

18. MASKS OFF!

I. A Planned Marriage

For some time, the only topic of conversation among the “Five Hundred” constituting the financial aristocracy of America, had been the installation in New York of Señora Carmen Hernandez. The young woman, who would become, on the death of her mother, the possessor of a fortune of more than a billion and a half, had left Buenos Aires, where the family owned estates as vast as several French départements, and had bought one of the most luxurious town houses on Fifth Avenue.

Fifth Avenue, for which only certain streets in the Plaine-de-Monceau and the Champs-Élysées can provide any standard for comparison, is inhabited entirely by billionaires, and consists of a series of palaces and town houses surrounded by gardens, some of which cost fortunes. To live on Fifth Avenue is already proof of vast wealth.

The house that Señora Carmen had chosen was an exact replica of a Spanish Renaissance Palace, whose model could be found on one of the most picturesque streets of the ancient city of Cordova.

It was thought, not without reason, that Doña Carmen had selected, from among so many marvelous residences, the one that made the most advantageous frame for her beauty. Carmen offered, in all its splendor, a type specimen of the Castilian race, which was not mingled in her with the slightest drop of any foreign blood. Her skin was very pale, her hair so black that it had a blue metallic sheen in the shade. She had features of an admirable purity of design, and her adorers never failed to compare her eyes, whose gaze was both fulgurant and dominating, to beautiful diamonds in a dark velvet case.

Her feet arched and her hands small and delicate, Carmen had a body of sculptural beauty. Her bosom as beautiful without exaggeration, and her hips harmoniously developed; when walking, she had the muscular rhythm “that reveals a goddess in every movement.”

In addition, Carmen Hernandez was as intelligent, generous and honest as she was beautiful. The most indifferent individuals became her devoted friends, even her adorers as soon as they had seen her, as soon as she had smiled or pronounced a few words.

In spite of their billions, the Five Hundred did not offer many examples of similar perfection; young women who were sullen and ugly, spiteful and vulgar, were not rare among them. Thus, the arrival of Señora Carmen in the drawing rooms of Fifth Avenue had the effect of some quasi-celestial apparition.

In America, people are, above all, practical. They began by ascertaining the exact extent of the charming señora’s fortune and situation, and what they learned was that she was the only daughter of Pablo Hernandez, one of the richest landowners in the Argentine Republic. He had doubled his fortune by setting up cotton-mills at the most opportune moment. It was the billionaire Fred Jorgell, then the owner of the Cotton Trust, who had provided his raw materials.

Pablo Hernandez had died about three years before in tragic and mysterious circumstances. He had been on his way to Jorgell City alone, in an automobile, in order to put a considerable payment into Fred Jorgell’s own hands, when he had been murdered by malefactors who remained unidentified. His cadaver had been found some distance from the city, near a marshy stream, a few yards from the automobile, from which the unfortunate fellow must have descended in order to carry out a minor repair.

The banknotes had disappeared, but, extraordinarily enough, the body bore no trace of any wound, save for a slight contusion—an imperceptible black patch—behind the ear. The murderers were never found.

Other crimes had occurred thereafter, in the same circumstances, without the mystery being clarified, but it was repeated in whispers that the murders that had desolated Jorgell City had ceased abruptly as soon as Baruch Jorgell, the billionaire’s son, had left the city to go to Europe, where he had soon acquired a bloody celebrity by treacherously murdering his host and benefactor, Monsieur de Maubreuil.

On the death of her husband, Doña Juana Hernandez, aided by a few trusted servants, had continued to administer his estates and factories with a great deal of activity and intelligence. When the Trust had passed from the hands of Fred Jorgell into those of William Dorgan, she had continued to buy from the latter, every year, quantities of cotton that were measured in millions of bales.

She had been grief-stricken to learn of William Dorgan's death in the Rochester Bridge catastrophe. She knew the dead man's two heirs, Harry and Joe Dorgan. She was pained to see a legal battle engaged between them that was to result in stripping the engineer Harry of his possession and transferring almost all of the property in the Trust to Joe and his two associates, Cornelius and Fritz Kramm.

