THE GREAT PLOT

by

WILLIAM LE QUEUX

The Master of Mystery

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daughter of the Squire of Ailesworth. On that account Sylvia had been severely lectured by her mother, and sneered at by Nella, who was engaged to Douglas Kenyon, a wealthy landowner of Stamford, and by Ethel, who was a confirmed old maid, who never took men's attentions seriously. Truly, the position of the youngest daughter in a family of girls is never a very satisfactory one.

Grace Fairbairn, although occupying a somewhat menial position in the household, was nevertheless the confidante of the Milbournes. She was twenty-seven, tall, rather thin, with well-cut, refined features, hair almost black, and a pair of dark, luminous eyes that were always admired, even by those women who are usually jealous of the good looks of others. In common with most other lady companions, she was a distressed gentlewoman. Her father, Alexander Fairbairn, younger son of a Scotch baronet, had been British Vice-Consul at Riga, and upon his death Grace, whose mother had died when she was three years old, found herself utterly alone and unprovided for. Her position came to the ears of Nella Milbourne, with whom she had been at school at Madame Barlet's select pension at Juvisy, near Paris, and this resulted in her being taken into the Squire's family as companion to the three girls, her linguistic attainments enabling her to give the trio practice, and thus keep up their French and German. The two languages are much spoken in Riga, with, of course, Russian ; hence Grace had mastered them perfectly. Indeed, no young person is afforded better opportunities for learning a foreign tongue than a Consul's child.

The long, old room in which the pair were sitting was well furnished with old Chippendale and Sheraton inlaid cabinets containing choice old Worcester and Sèvres, and a table with glass top wherein was displayed some fine old silver and other curios. Squire Milbourne, from his early days, had been an ardent collector, like his father before him ; therefore, the Manor was filled with antique furniture and works of art. The gimcrack products of Tottenham Court Road found no place in his home, for if his exterior in the hunting field was a little rough and ready, he was, nevertheless, a man of culture and high attainments.

"No, no, dear," exclaimed Grace calmly, endeavouring to comfort Sylvia. "Don't give way like that. In all our lives we have disappointments. I have had many—very many.

Come, dry your eyes. Show them that you are quite unconcerned. You will meet Dr. Wingate most probably to-morrow. He is attending a patient over at Water Newton, and—well, if you cycled along the road from that place towards Peterborough at about eleven o'clock you might, in all probability, meet him."

The girl was silent for a moment. Then a sudden thought occurred to her.

"Grace !" she exclaimed very earnestly, "tell me the truth now. Is that a message from him ?"

"Well," responded the other, smiling, "if you'll be very secret, I'll tell you the truth."

"I won't say a single word, of course."

"Then the fact is that when I was in Peterborough this morning, I met him in Narrow Street, and he gave me that message to give you. But you know I ought not to give it. If your mother knew, she'd be awfully angry, you know."

"Oh, trust me ! Mother will never know," declared the girl. "But it is really good of you to give me the message. I always thought you were like the rest of them, and did not approve of the doctor."

"On the contrary, I consider him a charming fellow."

"So good-looking, isn't he ?" exclaimed the girl with all the ecstasy of youth·

"Well—yes," acquiesced the companion rather hesitatingly. "And I believe he's thoroughly genuine."

At that moment there came a light tap at the door, and Anderson, the head parlourmaid, entered, and, addressing Grace, said :

"I'm sorry to disturb you, miss, but I fear Mr. Leigh is taken worse. Mrs. Chapman is upstairs with him, and she sent me to ask you to go up and see whether we ought to send for the doctor."

"Oh, poor uncle !" cried Sylvia, in quick distress. "I must go up to him at once."

And all three mounted the old oak stairs and hurried along the corridor which ran the whole front of the Manor to the end where stood a door half-open, from which a bright light shone, and whence issued the low groans of a man in pain.

