

A MAKER OF HISTORY

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Author of "The Master Mummer," "A Prince of Sinners," "Mysterious Mr. Sabin," "Anna the Adventuress," Etc.

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[CONTINUED.]

"You must be rich enough to buy their lives then," Spencer answered gravely, "for if you do succeed in tempting any one to betray the inner happenings of that place on which the seal of silence has been put you will hear of them in the morgue before a fortnight has passed."

"They must take their risk," Duncombe said coldly. "I am going to stuff my pockets with money tonight, and I shall bid high. I shall leave word at the hotel where I am going. If anything happens to me there—well, I don't think the Cafe Montmartre will nourish afterward."

"Duncombe," his friend said gravely, "nothing will happen to you at the Cafe Montmartre. Nothing ever does happen to any one there. You remember poor De Laursan?"

"Quite well. He was stabbed by a girl in the Rue Pigalle."

"He was stabbed in the Cafe Montmartre, but his body was found in the Rue Pigalle. Then there was the vicomte de Sauvinae."

"He was found dead in his study—poisoned."

"He was found there, yes, but the poison was given to him in the Cafe Montmartre, and it was there that he died. I am behind the scenes in some of these matters, but I know enough to hold my tongue, or my London letter wouldn't be worth a pound a week. I am giving myself away to you now, Duncombe. I am risking a position which it has taken me twenty years to secure. I've got to tell you these things, and you must do as I tell you. Go back to London!"

Duncombe laughed as he rose to his feet.

"Not though the vicomte's fate is to be mine tonight," he answered. "The worse hell this place is the worse the crew it must shelter. I should never hold my head up again if I sneaked off home and left the girl in their hands. I don't see how you can even suggest it."

"Only because you can't do the least good," Spencer answered. "And, besides, don't run away with a false impression. The place is dangerous only for certain people. The authorities don't protect murderers or thieves except under special circumstances. The vicomte's murderer and De Laursan's were brought to justice. Only they keep the name of the place out of it always. Tourists in shoals visit it and visit it in safety every evening. They pay fancy prices for what they have, but I think they get their money's worth. But for certain classes of people it is the decoy house of Europe. Foreign spies have babbled away their secrets there, and the greatest criminals of the world have whispered away their lives to some fair daughter of Judas at those tables. I, who am behind the scenes, tell you these things, Duncombe."

Duncombe smiled. "Tomorrow," he said, "you may add another victim to your chamber of horrors!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE amber wine fell in a little wavering stream from his upraised glass on to the tablecloth below. He leaned back in his chair and gazed at his three guests with a fatuous smile. The girl in blue, with the dazzlingly fair hair and wonderful complexion, steadied his hand and exchanged a meaning look with the man who sat opposite. Surely the poor fool was ready for the plucking? But madame, who sat beside her, frowned upon them both. She had seen things which had puzzled her. She signed to them to wait.

She leaned over and flashed her great black eyes upon him.

"Monsieur enjoys himself like this every night in Paris?"

A soft, a very seductive, voice. The women who envied her success compared it to the purring of a cat. Men as a rule found no fault with it, especially those who heard it for the first time.

Duncombe set down his glass, now almost empty. He looked from the stain on the tablecloth into the eyes of madame, and again she thought them very unlike the eyes of a drunken man.

"Why not? It's the one city in the world to enjoy oneself in. Half past 4, and here we are as jolly as anything. Chucked out of everywhere in London at half past 12. Time, gentlemen, please! And out go the lights. Jove, I wonder what they'd think of this at the Continental! Let's—let's have another bottle."

The fair haired girl—Flossie to her

friends, Mlle. Mermillon until you had been introduced—whispered in his ear. He shook his head vaguely. She had her arm round his neck. He removed it gently.

"We'll have another here first anyhow," he declared. "Hi, garcon! Ring the bell, there's a good chap, monsieur—dash it, I've forgotten your name! No, don't move. I'll do it myself."

He rose and staggered toward the door.

"The bell isn't that way, monsieur," madame exclaimed. "It is to the right. Louis, quick!"

M. Louis sprang to his feet. There was a queer grating little sound, followed by a sharp click. Duncombe had swung round and faced them. He had turned the key in the door and was calmly pocketing it.

M. Louis did not move. The hand which held that small, shining revolver was certainly not the hand of a drunken man.

They all three looked at him in wonder—madame, M. Louis and Mlle. Flossie. The dark eyebrows of madame almost met, and her eyes were full of the promise of evil things. M. Louis, cowering back from that steadily pointed revolver, was white with the inherited cowardice of the degenerate. Flossie, who had drunk more wine than any of them, was trying to look as though it were a joke. Duncombe, with his disordered evening clothes, his stained shirt front and errant tie, was master of the situation. He came and stood a few feet away from them. His blundering French accent and slow choice of words had departed. He spoke to them without hesitation, and his French was almost as good as their own.

"I want you to keep your places," he said, "and listen to me for a few minutes. I can assure you I am neither mad nor drunk. I have a few questions to ask you, and if your answers are satisfactory you may yet find my acquaintance as profitable as though I had been the pigeon I seemed. Keep your seat, M. le Baron!"

M. Louis, who had half risen, sat down again hastily. They all watched him from their places around the table. It was madame whom he addressed more directly—madame, with the jet black hair and golden earrings, the pale cheeks and scarlet lips.

"I invited you into a private room here," he said, "because what I have to say to you three is between ourselves alone. You came, I presume, because it promised to be profitable. All that I want from you is information, and for that I am willing to pay."

M. Louis interposed. He stroked his little black mustache with a much beringed hand. With the other he gesticulated.

"Monsieur talks reasonably," he declared, "but why all this mystery? Why this feigned drunkenness? Why the show of arms? If we can help monsieur, it is an affair of pleasure, and if he chooses to make a present to these ladies in return, why, no doubt they will be charmed. Me, I presume, he has no intention to insult. Permit me, monsieur."

He drew a card from a small gold case and presented it to Duncombe, who accepted it, with a little bow.

"I invited you into a private room here," he continued. "If I can aid you in any way I am entirely at your service, but I require first of all that in addressing us you recognize my position as a French nobleman, who amuses himself in this place as you, monsieur, also do, and also that you unlock that door."

Duncombe smiled quietly. "Monsieur le Baron," he said, "I think that we are very well as we are—secure from interruption. I have sent others here on this same mission, and they did not succeed. Both of these ladies, I believe, have been approached for the information I desire, and they have thought well to withhold it. I have set my heart upon success this time, and I wish to secure at least the opportunity of being heard."

M. Louis shrugged his shoulders.

"There are secrets," he murmured; "affairs of honor!"

Duncombe interrupted him. "M. Louis," he said, "I am not so young as I look, and I have lived in Paris. I know that this cafe for all its outward smartness bears perhaps the worst reputation in Europe. I have heard of you three many times—the 'Trinity from Hell,' they call you sometimes, I think. You see, I know where I am and the risk I run. Even this little room has its secrets—a murderer or two, I believe, and other things

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And a host of others which we have not space to mention. Come in and we will show them to you. No trouble to show goods.



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