take it as most friendly too."

Carne's face was as smiling and fascinating as it was wont to be, but an acute observer might have read in the curves of his lips a little of the contempt he felt for the man before him. Matthew Greenthorpe's face and figure betrayed his origin as plainly as any words could have done. If this had not been sufficient, his dress and the profusion of jewellery—principally diamonds—that decked his person would have told the tale. In appearance he was short, stout, very red about the face, and made up what he lacked in breeding by an effusive familiarity that sometimes bordered on the offensive.

"I am afraid," said Carne, when his host had finished speaking, "that I ought to be ashamed of myself for intruding on you at such an early hour. I wanted, however, to thank you personally for the kind invitation you have sent me to be present at your daughter's wedding."

"I trust you will be able to come," replied Mr. Greenthorpe a little anxiously, for he was eager that the world should know that he and the now famous Simon Carne were on familiar terms.

"That is exactly what has brought me to see you," said Carne. "I regret to say I hardly know yet whether I shall be able to give myself that pleasure or not. An important complication has arisen in connection with some property in which I am interested, and it is just possible that I shall be called to the Continent within the next few days. My object in calling upon you this morning was to ask you to permit me to withhold my answer until I am at liberty to speak more definitely as to my arrangements."

"By all means, by all means," answered his host, placing himself with legs wide apart upon the hearthrug, and rattling the money in his trouser pockets. "Take just as long as you like so long as you don't say you can't come. Me and the

missus—hem! I mean Mrs. Greenthorpe and I—are looking forward to the pleasure of your society, and I can tell you we shan't think our company complete if we don't have you with us."

"I am extremely flattered," said Carne sweetly, "and you may be sure it will not be my fault if I am *not* among your guests."

"Hear, hear, to that, sir," replied the old gentleman. "We shall be a merry party, and, I trust, a distinguished one. We *did* hope to have had Royalty present among us, but, unfortunately, there were special reasons, that I am hardly privileged to mention, which prevented it. However, the Duke of Rugby and his duchess, the father and mother of my future son-in-law, you know, are coming; the Earl of Boxmoor and his countess have accepted; Lord Southam and his lady, half a dozen baronets or so, and as many Members of Parliament and their wives as you can count on one hand. There'll be a ball the night before, given by the Mayor at the Assembly Rooms, a dinner to the tenants at the conclusion of the ceremony, and a ball in my own house after the young couple have gone away. You may take it from me, my dear sir, that nothing on a similar scale has ever been seen at Market Stopford before."

"I can quite believe it," said Carne. "It will mark an epoch in the history of the county."

"It will do more than that, sir. The festivities alone will cost me a cool five thousand pounds. At first I was all for having it in town, but I was persuaded out of it. After all, a country house is better suited to such jinks. And we mean to do it well."

He took Carne familiarly by the button of his coat, and, sinking his voice to an impressive whisper, asked him to hazard a guess how much he thought the whole affair, presents and all, would cost.

Carne shook his head. "I have not the very remotest notion," he said. "But if you wish me to guess, I will put it at fifty thousand pounds."

"Not enough by half, sir—not enough by half. Why, I'll let you into a little secret that even my wife knows nothing about."

As he spoke, he crossed the room to a large safe in the wall. This he unlocked, and having done so took from it an oblong box, wrapped in tissue paper. This he placed on the table in the centre of the room, and then, having looked out into the hall to make sure that no one was about, shut and locked the door. Then, turning to Carne, he said:

"I don't know what you may think, sir, but there are some people I know as try to insinuate that if you have money you can't have taste. Now, I've got the money"—here he threw back his shoulders, and tapped himself proudly on the chest—"and I'm going to convince you, sir, that I've got as pretty an idea of taste as any man could wish to have. This box will prove it."

So saying, he unwrapped the tissue paper, and displayed to Carne's astonished gaze a large gilded casket, richly chased, standing upon four massive feet.

"There, sir, you see," he said, "an artistic bit of workmanship, and I'll ask you to guess what it's for."

