



By GEORGE GRIFFITH,

Author of "The Angel of the Revolution," "Brothers of the Chain,"
"The White Witch of Mayfair," "The World Masters," &c.

BOOK I. BEFORE THE STORM.

Tells of a Traitor's Deal; of The Vanished Submarine, and of certain passages in the history of Arthur Erskine, barrister, of Lincoln's Inn; a brilliant defence at the Old Bailey; and how the evidence of Arthur Erskine's wrongdoing vanished from his possession.

PROLOGUE.

Many of the events which are hereafter to be related practically came about through the chance meeting of an Englishman and a Frenchman—or, to be more precise, a Corsican—just after dusk, one lovely autumn evening, in the Rue Canebiere, Marseilles.

Victor Erskine, the Englishman, had just come back from Canton, where he had put in five years of hard and ungenial work, little better than slavery; in fact, under the domination of an uncle who was himself the slave of his liver, a circumstance which naturally made him the tyrant of everyone, white, yellow, and black, who had the misfortune to be dependent on him. Victor, who possessed one of those pliant but unbreakable natures usually associated, as it was in his case, with boundless ambition and utter unscrupulousness, had set his teeth and hardened his heart, and played the slave to perfection.

Now he had got his reward. An attack of bilious fever had transferred his uncle, as he devoutly hoped, to an even warmer region than Canton in the summer, and he was rather agreeably surprised to find himself his sole heir. He had at once sold up the business, and here he was, a patient, uncomplaining inwardly-cursing dandy, transformed into a gentleman at large, with nearly a hundred thousand pounds in his credit in the London and Shanghai Bank.

He had sent his baggage on to the Hotel Louvre, and was strolling up the Rue Canebiere, smoking a long, thin cigar, and thoroughly enjoying the relief from the monotony of the ship to the ever-changing variety of the broad street, with its rows of glittering, mirror-lined cafes on either side, and its quadruple procession of electric trams, flashing up and down the centre, when he met the Corsican.

"It was just outside the Brasserie du Sud, and Erskine was thinking of stopping and taking a vermouth. As he approached one of the little marble-topped tables, a man of about his own age, 28 or so, in the uniform of a French lieutenant-commander, who was coming down the street, turned in under the awning, and laid his hand on the chair opposite.

"Pardon, monsieur?" Erskine looked up and their eyes met. His were steady, cold, and steelily blue with a thin dark rim round the pupil, which was visible in some lights and not in others. The Corsican's were blue-black, restless, and with a spark of yellow fire lurking in their depths. They

stared at each other for some 30 seconds without speaking, and then the Corsican showed a gleam of white teeth under the neatly trimmed black moustache which so exactly matched the close-clipped, pointed beard, and said:

"Is it possible—can you be Victor?"

"About as possible as it is that you are Orsino," replied the Englishman, putting out his hand.

The other gripped heartily, and laughed:

"Then, since I am Orsino, you must be Victor. Welcome, brother. And now we will have a consummation, and you shall tell me what you are doing here in our good city of Marseilles. You look as if you had just landed from somewhere."

"Yes," said Erskine, as he sat down, "from the Australian. I left Canton five weeks ago, after five years' hard labour under an old tyrant of an uncle who has just obliged me by dying and making me his heir."

"Ah," said the other, raising his brows and looking at him with the two sparks of yellow fire glowing in his eyes, "that is excellent to hear. And now, I suppose, you are going home to marry a wife, if you have not done so already, and enjoy your well-earned wealth. Happy mortal. And here am I, your poor Corsican foster-brother—"

"Well," said Erskine, looking at his epulettes, his Madagascan medal, and the military cross of the Legion of Honour, "it doesn't seem as though you had done so very badly, my dear brother Orsino, considering where we both started from, that we were both nursed by the same foster-mother—your mother, that splendid Corsican woman—but pardon. I ought to have asked before now after the health of her."

"She is well," replied Orsino. "She has asked about you several times since we lost sight of you."

"And circumstances?" queried Erskine. "If there is anything wanted, you know, you must tell me, as brother to brother. I am rich enough now to keep the promise which my father could not fulfil. But we can talk about that afterwards. If your professional duties permit, of course you will dine with me to-night at the Louvre. And meanwhile, my dear Orsino," he continued, raising his glass to his lips, "allow me to congratulate you upon having advanced so far in the most honourable service to which a man can devote himself."