Joe Dorgan—or, rather, Baruch, to whom the diabolic artistry of Cornelius had given his victim's features—was determined not to lose such an important client, so he multiplied his visits to Señora Juana. Harry Dorgan, who was running the Lightning Steamship Company on behalf of his father-in-law, was by no means so assiduous. He only made a few widely-spaced visits, and the two proud Spaniards—the daughter as well as the mother—were somewhat resentful of the young man's negligence.

Baruch cleverly took advantage of the situation. He gained the good graces of the old lady entirely, and one evening, declared to her that he was passionately smitten with Doña Carmen and solicited the honor of becoming her husband.

Doña Juana only raised objections for form's sake.

"You love my daughter," she said, with an entirely Spanish frankness. "I don't know whether she loves you, but I believe that you're capable of making her happy."

"My entire life," the suitor murmured, "will be devoted to making your adorable daughter happy!"

"And of course," replied Doña Juana, who had spoken a trifle freely, "you believe that, for her part, will bring you a sum of happiness far superior to the one you are promising her? What woman is more capable of rendering a husband happy?"

"I know," Baruch murmured gallantly, "that I'm unworthy of a person as perfect in every respect as Doña Carmen."

"Enough compliments!" the old lady exclaimed, abruptly, to whom a suspicion of a gray moustache gave a hint of virility. "I've already told you that from the viewpoint of moral qualities and affection, I believe you to be worthy of becoming my daughter's husband. You're intelligent and energetic and I believe you to be honest. But there's one question, about which it's necessary to speak."

"The question of money?"

"Yes, Señor, and let's settle it right away, in order not to have to come back to it."

"In that matter," Baruch replied, with perfect assurance, "I believe that we can come to a rapid understanding."

"You're involved in a lawsuit with your brother?"

"Of course—but I'm certain of winning the case. Anyone will tell you that, even if I were to lose—which is improbable—I'd still have sufficient millions of dollars..."

"That's good. In that case, my notary will get in touch with your solicitor tomorrow, and as soon as I'm convinced of that important point, you'll be officially authorized to pay court to Carmen."

"My only desire is to conclude the formalities as quickly as possible," the young man said, in a detached voice. "But that's not, in my opinion, the most important question."

"What do you mean?"

"Does Doña Carmen have some sympathy for me. That's what preoccupies me more than anything else. She doesn't love me, I know, but I'm worried that she might be antipathetic."

The old Spaniard smiled thinly. "I believe that I can affirm," she murmured, "that Carmen has no prejudice against you. I can say, without overstepping my prerogative, that you are one of those who are sympathetic to her."

"I shall do the impossible," cried Baruch, with a gesture of emotional determination, "to conquer the Señora's affection entirely!"

The place where this conversation took place was a little summer drawing room furnished with bamboo chairs, cluttered with green plants, which overlooked the magnificent garden of the palace through a large bay window,

“Here comes Carmen now,” said Doña Juana, amiably, pointing at the young woman, who was advancing insouciantly along a broad pathway bordered by magnolias. “I’ll leave you alone. If you fear that Carmen has any prejudices against you, it’s up to you to dissipate them. But above all, not a word about our plans!”

And, putting her finger to her lips with a malicious smile, the old lady disappeared just as Carmen came into the summer-house, strolling absent-mindedly. At the sight of the young man she started in surprise. Her cheeks were covered by a bright blush. “I don’t know you were here, Master Joe,” she murmured.

The young man kissed her the charming little hand that the señora held out to him respectfully. “I hope that my visit isn’t disturbing you,” he said.

“Not at all, my dear sir. It’s always with great pleasure that my mother and I see you.”

The conversation continued in that vein for some time, alimeted by the commonplaces of social politeness. Baruch spoke negligently about the millions that he would soon acquire. He said a few words about the latest theatrical productions, the reception given the previous week by a member of the Five Hundred—the Rockefellers—and at which, by virtue of a eccentricity that everyone thought exquisitely tasteful, dinner had been served by tame apes admirable dressed and of a size ingeniously adapted to the dishes that they were charged with bringing. Thus, an orangutan had been charged with the roast, a gorilla had brought the salmon, a macaque the vegetables, a capuchin monkey the entremets and a marmoset the desserts.

“What about the coffee?” Carmen asked, laughing wholeheartedly.

“That was a negro boy.”