CHAPTER II

A MYSTERIOUS INJUNCTION

The small upstairs sitting-room into which the girl and her companion entered showed at once that its occupant was a studious man and a traveller. The ceiling was low, for it was in a wing of the older or Jacobean portion of the Manor, but upon the walls were hung many quaint and curious weapons—long rifles with richly inlaid stocks, curved daggers, grotesquely shaped tom-toms, and extraordinary little two-string fiddles shaped from tortoise-shells over which skin had been stretched. Along one side of the room a tattered old banner of green silk was nailed, and upon it ran an inscription in Arabic. It formed the key to the collection. They were all trophies from the Great Sahara and the wide, waterless plains of the Bir Eglif, and the Afele, the arms, instruments, and utensils of the dreaded Tuareg, the veiled men of the desert, the Bedouins, the Tibbus, and others.

Upon the floor were thick carpets of bright reds and dark blues from the markets of Marakesh and Oran, and some of the furniture was of cedarwood inlaid with ivory and mother-of-pearl of Arab workmanship, while the atmosphere of the place seemed overpoweringly heavy with the odour of burning pastilles. The scene which presented itself on the entry of Sylvia Milbourne and Grace was a somewhat startling one, for stretched upon a couch at the opposite side of the room was an elderly man, grey-haired, thin-faced, and rather bald, groaning and gasping for breath. Mrs. Chapman, the housekeeper, had been called and was kneeling beside him, supporting his head and trying to force a little brandy between his lips. He, however, refused to take it. His countenance was ashen pale, his lips grey, and in his dark eyes shone the light of a fierce desperation as he struggled against the sudden seizure.

"Anderson," said Mrs. Chapman with an effort at composure, "tell Jaikes to ride into Peterborough at once and summon Dr. Walker. If he is not at home, call Dr. Peach-Hay, or, failing him, someone else. No time must be lost. Quick!"

And the maid, in obedience, dashed out of the room and down to the servants' hall.

As Sylvia stood there watching her uncle, whose favourite she was, and yet unable to render him assistance, she heard loud voices ouside, and a few minutes later there resounded the clattering of horse's hoofs which were quickly lost down the drive.

Austen Leigh, Mrs. Milbourne's elder brother, had of recent years been half an invalid. Having succeeded to his father's property when a young man, he had devoted the greater part of his life to travel in Asiatic Russia and in Morocco, Tunis, and Algeria, making many expeditions to the far south, penetrating the unknown tracts of these various deserts and oases which make up what is commonly known as the Great Sahara. An Arabic scholar and a thorough-going cosmopolitan, he had adopted Arab dress and had actually lived with a tribe of marauding Tuaregs in the vicinity of the Aïr Oasis for nearly two years, riding with them upon their raids, and in his leisure studying those vast ruins of the extinct civilization which to-day remain in the wilderness half-buried by the sand—mute monuments of a race to us unknown and unnamed.

He was the great, in fact, almost the only authority upon the extinct civilization of the Sahara, and had lectured before the Royal Geographical Society and the British Association upon those gigantic ruins of prosperous cities which lie buried so far beyond the reach of the ordinary traveller, with a thousand miles of desert between them and the Mediterranean seaboard—the only European to penetrate that wonderful region of the Aïr or Asben, the people of which are believed to be the direct descendants of the builders of the mighty monuments and temples. He was known to geographers and antiquarians as daring and resourceful, a man with a constitution like iron and nerves of steel. Following Burton's example, he had, by the aid of his intimate knowledge of Arabic, been able to pass himself off as a Bedouin from the west, and had entered the city of Kano, which the explorer Barth discovered fifty years before, and into which no other white man had ever entered. His journals were in the archives of the Royal Geographical Society, and, although his adventures had never been recounted save sometimes to the Milbournes, they would probably have formed one of the finest romances ever written.

He was, however, a very reserved man. He hated to be lionized. The exploration of Northern Siberia, and afterwards of the Great Sahara desert, had been his hobby throughout life, and he knew more upon these subjects than any other living European. Yet it was with the greatest reluctance that he consented to lecture, and then he had made it a provision that no vote of thanks was to be accorded to him.