Carne, however, shook his head. "I'm afraid I'm but a poor hand at guessing, but, if I must venture an opinion, I should say a jewel case."

Illustration:

"I should say a jewel case."

Thereupon Mr. Greenthorpe lifted the lid.

"And you would be wrong, sir. I will tell you what it is for. That box has been constructed to contain exactly fifty thousand sovereigns, and on her wedding day it will be filled, and presented to the bride, as a token of her father's affection. Now, if that isn't in good taste, I shall have to ask you to tell me what is."

"I am astonished at your munificence," said Carne. "To be perfectly candid with you, I don't know that I have ever heard of such a present before."

"I thought you'd say so. I said to myself when I ordered that box, 'Mr. Carne is the best judge of what is artistic in England, and I'll take his opinion about it.'"

"I suppose your daughter has received some valuable presents?"

"Valuable, sir? Why, that's no name for it. I should put down what has come in up to the present at not a penny under twenty thousand pounds. Why, you may not believe it, sir, but Mrs. Greenthorpe has presented the young couple with a complete toilet-set of solid gold. I doubt if such another has been seen in this country before."

"I should say it would be worth a burglar's while to pay a visit to your house on the wedding day," said Carne with a smile.

"He wouldn't get much for his pains," said the old gentleman warmly. "I have already provided for that contingency. The billiard-room will be used as a treasure-chamber for the time being, as there is a big safe like that over yonder in the wall. This week bars are being placed on all the windows, and on the night preceding, and also on the wedding day, one of my gardeners will keep watch in the room itself, while one of the village policemen will mount guard at the door in the passage. Between them they ought to be sufficient to keep out any burglars who may wish to try their hands upon the presents. What do you think?"

At that moment the handle of the door turned, and an instant later the bride-elect entered the room. On seeing Simon Carne she paused upon the threshold with a gesture of embarrassment, and made as if she would retreat. Carne, however, was too quick for her. He advanced and held out his hand.

"How do you do, Miss Greenthorpe?" he said, looking her steadily in the face. "Your father has just been telling me of the many beautiful presents you have received. I am sure I congratulate you most heartily. With your permission I will add my mite to the list. Such as it is, I would beg your acceptance of it."

So saying, he took from his pocket the case containing the bracelet he had that morning purchased. Unfastening it, he withdrew the circlet and clasped it upon her wrist. So great was her surprise and delight that for some moments she was at a loss how to express her thanks. When she recovered her presence of mind and her speech, she attempted to do so, but Carne stopped her.

"You must not thank me too much," he said, "or I shall begin to think I have done a meritorious action. I trust Lord Kilbenham is well?"

"He was very well when I last saw him," answered the girl after a momentary pause, which Carne noticed, "but he is so busy just now that we see very little of each other. Good-bye."

ALL the way home Simon Carne sat wrapped in a brown study. On reaching his residence he went straight to his study, and to his writing-desk, where he engaged himself for some minutes jotting down certain memoranda on a sheet of note-paper. When he had finished he rang the bell and ordered that Belton, his valet, should be sent to him.

"Belton," he said, when the person he wanted had arrived in answer to the summons, "on Thursday next I shall go down to Market Stopford to attend the wedding of the Marquis of Kilbenham with Miss Greenthorpe. You will, of course, accompany me. In the meantime" (here he handed him the sheet of paper upon which he had been writing) "I want you to attend to these few details. Some of the articles, I'm afraid, you will find rather difficult to obtain, but at any cost I must have them to take down to the country with me."

Belton took the paper and left the room with it, and for the time being Carne dismissed the matter from his mind.

THE sun was in the act of setting on the day immediately preceding the wedding when Simon Carne and his faithful valet reached the wayside station of Market Stopford. As the train came to a standstill, a footman wearing the Greenthorpe livery opened the door of the reserved carriage and informed his master's guest that a brougham was waiting outside the station to convey him to his destination. Belton was to follow with the luggage in the servants' omnibus.