“It must have been a charming dinner, but I think people must be very desirous of being talked about to take pleasure in such feasts.”

“Bah! It’s necessary to give original feasts. When you’re married, it will be necessary for you to have your receptions too.”

“Oh, there’s plenty of time to think about that,” Carmen murmured, blushing imperceptibly.

She looked Joe in the face. Their eyes met. They had read one another’s thoughts.

With a tender gesture, Baruch took hold of Carmen’s hand; she did not withdraw it.

“Listen, Señora,” he said, “I’m frankness personified, and I can’t hide from you any longer that I have the profoundest admiration for you, and the most entire devotion...”

“Is this a declaration?” the Señora replied, withdrawing her hand. Then, suddenly assuming a serious expression, she continued: “You said just now Mr. Dorgan, that you were frankness personified. I have the pretention of being just as frank as you can be, and you shall know my opinion of marriage in a few words. I will only accept the spouse that my mother selects for me.”

“On condition, of course, that he pleases you.”

“Oh, my mother would never marry me off against my will. She would be desolate if she caused me any pain. For my part, you understand, I would never take a husband who displeased my mother.”

“Señora,” the young man murmured, with a tremor in his voice, “what would your decision be if Señora Juana had agreed to my request?”

“I don’t know,” the young woman murmured, surprised by that unexpected question. “I’ve never thought about such a thing.”

The conversation, which was taking on a very intimate appearance, was abruptly interrupted by the entrance of a domestic who was carrying a visiting card covered in fine handwriting on a silver-plated tray.

The young billionaire was burning to know the name of the inopportune visitor, but, in spite of his curiosity, he could not make out what was written on the card.

After glancing at it, Carmen had risen to her feet precipitately.

“Excuse me, Mr. Dorgan,” she said. “I’ll leave you for a few minutes. If you’re not in a hurry, wait for me to return. The piano and the albums in the drawing room will assist you to be patient. There are also dry Havanas in the little ebony sideboard.

As light and nimble as a fairy, Carmen had already disappeared, without waiting for her admirer's response.

Baruch was enchanted. In his mind's eye, he could already see himself in control of Doña Hernandez' regal fortune.

"All's going well," he murmured. "This time, I believe that I'll attain my objective without too much difficulty."

Nonchalantly, he took a golden cigar from the ebony sideboard, split it with a stroke of his fingernail and lit it, extending himself voluptuously in a rocking chair. He abandoned himself to exceedingly pleasant thoughts, swathed in a cloud of smoke, without noticing the passage of time.

An hour went by, and Doña Carmen had not yet returned.

If Baruch had been able to guess who the visitors were for whom Doña Carmen had left him, he would certainly have been less comfortable. The message written on the visiting card handed to the young woman was:

Lord Astor Burydan and Madame Andrée Paganot, née de Maubreuil, recall themselves to the memory of Doña Carmen Hernandez, and beg her to accord them a few minutes of conversation, concerning an extremely serious matter.

Carmen knew Lord Astor and Andrée, whom she had met on various occasions in the drawing rooms of the Five Hundred. She therefore hastened to grant their request.

She had thought at first that it was merely a mundane matter, but as soon as Lord Burydan had pronounced a few words, the young woman understood that what they had to say to her was of exceptional gravity.

When she finally rejoined Baruch, her features still expressed a violent emotion and her beautiful velvet eyes were reddened by tears, but she made an effort not to let any of these disturbances show. It was with a smiling face and a perfect calm, at least in appearance, that she went back into the small drawing room.

If Baruch had been more observant—or, rather, if he had not been misled by the conviction of success—he would have noticed that the young woman's words and manner had neither the same insouciance nor the same frankness as before. A secret constraint was detectable in her slightest gestures and most insignificant remarks.

"Excuse me for having kept you waiting," she said. "I could not liberate myself sooner from an inopportune visit. Now, however, I'm all yours."

"Please don't apologize, Señora."

"You must have been bored."

"No matter. You're here, you're forgiven..." He added, boldly "Would it please you, Señora, to resume the conversation at the point at which it was interrupted?"

"What was it that we were talking about?" she murmured, with a feigned distraction.

"Don't you remember that it was the question of marriage?"

"That's true," said Carmen, with an abrupt gesture.