The Milbarnes were his only relatives, yet for ten whole years he had been utterly lost to everyone, travelling always in that limitless waste of sky and sand, until one day, a year ago, he had arrived at Ailesworth, a white-headed, bearded man prematurely old and broken, and had explained that the cause of his silence had been that he had been living far beyond the reach of post or telegraph upon the shore of Lake Chad. Ill-health had at last compelled him to return home, and, after a journey lasting six months, he had found himself upon the French Trans-Atlantic mail-boat leaving Algiers for England.

His first afternoon in London he had devoted to his own ailments, and had visited a doctor, a friend of his old days. But the latter, after a careful examination, declared that he was suffering from a weak heart, that the life he had led had aggravated it, and that in future he would have to be very careful to avoid any exertion or excitement. Residence in rural England was best, and, if possible, with friends.

And so it was that his sister, having heard his story, consulted her husband, and they gave him a suite of three rooms, a study, bedroom, and dressing-room, in the old wing of the Manor. From an active explorer, acute, alert, muscular, and daring, he very soon degenerated into a confirmed invalid, and for the past four months or so had scarcely ever gone forth farther than the bottom of the drive. He had grown to be quite a recluse, spending his time in his study, ever covering page after page of manuscript, and evidently compiling something supposed by the household to be the story of his adventures. Seldom, if ever, he joined the family circle below ; but Sylvia, his favourite, was often allowed to spend some hours with him, and to her he had related many a strange tale of his life with that wild desert tribe of robbers and marauders who dress in black, and wear veils about the lower part of their faces in the manner of the Arab and Turkish women.

On one or two rare occasions Austen Leigh had been induced to join the family circle at the dinner table, and upon each occasion he had held the company breathless by recounting some strange adventures in that fascinating country of mysticism and mystery. Being of a romantic disposition, Sylvia had once or twice questioned him upon the why and wherefore of certain facts he had related. But to her he would only respond in his quiet way:

"I can tell you nothing else, my dear. As we say in Arabic: 'It is so, because it is so'."

To her he unbended more than to any other member of the family, his own sister included. Old Mr. Milbourne, bluff, hearty, country gentleman that he was, had always looked upon his brother-in-law as something of a visionary, just as the man of wealth too often regards the man of genius as a harmless idiot, to be tolerated and ridiculed. Not that he had ever ridiculed Austen Leigh. He could not. The result of his explorations had long ago been proclaimed by the daily press beneath big headlines, and the Sovereigns of both Italy and Belgium had bestowed upon him decorations as acknowledgement of his efforts towards the extension of our geographical knowledge. Nevertheless, old Squire Milbourne was apt to smile when he mentioned "Austen and his Arabs", although he respected the privacy which he almost constantly maintained.

The minutes seemed like hours. Again and again Sylvia endeavoured to obtain some coherent word from her uncle, but without avail. He was conscious and answered her, but it seemed as though his tongue were paralysed. His replies to her questions were always the same, a short, abrupt sentence accompanied by a forward motion of the open hand, a gesticulation which she, the housekeeper, and the companion endeavoured to interpret. The prostrate man, evidently in intense pain, was utterly helpless. Suddenly he tried to rouse himself, but after a desperate struggle his strength failed, and he fell back again exhausted with his hand upon his heart.

For fully ten minutes the suffering man remained quite still, then rousing himself again he struggled desperately to rise, but in vain.

His action was as though he wished to reach a small black tin box which stood upon a table on the opposite side of the room. The box was strong, but battered, dented, and showed signs of hard travel. Its contents were his private papers, Sylvia knew, for she had once seen him open it to obtain some document from which he made notes. He kept it there upon the small oblong table always in his sight so that no strange hand should tamper with it, for it had always seemed that his greatest treasure was concealed therein. Therefore what more natural than, feeling himself seized, as the doctors had foretold, he should endeavour to reach the old box that had been his constant travelling companion through so many years.

The look in his eyes as he strove to rouse himself was that of one in extreme agony of mind as well as of body. He appeared anxious to give his favourite niece some instructions, but the sounds he uttered were inarticulate.

Of a sudden an idea struck the distressed girl, and dashing across to his writing-table, she snatched a sheet of paper from the rack, and a pencil. He put forth his weak, trembling hand with all the eagerness of the drowning man who clutches at a straw, but his nerveless fingers refused to hold the pencil, and it fell from his grasp and rolled to the floor.