On arrival at Greenthorpe Park, Simon Carne was received by his host and hostess in the hall, the rearmost portion of which was furnished as a smoking-room. Judging from the number of guests passing, re-passing, and lolling about in the easy chairs, most of the company invited had already arrived. When he had greeted those with whom he was familiar, and had taken a cup of tea from the hands of the bride-elect, who was dispensing it at a small table near the great oak fireplace, he set himself to be agreeable to those about him for the space of a quarter of an hour, after which he was escorted to his bedroom, a pretty room situated in the main portion of the building at the head of the grand staircase. He found Belton awaiting him there. His luggage had been unpacked, and a glance at his watch told him that in a few minutes' time it would be necessary for him to prepare for dinner.

Illustration:

A cup of tea from the hands of the new bride.

"Well, Belton," he said, as he threw himself into a chair beside the window that looked out over the rose garden, "here we are, and the next question is, how are we going to succeed?"

"I have never known you fail yet, sir," replied the deferential valet, "and I don't suppose you'll do so on this occasion."

"You flatter me, Belton, but I will not be so falsely modest as to say that your praise is altogether undeserved. This, however, is a case of more than usual delicacy and danger, and it will be necessary for us to play our cards with

considerable care. When I have examined this house I shall elaborate my plans more fully. We have none too much time, for the attempt must be made tomorrow night. You have brought down with you the things I mentioned on that list, I suppose?"

"They are in these chests, sir," said Belton. "They make a precious heavy load, and once or twice I was fearful lest they might arouse suspicion."

"You need have no fear, my good Belton," said Carne. "I have a very plausible excuse to account for their presence here. Every one by this time knows that I am a great student, and also that I never travel without at least two cases of books. It is looked upon as a harmless fad. Here is my key. Open the box standing nearest to you."

Belton did as he was commanded, when it was seen that it was filled to its utmost holding capacity with books.

"No one would think," said Carne, with a smile at the astonishment depicted on the other's face, "that there are only two layers of volumes there, would they? If you lift out the tray upon which they rest, you will discover that the balance of the box is now occupied by the things you placed in it. Unknown to you, I had the trays fitted after you had packed the others. There is nothing like being prepared for all emergencies. Now, pay attention to what I am about to say to you. I have learned that the wedding presents, including the fifty thousand sovereigns presented by Mr. Greenthorpe to his daughter in that absurd casket, of which I spoke to you, will be on view to-morrow afternoon in the billiard-room; to-night, and to-morrow before the ball commences, they will be placed in the safe. One of Mr. Greenthorpe's most trusted servants will keep watch over them in the room, while a constable will be on duty in the lobby outside. Bars have been placed on all the windows, and, as I understand, the village police will patrol the building at intervals during the night. The problem of how we are to get hold of them would seem rather a hard nut to crack, would it not?"

"I must confess I don't see how you are going to do it at all, sir," said Belton.

"Well, we'll see. I have a plan in my head now, but before I can adopt it I must make a few inquiries. I believe there is a staircase leading from the end of this corridor down to the lobby outside the billiard and smoking-rooms. If this is so, we shall have to make use of it. It must be your business to discover at what time the custodians of the treasure have their last meal. When you have found that out let me know. Now you had better get me ready for dinner as soon as possible."

When Carne retired to rest that evening, his inimitable valet was in a position to report that the sentries were already installed, and that their supper had been taken to them, by Mr. Greenthorpe's orders, at ten o'clock precisely, by one of the under-footmen, who had been instructed to look after them.

"Very good," said Carne; "I think I see my way now. I'll sleep on my scheme and let you know what decision I have come to in the morning. If we pull this little business off successfully, there will be ten thousand pounds for you to pay into your credit, my friend."

Belton bowed and thanked his master without a sign of emotion upon his face. After which Simon Carne went to bed.

WHEN he was called next morning, he discovered a perfect summer day. Brilliant sunshine streamed in at the windows, and the songs of birds came from the trees outside.