"Ah, honourable," said the Corsican, his voice dropping to a whisper. He slung his shoulders, and the two

yellow spots in his eyes gleamed angrily. "Yes, I will dine with you to-night, brother, and afterwards we will talk, and I will tell you something more than you know, perhaps, about honour in this French marine which we Corsicans have made for France with so little thanks or profit to ourselves."

During dinner these two foster-brothers, one the son of a Corsican peasant-proprietor who had made a fairly profitable combination between agriculture and smuggling, and the other the son of an Englishman, a wandering artist and the scapegrace of his family, who had married a beautiful Corsican girl—only to lose her a few weeks after Erskine was born—talked of many things, mostly commonplace, each telling the other of such adventures and experiences as had befallen him. But when dinner was over, instead of taking their coffee and cognac and smoking their cigars on the glass-fronted verandah overlooking the Rue Canebiere, Victor took his guest up to his private sitting-room, and when the waiter had left the room he locked the door, closed the windows, and said as he lit his cigar:

"Now, brother Orsino," you said quite enough during dinner to give me the impression that you have a good deal more to say. We are quite by ourselves, and if you have any confidences to impart I think you will find an appreciative, and I hope I need hardly say, an absolutely confidential listener."

"There is no need for that, Victor," replied Orsino, tipping his glass of cognac into his coffee; "our mothers were both Corsicans, and, in another sense, mine was yours also. That is quite enough. There could be no breach of faith between us. If you wish you shall hear everything."

"Perfectly," replied Victor, leaning back in his chair and looking keenly at him through the blue haze of cigar smoke. "But, after all, it is not quite fair that the confidences should be altogether on one side. Let me begin."

"As you will, brother," replied Orsino. "It is not possible that we can understand each other too well, as I think you will confess when you have heard what I'm going to tell you."

"Very well, then," said Erskine, dropping his words between the puffs of his cigar. "Since all things begin or end with money, we may as well start there. From one or two remarks you made at dinner, I conclude that it is mainly a question of cash with you."

"Rather the want of it, the want of sufficient money to carry out one of the

greatest schemes that has ever been conceived."

"Yes," said Erskine, looking across the table at him, the dark rings round the pupils of his eyes growing more distinct. "Yes, and I suppose that is where my part of the confidences would come in. Now it comes to this, Orsino," he continued, tapping the tablecloth with the fingers of his left hand. "I have made money. You have not, and you have something to sell. What is it? No—don't hurry, think about it before you speak, and meanwhile I'll tell you just where I stand. I've got nearly a quarter of a million francs at my disposal. That might satisfy some people, but it doesn't satisfy me. I want more—"

"A quarter of a million! Ah, mon Dieu! With that, and with what I can tell you, it could be made into millions."

"Millions of what—francs or pounds?" asked Erskine, pouring out another glass of cognac.

"Francs, pounds, anything," exclaimed Orsino, draining his coffee cup and rising from his chair.

"More or less criminal, I suppose?" interrupted Erskine leaning flat back in his chair, and looking at him very straight in the eyes. "You know you don't make millions that way, even between the Chains at Johannesburg, unless there's a bit of a crook on the end of the deal. No, no, don't get offended. It's quite possible that neither of us knows how bad the other is, or how good. To put it more politely—"

"Ah, now," said Orsino, sitting down again, it seems as though we should understand each other."

"It's just a matter of hard cash, and something coming out of it," said Erskine, getting up and lighting a fresh cigar. "I'm there. Inside or outside the law, I'm not troubling much, if it is only fairly safe. Now, what is it? You said something about a submarine at dinner. Has that got anything to do with it?"

"It has everything to do with it, brother Victor," replied Orsino, throwing his arms out over the table and looking at him with the yellow spots burning more intensely in his eyes. "To put it into plain figures, as you say, how much are you prepared to risk to make millions. I don't say pounds just yet, but of francs, and possibly after that pounds."

"It's your turn to call the game, my dear Orsino. If I'm putting the money up I want to know what I'm gambling on. If you can't tell me that, of course we can't do any business. If you can, well, I'm good for ten thousand, say