Then he shook his head sorrowfully, sighed, and remained again motionless.

He wished to speak, but could not. There was some message or some instruction he wished to give, but his signs could not be interpreted, even though he was perfectly conscious and in the full possession of all his faculties. To the pale, anxious girl longing for the arrival of the doctor, every moment seemed an hour.

Again he turned his head towards her, and she saw that his thin, white countenance had undergone a change. A strange light was in his dark eyes, and his blanched lips twitched nervously. She saw with distress that his pain had become intensified.

He put forth his trembling hand and pointed straight at the battered tin box, uttering some further words, but what they were intended to convey the hearers could not guess.

The unfortunate man distinguished by their faces that they had not understood, and this caused him to repeat the sounds over and over again more slowly, in order that they should be understood. But in vain.

Then his hand clutched that of Sylvia, who was kneeling beside him, and with an apparently Herculean effort he managed to loosen his tongue from the paralysis that had seized it, and to utter words that all three could understand.

"Sylvia !" he gasped. "The Great Ishak ! See ! In there !" And he pointed again towards the box. "Hide it !—hide it—or—or death ! Death ! Ah——"

And the remainder of the sentence was lost in a long-drawn-out sigh as he sank back again.

The three women stood awe-stricken as slowly the muscles of his countenance relaxed, and his jaw dropped.

Austen Leigh, the great traveller and Arabic scholar was dead.

CHAPTER III

AUSTEN LEIGH'S TREASURES

THE opinion of Dr. Walker, who arrived half an hour after Austen Leigh's decease, was that death was due to angina pectoris, and, a certificate being given to that effect, there was no necessity for a coroner's inquiry. Walker had attended the unfortunate man ever since his return to civilization, and had always held the conviction that the end would be sudden.

Therefore the dead traveller was interred in the sloping graveyard of Castor Church, and, although many attended the funeral, perhaps the person who felt the keenest grief was poor, neglected Sylvia, the only member of the family with whom he had cared to hold converse.

On the day following the funeral the dead man's effects were overhauled for the purpose of discovering whether he had left any will, and if any clue could be found to the extent of his property. He had always been in possession of adequate funds, yet he had never spoken to either his sister or brother-in-law of his financial position ; hence both the old Squire and his wife were naturally curious to ascertain the true state of affairs. When a man is a little eccentric, and when years of his life have been hidden in mystery and his whereabouts unknown, gossip generally credits him with being wealthy. It was so in Leigh's case.

Assisted by Mr. Tarbutt, the lawyer of Peterborough, Mrs. Milbourne, and Sylvia, the Squire made a thorough search of the dead man's effects, revealing a state of things quite unexpected. In all sorts of holes and corners, in books, and beneath drawers, they found various documents—some relating to the adventurous period of his life, and others, being in Arabic, could not be deciphered. But within half an hour the solicitor was able to definitely declare that there was an estate evidently consisting of rather valuable house property in Paddington, as well as considerable invested funds. The will then became the object of interest but it could not be found.

Sylvia related how her uncle, before his death, had struggled to reach the battered box, and, no key being forthcoming, a chisel was sent for, and the lawyer forced it open.

Then, seating himself at the table where the dead man had spent so many hours of his life, Mr. Tarbutt, most methodical of men, proceeded to cursorily examine the mass of papers it contained. The casket was a kind of dispatch-box of the old-fashioned sort, with three tin trays, the first two being filled by papers neatly arranged and tied together, and the bottom compartment containing a quantity of very fine antique jewellery of Oriental design and delicate workmanship. He had no doubt collected it during his travels, for in a piece of tissue paper were wrapped several uncut emeralds and rubies of unusual size, and no doubt of value.

"Pity we cannot find any disposition of the deceased gentleman's property," remarked the lawyer, removing his gold pince-nez in order to wipe them.

"Don't believe he ever made one," said the old Squire bluntly. "He thought of nothing except of his Arabs and all their hieroglyphics. But I must say I never thought he had more than a couple of sixpences to chink together."