"An excellent augury," he said to himself as he jumped out of bed and donned the heavy dressing-gown his valet held open for him. "Miss Greenthorpe, my compliments to you. My lord marquis is not the only man upon whom you are conferring happiness today."

His good humour did not leave him, for when he descended to the breakfast-room an hour later his face was radiant with smiles, and every one admitted that it would be impossible to meet a more charming companion.

During the morning he was occupied in the library, writing letters.

At one he lunched with his fellow-guests, none of the family being present, and at half-past went off to dress for the wedding ceremony. This important business completed, a move was made for the church; and in something less than a quarter of an hour the nuptial knot was tied, and Miss Sophie Greenthorpe, only daughter of Matthew Greenthorpe, erstwhile grocer and provision merchant, of Little Bexter Street, Tottenham Court Road, left the building, on her husband's arm, Marchioness of Kilbenham and future Duchess of Rugby.

Simon Carne and his fellow-guests followed in her wake down the aisle, and, having entered their carriages, returned to the Park.

The ball that evening was an acknowledged success, but, though he was an excellent dancer, and had his choice of the prettiest women in the room, Carne was evidently ill at ease. The number of times he stealthily examined his watch said this as plainly as any words. As a matter of fact, the last guest had scarcely arrived before he left the ball-room, and passed down the lobby towards the back staircase, stopping en route to glance at the billiard-room door.

As he expected, it was closed, and a stalwart provincial policeman stood on guard before it.

He made a jocular reference about the treasure the constable was guarding, and, with a laugh at himself for forgetting the way to his bedroom, retraced his steps to the stairs, up which he passed to his own apartment Belton was awaiting him there.

"It is ten minutes to ten, Belton," he said abruptly. "It must be now or never. Go down to the kitchen, and hang about there until the tray upon which the suppers of the guard are placed is prepared. When the footman starts with it for the billiard-room, accompany him, and, as he opens the green baize door leading from the servants' quarters into the house, manage, by hook or crook, to hold him in conversation. Say something, and interrupt yourself by a severe fit of coughing. That will give me my cue. If anything should happen to me as I come downstairs, be sure that the man puts his tray down on the slab at the foot of the stairs and renders me assistance. I will manage the rest. Now be off."

Belton bowed respectfully, and left the room. As he did so, Carne crossed to the dressing-table, and unlocked a small case standing upon it. From this he took a tiny silver-stoppered scent bottle, containing, perhaps, half an ounce of white powder. This he slipped into his waistcoat pocket, and then made for the door.

On the top of the back staircase he paused for a few moments to listen. He heard the spring of the green baize door in the passage below creak as it was

pushed open. Next moment he distinguished Belton's voice. "It's as true as that I'm standing here," he was saying. "As I went up the stairs with the governor's hot water there she was coming along the passage. I stood back to let her pass, and as I did she "(Here the narrative was interrupted by a violent fit of coughing.) On hearing this Carne descended the stairs, and, when he had got half-way down, saw the footman and his valet coming along the passage below. At the same instant he must have caught his foot in the stair carpet, for he tripped and fell headlong to the bottom.

"Heaven's alive!" cried Belton. "I do believe that's my governor, and he's killed." At the same time he ran forward to the injured man's assistance.

Illustration:

He ran forward to the injured man's assistance.

Carne lay at the foot of the stairs just as he had fallen, his head thrown back, his eyes shut, and his body curled up and motionless. Belton turned to the footman, who still stood holding the tray where he had stopped on seeing the accident, and said: "Put down those things and go and find Mr. Greenthorpe as quickly as you can. Tell him Mr. Carne has fallen downstairs, and I'm afraid is seriously injured."

The footman immediately disappeared. His back was scarcely turned, however, before Carne was on his feet.

"Excellent, my dear Belton," he whispered; and, as he spoke, he slipped his fingers into his waistcoat pocket. "Hand me up that tray, but be quiet, or the policeman round the corner will hear you."