"I was saying," Baruch went on, "that you would make me the happiest of men, Señora, by consenting to grant me your hand."

Carmen blushed and paled alternately. It was under terrible constraint that she replied: "Indeed, Mr. Dorgan—and I explained to you that I would only accept a husband if it were agreed with my mother..."

"I believe," murmured Baruch, with a well-feigned emotion, "that I have every chance of obtaining Doña Juana's consent."

"I shall do what my mother says..." she said, lowering her eyes. With an inflection that seemed strange to Baruch, she added: "Certainly, I'm not in love with anyone—but I confess that I would immediately accord my hand to the man who succeeded in discovering my father's murderer and avenging his death."

Baruch had gone pale. "I know," he stammered, with great effort, "that Señor Pablo Hernandez perished in a mysterious fashion in Jorgell City. Believe, Señora, that I will do everything possible to be agreeable to you and to discover the murderers. If I don't succeed, no one can."

Carmen had recovered all her calm and amiability. "I see, Mr. Dorgan," she said, smiling, "that we understand one another perfectly. Don't forget that the most important thing of all is to obtain the consent of Doña Juana."

She extended her hand to Baruch, who deposited a long and respectful kiss thereon.

The bandit withdrew with joy in his heart. He could not see any serious obstacle to his marriage to the charming Spaniard. He was even surprised not to have encountered more difficulties.

Initially vaguely worried by what the young woman had said about Pablo Hernandez' murder, he was quickly reassured.

Carmen is like all young women, he told himself. She would like to marry the avenger of her father's murder. It's a romantic declaration that has a fine effect. But the death of the old textile merchant is already ancient history. It's been shelved, forgotten; it's improbable that it will ever surface again. I'll make a few enquiries for form's sake; I'll offer rewards; Carmen will be impressed by my zeal. But nothing can be done about the impossible; it will soon be perceived that the murderers are undetectable, and no more thought will be given to it. I have Doña Juana's consent; all will be well. Within three months, I'll be the husband of the most charming woman in America—and I'll be the richest man in America.

A week later, the Union's newspaper reported, in tentative terms, the imminent marriage of the beautiful Carmen to the celebrated young director of the cotton and corn Trust.

II. A Rescue

A large automobile, massive in form and hermetically sealed, had departed the previous day from the manor house that Lord Burydan possessed in the environs of Winnipeg in Canada.

On that clear spring morning it was going along the bank of the Red River, which irrigates the state of Minnesota on the Canadian border.

In any other country than the United States, where everyone has the principle of not meddling in his neighbors affairs, that vehicle would have attracted the attention of the curious for more than one reason. It was only illuminated by two small windows of frosted glass with internal bars. One might have thought it a veritable prison on wheels. At any rate, in spite of its solidity and weight, it was equipped with a very powerful engine, and it could easily reach a speed of a hundred and twenty kilometers an hour on occasion.

Three people occupied that mysterious vehicle. One, who was never seen, was, according to the other two, an invalid afflicted by insanity, who was being taken to the state of New York, where he would be interned in a sanitarium. That was what his guardians had affirmed when they crossed the Canadian border.

The Yankee customs officers, more suspicious than those of any other country in the world, had demanded to see the invalid. They had been shown, sprawling in the back of the vehicle, a thin and pale individual whose arm as surrounded by an apparatus and who seemed to be plunged in a coma-like unconsciousness. The customs men had had no further doubts hereafter.

“Anyway,” one of the drivers had added—a man of gigantic stature who answered to the name of Goliath—“we’re obliged to so take many precautions because our invalid, Mr. Slug, is subject to violent fits of rage.”

All that seemed quite plausible.

The vigilance of the two guardians with regard to their prisoner was such that they never permitted him to get out of the vehicle, even to take his meals. When they stopped—which was always at some isolated inn—Goliath went to eat first, leaving his companion, Bob Horwett, on sentry duty. Then it was the turn of the latter, in such a fashion that Slug was never alone for a moment.

Perhaps the precaution was superfluous, for the poor devil seemed to be in such a lamentable state that it would have been difficult for him to free himself. Without relaxing their surveillance, Goliath and Bob Horwett had ended up becoming completely tranquil with regard to the possibility of an escape on the part of their prisoner.