"There are first-class securities here worth quite twenty thousand pounds at the very least," observed the lawyer, returning to the search. "But," he added, "he seemed most eccentric, and we may find a will in some odd corner yet, if we have patience."

"I hope we will," declared the Squire with something of a sneer. "Perhaps he wrote it in Arabic among all that mass of rubbish. Who knows?"

"One thing has certainly aroused my curiosity," the lawyer said as he bent to examine a small square of crisp old parchment which he had found tightly rolled in the bottom of the box. He had spread it before him, placing a weight on either side to keep it out flat, and for some minutes had been making a minute examination.

The yellow parchment, about eight inches square, was stained by dark patches of damp, and was covered by a mass of apparently Arabic writing evenly penned by a careful scribe, and possibly of great age. The ink used was gold, but the damp had somewhat tarnished it; in parts, indeed, the writing had almost entirely disappeared. Without doubt it was some document of considerable importance as an antiquity, from the fact that he had taken equal care of it with the gems and jewellery. Mr. Tarbutt's curiosity had been aroused for several reasons. Anything upon parchment appeals to the legal mind; and, secondly, a document so well taken care of must be of importance.

The Squire and Sylvia stood leaning over the lawyer's shoulder gazing upon the puzzling lines of curious writing, but neither could decipher one single word.

"I suppose lots of clever people up in London could read that off just as easily as a newspaper," remarked old Mr. Milbourne, also seized by curiosity. "We had better get it translated and see what it's all about. You must see what you can do, Tarbutt."

"Very well," said the lawyer. "I don't anticipate any great difficulty. Arabic will be an easy task to a scholar. As you say, we ought to ascertain what it is. Probably it is some valuable document which should be in a museum. That's my private opinion. But we will see."

The lawyer was rather reluctant, however, to put it aside. He held it nearer the light and examined line after line, held it level with his eyes in order to see whether what looked like Arabic merely concealed some words in English. But in vain. It defied elucidation.

"Come, Sylvia," said the Squire chaffingly, "you were your uncle's companion, can't you suggest any place where his will might be? He may have left you something. He ought to have done, if he hasn't."

"I know he made one," replied the girl, "for one evening when I came up as usual to see him I found him very busy writing, and he told me that he was making his will, and wanted to be alone. So I left him."

"Then who witnessed it?" queried the lawyer. "Possibly one of the servants?"

"No," replied Mrs. Milbourne; "I have questioned them all. No one in the house acted as witness."

"Uncle went up to London a few days afterwards," Sylvia remarked.

"Went to his solicitors most likely, and signed it at their office," suggested Mr. Tarbutt. "We really ought to be able to discover who were his legal advisers. Yet, so far as I've seen, there's no clue to his solicitors."

They spent a full hour in searching in every hole and corner of the dead man's rooms, but without success. Indeed, they were just about to relinquish their anxious investigation with a feeling that twenty thousand pounds or so were slipping through somebody's fingers, when Sylvia suddenly recollected that on one occasion she had seen her uncle replacing the parchment cover, or drum-head, of an old earthenware tom-tom of Arab make.

It was in the form of a big jar, gaudily painted, and was suspended from a nail in the wall. Eagerly she took it down and shook it. Something rattled inside.

In an instant she ripped it open, and within, sure enough, was a document, which Mr. Tarbutt at once pronounced to be the missing will.

Written upon a single sheet of foolscap, it had been witnessed by two men living at Peterborough—one a carrier and the other a plumber—and, having been found entirely in order by the lawyer, he commenced to read it.

The dead traveller left all his trophies, maps, papers, books, diaries and manuscripts to the Royal Geographical Society. "The jewels, and also the roll of parchment which will be found in the same place," the will continued, "I bequeath to my niece, Nella Milbourne; to each of my two nieces, Ethel Milbourne and Sylvia Milbourne, I bequeath one thousand pounds, and to my sister, Esther Georgina Milbourne, I give and bequeath all the remainder of my property of whatsoever I die possessed."