Belton did as he was ordered, and Carne thereupon sprinkled upon the suppers provided for the two men some of the white powder from the bottle he had taken from his dressing-case. This done, he resumed his place at the foot of the stairs, while Belton, kneeling over him and supporting his head, waited for assistance. Very few minutes elapsed before Mr. Greenthorpe, with his scared face, appeared upon the scene. At his direction Belton and the footman carried the unconscious gentleman to his bedroom, and placed him upon his bed. Restoratives were administered, and in something under ten minutes the injured man once more opened his eyes.

"What is the matter?" he asked feebly. "What has happened?"

"You have met with a slight accident, my dear sir," said the old gentleman, "but you are better now. You fell downstairs."

As if he scarcely comprehended what was said, Carne feebly repeated the last sentence after his host, and then closed his eyes again. When he opened them once more, it was to beg Mr. Greenthorpe to leave him and return to his guests downstairs. After a small amount of pressing, the latter consented to do so, and retired, taking the footman with him. The first use Carne made of their departure was to turn to Belton.

"The powder will take effect in five hours," he said. "See that you have all the things prepared."

"They are quite ready," replied Belton. "I arranged them this evening."

"Very good," said Carne. "Now, I am going to sleep in real earnest."

So saying, he closed his eyes, and resigned himself to slumber as composedly as if nothing out of the common had occurred. The clock on the stables had struck three when he woke again. Belton was still sleeping peacefully, and it was not until he had been repeatedly shaken that he became conscious that it was time to get up.

"Wake up," said Carne; "it is three o'clock, and time for us to be about our business. Unlock that box, and get out the things."

Belton did as he was ordered, placing the packets as he took them from the cases in small Gladstone bags. Having done this, he went to one of his master's trunks, and took from it two suits of clothes, a pair of wigs, two excellently contrived false beards, and a couple of soft felt hats. These he placed upon the bed. Ten minutes later he had assisted his master to change into one of the suits, and when this was done waited for further instructions.

"Before you dress, take a tumbler from that table, and go downstairs. If you should meet any one, say that you are going to the butler's pantry in search of filtered water, as you have used all the drinking water in this room. The ball should be over by this time, and the guests in bed half an hour ago. Ascertain if this is the case, and as you return glance at the policeman on duty outside the billiard-room door. Let me know his condition."

"Very good, sir," said Belton; and, taking a tumbler from the table in question, he left the room. In less than five minutes he had returned to report that, with the exception of the corridor outside the billiard-room, the house was in darkness.

"And how is the guardian of the door?" Carne inquired.

"Fast asleep," said Belton, "and snoring like a pig, sir."

"That is right," said Carne. "The man inside should be the same, or that powder has failed me for the first time in my experience. We'll give them half an hour longer, however, and then get to work. You had better dress yourself."

While Belton was making himself up to resemble his master, Carne sat in an easy chair by his dressing-table, reading Ruskin's "Stones of Venice." It was one of the most important of his many peculiarities that he could withdraw his thoughts from any subject, however much it might hitherto have engrossed him, and fasten them upon another, without once allowing them to wander back to their original channel. As the stable clock chimed the half-hour, he put the book aside, and sprang to his feet.

"If you're ready, Belton," he said, "switch off the electric light and open that door."

When this had been done he bade his valet wait in the bedroom while he crept down the stairs on tip-toe. On turning into the billiard-room lobby, he discovered the rural policeman propped up in the corner fast asleep. His heavy breathing echoed down the corridors, and one moment's inspection showed Carne that from him he had nothing to fear. Unlocking the door with a key which he took from his pocket, he entered the room, to find the gardener, like the policeman, fast asleep in an armchair by the window. He crossed to him, and, after a careful examination of his breathing, lifted one of his eyelids.

Illustration:

He discovered the rural policeman fast asleep.

"Excellent," he said. "Nothing could be better. Now, when Belton comes, we shall be ready for business."