That morning, charmed by the beauty of the weather, they had both climbed into the front seat after having carefully locked Slug in his rolling prison. They were taking pleasure in gazing at the banks of the Red River, bordered by poplars, alders, willows and tall osiers that were just coming into bud.

In the nearby forest, the rhythmic noise of a woodcutter’s ax could be heard, and that solitary region had something simultaneously wild and placid about it that rested the eyes and the mind.

“Say,” said Goliath, suddenly, taking an enormous gold-plated chronometer—a gift from Lord Burydan—out of his pocket, “it’s nearly eleven and I can see a small house over there that might be a tavern.”

“It certainly is,” said Bob Horwett. “I can see the sign from here.”

“In that case, we’ll stop there for lunch. The keen river air is making me hungry.”

“Me too. And we might go a long way before finding anywhere else as nice...”

A few minutes later the automobile stopped in front of the tavern, a pretty wooden building newly painted red and green, and well-varnished, like one of those doll’s houses that are given to children on their birthday.

There was an arbor in front of the door, presently deprived of its foliage of hops and cobaeas, but from which one had a magnificent view of the river.

“This will suit us admirably,” said Goliath, summoning the innkeeper with a thump of his fist that almost split the table.

“There are people in here already,” said Bob Horwett, pointing to two men at the other end of the arbor costumed as tourists, sitting in front of a bottle of whisky.

“Bah! Day-trippers!”

“For once,” Bob Horvet proposed, “we might eat together. Slug won’t fly away.”

“Agreed. There’s nothing as disagreeable as eating alone. Besides which, I’ll watch the vehicle while we eat.”

The landlord, a jovial Scotsman, had come over.

Now, then,” said Goliath, thumping himself mightily on the chest, which sounded hollow. “What do you have in your larder? I warn you that I have a serious appetite.”

“One only has to look at you to be convinced of that,” the host replied, facetiously. “It’s certainly not by eating grasshoppers that you acquired such biceps. Don’t worry; my larder is well-furnished.”

“Tell us briefly what it contains.”

“Nothing but good things, sirs. God salmon from the Red River, good Canadian bear hams, good roast beef from the prairies of Minnesota. Not to mention smoked eels, tomatoes from San Francisco and other trivia.”

“I can see that we understand one another,” Goliath said. “Serve us right away.”

“But what should I bring you.”

“The best of everything, and better,” replied Bob Horwett. “We’re not worried about the expense...”

“So serve us everything,” Goliath put in, displaying a formidable row of teeth in a yawn. “I feel so hungry his morning that I could eat a whole sheep—as I once did, for a bet.”

Delighted to be dealing with such good customers, the innkeeper hastened to set the table, which he flanked symmetrically with two pitchers of pale ale to the right and two bottles of Californian wine to the left. He was soon convinced that Goliath had not exaggerated in speaking about his appetite. It was a pleasure to watch him wipe the plates clean and cause sides of salmon and quarters of beef disappear as if they were being hurled into some abyss.

Without possessing his comrade’s capacity for absorption, Bob Horwett demonstrated that he was what is commonly known as a good trencherman.

The innkeeper, who had once studied to be a teacher in Glasgow, was not far from thinking that he had the famous Gargantua at his table, along with his rival, the famous Gouliafre.¹

He was not the only one to admire the appetite of the diners. The two tourists, sitting with their whisky at the other end of the arbor, were no less impressed, especially one of them, an old man with gray hair and blue-tinted spectacles, clad in a green flannel suit and a yachtsman’s cap. He never took his eyes off Goliath and Bob Horwett.

The latter ended up noticing the attention of which he was the object, and asked the landlord casually if he knew the two gentlemen.

“Not at all,” the Scotsman replied. “but I think they’re decent fellows. They’ve been here since yesterday, and they pay up promptly. The big motor-launch that you can see anchored over here behind the willows is theirs. They’re hunting and fishing. They say that they plan to work their way up the Red River in stages to the lake.”

Reassured by these words, Bob Horwett paid no further heed to the two strangers. At any rate, they both got up shortly thereafter and headed placidly toward the place where their boat was moored.

