

VOLUME I

CHAPTER 4

“And experience showeth, there are few men so true to themselves and so settled; but that sometimes upon heat, sometimes upon bravery, sometimes upon kindness, sometimes upon trouble of mind and weakness, they open themselves; specially if they be put to it with a counter dissimulation according to the proverb of Spain, *‘Di mentira y sacaras verdad,’* Tell a lie and find a truth.”

—*Bacon*

MR. COSMO SALTASCHE possessed a first-floor office in a fine building in Dame Street, not very far from College Green. It comprised three apartments: two large rooms, and a smaller one at the back, which was fitted up, although but seldom used, as a bedroom by the owner. One of the other two was devoted to his clerks; his own office was a splendid, lofty room, dingy enough as to paint and paper, but furnished with fine desks and plenty of softly cushioned morocco chairs. A long leather-covered table stood in the middle of the room; share lists, prospectuses, and blue books, with reports in various languages, filled this. Maps of estates and railways hung on the walls. Two fine windows commanded a view of Dame Street and College Green, with their motley crowds. Standing in one of these, leisurely stroking his chin and looking out towards Westmoreland Street, was the owner.

Mr. Saltasche, the grandson of a French émigré, was now somewhat over forty years of age; short, but not of the shortness that would entitle him to be spoken of as “a little man.” His face was handsome: he had large brown eyes full of intelligence, an aquiline nose, and determined mouth and chin. His foreign pedigree asserted itself in the clear olive of his skin and silky fineness of his hair.

If you were told of it, and looked for it, a certain resemblance was discernible between him and the first Napoleon; and it was doubtless with the object of helping out this resemblance, on which he prided himself enormously, that Mr. Saltasche shaved so scrupulously every vestige of hair off his face, and always wore the whitest of vests and wide turned-down collars. A capital actor and mimic, and a finished linguist, although not a classical scholar, he was considered to be a most accomplished gentleman. A long residence on the Continent had given him a knowledge of men and women that was of immense use to him; and his easy, suave manners, joined to the advantages of wealth, obtained for him an intimate footing in the highest circles in Dublin. "All things to all men" seemed to be his device, for he was as intimate and congenial with Viscount Ramines, the turfite, as with Lord Brayhead, the champion of the Church party and patron of every proselytising institution in the kingdom.

Mr. Saltasche's religious creed was evidently a liberal one, for he had been known to attend a morning meeting for the christianizing or evangelization of Rome, and the evening of the same day had been seen to stroll arm-in-arm with gentle, amiable Monsignor Bursford, formerly, private secretary to His Holiness, and now parish priest of Green Lanes, through the grounds of his own home, Vevey House, or along the shaded high-roads. To Monsignor Bursford, who since his conversion had spent his life in Italy, a chat with his versatile neighbour over old times in Naples or Florence was a delightful treat. Saltasche knew every by-way of Europe. Every picture, every statue was familiar to him. He could tell you everything you needed to know from the best hotel to the best shop where to buy a bonnet.

Such a man must have enemies; and in the body at large of Dublin society Saltasche had not a few. Most of the number were jealous of his success and prosperity. Some distrusted his silky ways; many, were envious of his intimacy with the great folks, and puzzled their heads to know what could be the "open sesame" by which this insignificant nobody of a stock-broker penetrated the enchanted circle. Lord Ramines was known to be involved—so the explanation of his intimacy was of course not far to seek. But Lord Brayhead was a psalm-singing fanatic and this fellow, who, it was notorious, believed in nothing, human or divine, must have bewitched him. He was not a marrying man, and was in consequence by no means favourably regarded by women with flocks of marriageable daughters. There was an expression in Saltasche's face, when he was off

his guard (which was very seldom), that reminded one somewhat of a tiger; showing unmistakably that under the gloss of training and worldly usage was a powerful, unprincipled, and passionate mind,—that of a man capable of risking all on the turn of a card, and toppling down with one sweep the edifice that had cost years of patient scheming and plotting to rear. There was something of the Buonaparte nature in him, and in audacity and self-confidence at least, he was perhaps equal in his own way to that greatest of adventurers. His fault was a love of pleasure and self-indulgence; and on more than one occasion his lapses had nearly been his ruin. Any other man would have been swamped, but Saltasche's resources and impudence were overwhelming, and floated him over everything.

Lounging in the window was in no way congenial to him; and after some five minutes spent in looking up and down the street, he stamped his foot impatiently, and returned to his desk. He lifted a sheet of paper which was lying loosely on the blotting book, and read a pencilled memorandum: "Mr. Brangan and the gas companies at half-past two: and I must be on 'Change at three.' What can this fool mean?" The office clock pointed to five minutes past two, and Mr. Saltasche returned to his post of observation. In a minute or two a pleased expression came over his face. A brougham with a coronet on the panels, drawn by a pair of job horses, crossed the front of the Bank; and in a few moments a tall angular looking old man entered the office.