So saying, he left the room again, and went softly up the stairs to find his valet. The latter was awaiting him, and, before a witness, had there been one, could have counted twenty, they were standing in the billiard-room together. It was a large apartment, luxuriously furnished, with a bow window at one end and an alcove, surrounded with seats, at the other. In this alcove, cleverly hidden by the wainscotting, as Mr. Greenthorpe had once been at some pains to point out to Simon Carne, there existed a large iron safe of the latest burglar-proof pattern and design.

The secret was an ingenious one, and would have baffled any ordinary craftsman. Carne, however, as has already been explained, was far from being a common-place member of his profession. Turning to Belton, he said, "Give me the tools." These being forthcoming, in something less than ten minutes he had picked the lock and was master of the safe's contents.

When these, including the fifty thousand sovereigns, had been safely carried upstairs and stowed away in the portmanteaux and chests, and the safe had been filled with the spurious jewellery he had brought with him for that purpose, he signed to Belton to bring him a long pair of steps which stood in a corner of the room, and which had been used for securing the sky-light above the billiard table. These he placed in such a position as would enable him to reach the window.

With a diamond-pointed instrument, and a hand as true as the eye that guided it, he quickly extracted a square of coloured glass, filed through the catch, and was soon standing on the leads outside. A few moments later, the ladder, which had already rendered him such signal service, had enabled him to descend into the garden on the other side.

There he arranged a succession of footsteps in the soft mould, and having done so, returned to the roof, carefully wiped the end of the ladder, so that it should not betray him, and climbed down into the room below, pulling it after him.

"I think we have finished now," he said to Belton, as he took a last look at the recumbent guardians of the room. "These gentlemen sleep soundly, so we will not disturb them further. Come, let us retire to bed."

In less than half an hour he was in bed and fast asleep. Next morning he was still confined to his room by his accident, though he expressed himself as suffering but slight pain. Every one was quick to sympathise with him, and numerous messages were conveyed to him expressive of sorrow that he should have met with his accident at such a time of general rejoicing. At ten o'clock the first batch of guests took their departure. It was arranged that the Duke and Duchess of Rugby, the Earl and Countess of Raxter, and Simon Carne, who was to be carried downstairs, should travel up to town together by the special train leaving immediately after lunch.

When they bade their host good-bye, the latter was nearly overcome.

"I'm sure it has been a real downright pleasure to me to entertain you, Mr. Carne," he said, as he stood by the carriage door and shook his guest warmly by the hand. "There is only one thing bad about it, and that is your accident.",

"You must not speak of that," said Carne, with a little wave of his hand. "The pleasure I have derived from my visit to you amply compensates me for such a minor inconvenience."

So saying he shook hands and drove away to catch his train.

NEXT morning it was announced in all the Society papers that, owing to an unfortunate accident he had sustained while visiting Mr. Matthew Greenthorpe, at Greenthorpe Park, on the occasion of his daughter's marriage, Mr. Simon Carne would be unable to fulfil any of the engagements he might have entered into.

Any intelligent reader of the aforesaid papers might have been excused had he pictured the gentleman in question confined to his bed, tended by skilled nurses, and watched over by the most fashionable West End physicians obtainable for love or money. They would doubtless, therefore, have been surprised could they have seen him at a late hour on the following evening hard at work in the laboratory he had constructed at the top of his house, as hale and hearty a man as any to be found in the great Metropolis.

"Now those Apostle spoons," he was saying, as he turned from the crucible at which he was engaged to Belton, who was busy at a side table. "The diamonds are safely disposed of, their settings are melted down, and, when these spoons have been added to the list, he will be a wise man who can find in my possession any trace of the famous Kilbenham-Greenthorpe wedding presents."

He was sitting before the fire in his study next morning, with his left foot lying bound up upon a neighbouring chair, when Ram Gafur announced "Kelmare Sahib."

Illustration:
"Kelmare Sahib."