To reach it they had to go around the automobile, whose heavy mass separated them from Golith and Bob Horwett. At the moment when the yachtsmen went behind the vehicle—when, in consequence, they could not be seen by the diners—the man in the flannel seat leapt nimbly up on to the footboard and plunged an inquisitive glance through the barred window.

Immediately, he uttered an exclamation of surprise. “But it’s Slug!” he cried. “I thought he was dead!”

“Who are you?” asked the prisoner, excitedly.

¹ Gouliafre is not the name of a literary character but merely a trivial noun indicating a glutton; the author is improvising.

“Silence, in the name of the Lords!” said the stranger, putting a finger to his lips—and he continued on his way, leaving Slug in the most profound amazement.

Goliath and Bob Horwett had, of course, seen nothing of this little drama, which had unfolded a short distance from the table where they were eating lunch.

A few minutes later, the yachtsman, still followed by his companion—a vigorous sailor—came back from the motor-launch to the inn. He asked for writing materials, and appeared to absorb himself in drafting a long letter.

In reality, he had only written a note ten lines long, in handwriting so compact that the entire missive only occupied a tiny piece of paper.

Then, without attracting anyone’s attention, he went toward the kitchen. One the massive table that occupied its center there was a tray on which the elements of a substantial but not luxurious meal were set.

A kitchen-boy was finishing laying out the necessary utensils.

The stranger approached him. “Who’s this lunch for?” he asked, with an affable smile.

“Sir,” the boy replied, “it’s for an invalid who’s travelling in the auto with the two men you’ve seen under the arbor.”

“Are you going to take it to him?”

“No—the gentlemen insist on serving their friend themselves.”

“Good,” said the stranger, moving away with an indifferent expression.

As soon as the boy had turned away, however, the yachtsman came back and slipped the note he had just written, and had rolled up into the form of a tube about as long and thick as a match, into the bread, shoving it deeply enough into the roll for none of the paper to protrude. Then he left the kitchen stealthily and went back to sit down under the arbor.

Ten minutes later, Goliath got up to take Slug his lunch.

He opened the door of the automobile, deposited the tray on the bandit’s knees, and locked him in, as usual.

Slug started eating with a hearty appetite, for, although he was putting on an appearance of being very ill, he had almost completely recovered from his shoulder-wound.

Suddenly, he felt resistance between his teeth, and pulled the folded note out of his mouth, having almost swallowed it. He unfolded it carefully, and when he had read it his face was radiant.

“I knew that the Lords wouldn’t abandon me!” he exclaimed. “Now I’m sure that I won’t remain a prisoner for long.”

With his habitual prudence, Slug tore up the tint piece of paper, chewed it up into a ball and swallowed it.

Shortly thereafter, Goliath came back to collect the tray and the debris of his prisoner’s meal. They did not take long to get back *en route* thereafter.

One of the spring showers that do not last long and are soon followed by sunshine had begun to fall. Goliath remained on the front seat while Bob Horwett retired to the interior of the vehicle and sat down beside Slug.

The automobile continued along the bank of the Red River. The countryside was absolutely deserted.

Suddenly, Slug, who had been on the alert since reading the note, heard three regularly-spaced blasts of a horn in the distance. He shivered. It was the signal for which the note he had received had told him to watch out.

Neither Goliath nor Bob Horwett paid any heed to the sounds of the horn coming from the motor-launch that had set off almost at the same time as he automobile, following a parallel course along the river.

Motionless in his corner, Slug held his breath, his heart palpitating with anxiety. Suddenly, a loud scream rang out. It was the sailor in the motor-launch, who had just fallen into the water and was shouting for help at the top of his voice.

Bob Horwett, who, as is well-known, held a world record for swimming, did not take time to reflect. He opened the door abruptly, closed it again negligently, shouting to Goliath to watch out, and ran to the

bank opposite the place where the man had disappeared. Without even taking the time to undress, he dived in, and, swimming under the surface, set out in search of the man.

Slug had followed Bob Horwett with his eyes. At the precise moment when he dived into the water, the bandit opened the door, which had not been locked, and started running at top speed.

He had a significant advantage, because Goliath, by virtue of his enormous weight, was a mediocre runner.

The giant realized that immediately and, uttering a resounding oath, launched the automobile in pursuit of the fugitive, who was running straight for the river.