"I am a little late, Mr. Saltasche," he said, in an explanatory rather than apologetic tone, laying his hat on a chair as he spoke.

"Pray don't speak of it," returned the stockbroker, pulling round an easy chair and seating himself with his back to the light. After a few common-place remarks, his visitor, who seemed fidgety and uneasy, plunged head-long into his subject.

"I have been wanting to see you on a very particular business. You know the railway to Leadmines?" The stockbroker bowed assent. "Well, I wanted that railroad to be run a good two miles closer to my estate. See,"—and as he spoke he unrolled a chart which he took from his pocket,—“the boundaries are here; and on this side is a valuable quarry of splendid granite, worth—oh! a fortune, Mr. Saltasche. I offered the railway company as much granite as they wanted at a merely nominal price, on condition of course, you understand, that they complied with my wishes in the laying of the road. I offered, also, to assist them with my

interest—very great, as you are aware—in getting their Bill through Parliament, but, no: they refused, influenced by those of whom it were useless to speak now. Hem!”

“I understand you, my lord, perfectly.” Saltasche fixed his eyes on the chart, waiting for more.

“It is now my purpose to start a railway from Dublin to a point beyond Leadmines. The farmers, my tenants, will benefit enormously by it; and those magnificent granite and slate quarries will be at last practicable. Er—the forming of a company is one of the branches which I shall confide to you; but the getting the Bill through Parliament will be, I apprehend, troublesome. We may expect opposition.”

“Doubtless. That once disposed of, the rest would be quite easy.”

“Well, it is necessary to look ahead in these matters. This Bill will be read for the first time next session. My friends have secured a day for it; but I fear, unless some precautions are taken, it will fail. I certainly could not spare a single one of my supporters in the House. And to-day I am told that an old friend of mine who represented Lord Kilboggan’s family seat for years in Parliament is in very bad health. In fact—ah—he writes to me that his physician has recommended total abstinence from all public duty; he has gone to the south of France, and I may feel justified in saying that his resignation is imminent.” And fixing his gold spectacles on his nose, Lord Brayhead stared with a woe-begone expression at the broker.

“And Lord Kilboggan’s nominee for the seat may be—”

“With Lord Kilboggan I have nothing to say or to do in common, I thank the Lord. I trust I remember him in my prayers; but, Mr. Saltasche, he is a godless man, who would not scruple to injure me in any way he could; and if he were aware that I had any interest in the election for Peatstown he would oppose me.”

Saltasche, who was dying to laugh at the idea of his lordship praying for the ungodly Kilboggan, instantly answered:

“Nothing would be easier than to find a candidate for any vacant seat your lordship may think of. But then, as things are, it must be some Home Ruler; and—ah—hum—somebody agreeable to the priests. In fact, my lord, it is with them that you would have to treat. Moreover, as to money, you must be prepared to guarantee part, or all your man’s expenses.”

“I do not object to Home Rule, Mr. Saltasche. The Government has forfeited its title to our—”

“Certainly, my lord,” interrupted Saltasche skilfully. He dreaded a discourse on the iniquities of disestablishment. “But your Bill is to be read. Mr. Wyldoates had obtained permission, I think; and—”

“It was to have been brought in early in the next session,” groaned his lordship.

“That would be after Christmas. It must only be postponed,” said the broker, speaking rapidly and with his sharp eyes fixed on his client’s face.

“As to a candidate selected or approved by the priests, do you think, Mr. Saltasche,” asked the noble Churchman, his countenance presenting a diverting mixture of perplexity and disgust, “that the state of the country is such that we cannot avoid by some means that very annoying dilemma?”

“Candidly, my lord, I do not. Moreover, if a re-election be necessary, you cannot pick and choose. Of course your name must be kept out of the affair completely.”

“That is why I came to you, Mr. Saltasche,” said his lordship helplessly, “to talk it over. I cannot appear. I am a Conservative and a Churchman.”

“It would be awkward, certainly,” assented his friend, who thoroughly enjoyed the intrigue, and appreciated the position of the spiteful old wretch consenting to forego his principles, religious and political, in order to have his revenge against the railway magnates who had thwarted his schemes for money-making.

“You will make inquiries as to a probable candidate, the cost, etcetera, and come and dine with me, and we can talk it over. I can rely, of course, on your discretion?” said the nobleman, rising from his chair, and beginning to shuffle to the door.

“You may, my lord,” returned the stockbroker, with a triumphant smile, rising to show his distinguished client downstairs.

A moment after the brougham and the job horses had rolled away, Mr. Saltasche was on an outside car, driving down the quays as fast as possible. At the corner of a street near the Four Courts he saw O’Rooney Hogan nodding to him. He returned the salutation mechanically as he

passed; but, as if a sudden thought struck him, turned his head and looked back keenly after the young man's retreating figure.

“Where the deuce did he tell me he lived?” thought he.