"So sorry to hear that you are under the weather, Carne," said the new-comer as he shook hands. "I only heard of your accident from Raxter last night, or I should have been round before. Beastly hard luck, but you shouldn't have gone to the wedding, you know!"

"And, pray, why not?"

"You see for yourself you haven't profited by your visit, have you?"

"That all depends upon what you consider profit," replied Carne. "I was an actor in an interesting Society spectacle. I was permitted an opportunity of observing my fellow-creatures in many new lights. Personally, I think I did very well. Besides that, to be laid up just now is not altogether a thing to be despised, as you seem to imagine."

"What do you mean?"

"It isn't everybody who can boast such a valid excuse for declining invitations as I now possess," said Carne. "When I tell you that I had a dinner, a lecture at the Imperial Institute, two 'at homes,' and three dances on my list for to-night, you will understand what I mean. Now I am able to decline every one of them without risk of giving offence or fear of hurting the susceptibilities of any one. If you don't

call that luck, I do. And now tell me what has brought you here, for I suppose you have some reason, other than friendship, for this early call. When you came in I observed that you were bursting with importance. You are not going to tell me that you have abandoned your yachting trip and are going to be married?"

"You need have no fear on that score. All the same, I have the greatest and most glorious news for you. It isn't every day a man finds Providence taking up his case and entering into judgment against his enemies for him. That is my position. Haven't you heard the news?"

"What news?" asked Carne innocently.

"The greatest of all possible news," answered Kelmare, "and one which concerns you, my dear fellow. You may not believe it, but it was discovered last evening that the Kilbenham-Greenthorpe wedding presents have all been stolen, including the fifty thousand sovereigns presented to the bride in the now famous jewelled casket. What do you think of that?"

"Surely you must be joking," said Carne incredulously. "I cannot believe it."

"Nevertheless it's a fact," replied Kelmare.

"But when did it happen? and how did they discover it?" asked Carne.

"When it took place nobody can tell, but they discovered it when they came to put the presents together after the guests had departed. On the morning after the wedding old Greenthorpe had visited the safe himself, and glanced casually at its contents, just to see that they were all right, you know; but it was not until the afternoon, when they began to do them up, that they discovered that every single article of value the place contained had been abstracted, and dummies substituted. Their investigation proved that the sky-light had been tampered with, and one could see unmistakable footmarks on the flower beds outside.

"Good gracious!" said Carne. "This is news indeed. What a haul the thieves must have had, to be sure! I can scarcely believe it even now. But I thought they had a gardener in the room, a policeman at the door, and a patrol outside, and that old Greenthorpe went to sleep with the keys of the room and safe under his pillow?"

"Quite right," said Kelmare, "so he did; that's the mysterious part of it. The two chaps swear positively that they were wide awake all night, and that nothing was tampered with while they were there. Who the thieves were, and how they became so familiar with the place, are riddles that it would puzzle the Sphinx, or your friend Klimo next door, to unravel."

"What an unfortunate thing," said Carne. "It's to be hoped the police will catch them before they have time to dispose of their booty."

"You are thinking of your bracelet, I suppose?"

"It may seem egotistical, but I must confess I was; and now I suppose you'll stay to lunch?"

"I'm afraid that's impossible. There are at least five families who have not heard the news, and I feel that it is my bounden duty to enlighten them."

"You're quite right, it is not often a man has such glorious vengeance to chronicle. It behoves you to make the most of it."

The other looked at Carne as if to discover whether or not he was laughing at him. Carne's face, however, was quite expressionless.

"Good-bye; I suppose you won't be at the Wilbringham's to-night?"

"I'm afraid not. You evidently forget that, as I said just now, I have a very good and sufficient excuse."

When the front door had closed behind his guest, Carne lit a third cigar.

"I'm overstepping my allowance," he said reflectively, as he watched the smoke circle upward, "but it isn't every day a man gives a thousand pounds for a wedding present and gets upwards of seventy thousand back. I think I may congratulate myself on having brought off a very successful little speculation."