In the meantime, the motor-launch had moved closer to the shore. Slug leapt into it at the precise moment when the fake drowning victim hauled himself aboard.

The man whom Bob Horwett had so generously gone to help was an excellent swimmer. He had dived twice in order to elude his rescuer and, after having gone around the launch, had calmly climbed back aboard.

Immediately, the yachtsman, who was none other than Leonello, Dr. Cornelius' trusted servant and laboratory assistant, started the engine of the motor-launch, which sped away with all the velocity of which it was capable.

Bob Horwett, in despair at his imprudence, had understood too late the stratagem to which he had fallen victim. Furious and disappointed, he swam after the motor-launch for some time, but the men aboard fired revolver shots at him, which caused the water around him to crackle under a hail of bullets. With rage in his heart he was obliged to dive, beat a retreat, and finally return to the bank.

No less exasperated than his companion, Goliath fired revolver shots of his own after the launch, but the boat, favored by the rapid current, did not take long to disappear.

Two hours later, Slug and Leonello, leaving the launch in the charge of the sailor, disembarked opposite a railway station and bought tickets to New York, where they arrived the following day.

The old Italian took Slug to one of the houses secretly owned by the Red Hand, and then hastened to give a report on his mission to the sculptor of human flesh.

He found Cornelius in his subterranean laboratory.

"Well, Leonello," asked the doctor, impatiently, "have you brought me good news?"

"There's good and there's bad. I couldn't get my hands on Joe Dorgan."

"Explain that," growled Cornelius, frowning. "That's a very regrettable failure on your part, which astonishes me. You know how important it is that we have the fake Baruch in our hands."

"It wasn't my fault, as you'll see. I went to Winnipeg, as you'd ordered me to, asked around for information, and learned right away that Lord Burydan and all of his friends, among whom was Bondonnat, had just left Canada to return to New York."

"Indeed—I've been notified of their arrival."

"I didn't take long to pick up Joe Dorgan's trail. For a long time he was cared for in a cottage inhabited by Noel Fless, the son of the old miser that Slug once tried unsuccessfully to rob. The local people called him the madman of the Blue House. They regarded him as an inoffensive idiot, absolutely incurable."

"That's reassuring," murmured Cornelius. "If Bondonnat, who's no fool, had taken it into his head to study him at close range, he might have been capable of curing him."

"It's impossible that anyone could suspect such a substitution."

"I think so too. Even so, I was wrong to let that Joe live. Baruch can't enjoy the identity he's usurped in peace until Joe has disappeared conclusively."

"There's still time. The amnesiac has left Noel Fless's cottage and no one could tell me what had become of him. Then I learned about a mysterious prisoner who was kept out of sight in Lord Burydan's manor house."

"That was Joe?"

"I thought so too, and took measures in consequence. When the captive was taken away in an auto by his two guards I followed their vehicle from stage to stage and seized the first opportunity to take a

look inside the rolling prison. I expected to see Joe. You can imagine my surprise when I found myself in the presence of Slug, whom we thought dead and buried in the Florida swamp.”

“It’s necessary to get him out! Slug has been very faithful to the Red Hand. Furthermore, he’s a resourceful man, and a man of action.”

“I have got him out. Unfortunately, I don’t have any information to give you with regard to Joe Dorgan.”

Cornelius reflected momentarily. “We need to find out where he is, at all costs! I won’t rest easy while he’s still alive!”

“I assume that he’s in New York, or somewhere nearby. I also think that it won’t be difficult to find out where by following Lord Burydan and Bondonnat.”

“In order to succeed, don’t spare time or money. We’ve been too negligent with regard to Joe, and it’s necessary to make up for lost time. Everything’s going well. Baruch will soon enter into possession of William Dorgan’s billions, and we’ll get our hands on Fred Jorgell’s too.”

“How’s that?”

“Isidora will inherit from her father, the engineer Harry from his wife, and Baruch from Harry. It only remains for the Red Hand to organize the schedule of the three individuals’ decease.”

“What a grandiose plan!” said Leonello, amazed.

“Grandiose? Yes, perhaps. But it only requires a trifle, a single overlooked detail, to reduce it to nothing. Start your search right away. It’s necessary that Joe Dorgan is found before the end of the week.”