Endorsed upon the will was the name of a well-known firm of solicitors in Bedford Row, in whose hands the affairs of the deceased man had undoubtedly been.

"Well," grunted the bluff old Squire, "that seems very satisfactory, after all, Tarbutt. Austen was a queer fellow, but he was a careful man, it seems. I wonder why he hid his will in that old drum?"

"The reason of that is at present a mystery," the lawyer responded.

"Why," cried Sylvia, as a sudden idea occurred to her, "I see it all now! It was not the box to which poor uncle was pointing just before he died; it was at that old instrument, which hung just behind it. He wanted to direct my attention to it there."

"But why did he utter that extraordinary warning?"

queried the lawyer. "To me there is something very uncanny about those words of his."

"His mind was wandering, perhaps," suggested the dead man's sister. "Poor fellow, he was a great sufferer," she added.

The day being wet, Nell and Ethel were doing needlework in the morning-room when Sylvia burst in upon them to inform them of their good fortune.

"Then Uncle Austen was, after all, a regular brick!" exclaimed Nella, a tall, good-looking girl of twenty-six, with that rather waxen complexion which generally accompanies auburn hair. "I must see my jewels. Are they anything one can wear?"

"Of course, why, they're lovely!" declared Sylvia. But scarcely had she spoken when the two elder girls dashed from the room and ran upstairs to see and hear for themselves.

When the first excitement had died down, Mr. Tarbutt readjusted his gold pince-nez and set himself to more closely examine the securities. It did not take long to show that the investments were, almost without exception, good ones, and that, although the deceased had lived half his life outside the limits of civilization, he nevertheless knew a good deal about financial matters. In all probability his solicitors had acted for him in his absence, but, if so, they had, Mr. Tarbutt thought, shown considerable foresight.

"I consider it a very remarkable—indeed, an almost romantic—affair," he added. "To tell the truth, I cannot help thinking that the small roll of parchment which we found concealed with the jewels, and which is specially mentioned in the will, contains some extraordinary secret. What it is, of course, remains to be ascertained."

CHAPTER IV

A WOMAN'S TRIUMPH

SIX months had passed.

The long engagement between Nella Milbourne, the old Squire's eldest daughter, and Douglas Kenyon was arranged to culminate in matrimony, and the Manor, as well as the villages of Ailesworth and Castor, were agog in consequence. The wedding of the Squire's daughter always creates a local enthusiasm, and in this case, as Nella was to be married at the village church instead of in London, as the gossips had long asserted, the excitement rose to fever heat.

Weddings have been so often described that it is superfluous to describe this one in detail. Nella made an extremely handsome bride. The colour of her hair was unusual, her carriage was easy and majestic, her figure was well proportioned, and her dress, of ivory satin with old lace, the present of her father, was a costly and handsome one. In addition to the diamond necklet given her by Kenyon, she wore some of the valuable Oriental jewellery found among her dead uncle's effects and bequeathed to her.

Douglas Kenyon was an easy-going man of means, aged about thirty-two. Left a fair income by his father, who had amassed a fortune in the manufacture of agricultural implements at Grantham, he had lived for some years in a large, old-fashioned house just outside the quiet, sleepy town of Stamford, a place which even the railway has left undisturbed, and the echoes of whose pebbles are only awakened on market days.

Kenyon was by no means a drone. Erect, spruce, and clean-shaven, he had been in the Navy, and served as lieutenant in the Mediterranean and Channel Fleets, until on the death of his father his mother induced him to resign his commission, return home, and settle down on the property to the life of the country gentleman. He had already been home four years before he had met and fallen in love with Nella, and then, when the engagement was announced, Mrs.

Kenyon had taken a house in London, and her son's place had been thoroughly renovated and refurnished in preparation to receive its new mistress.

The church at Castor looked its best and brightest that morning in early spring. Nella, flushed and handsome beneath her veil and wreath of orange blossoms, was, of course, led to the altar by the old Squire, while a friend of Kenyon's, a Mr. Hubert Hutton, acted as his best man. The latter was a pleasant fellow, and essentially a gentleman. The Milbournes, save Nella, knew very little of him. He had been introduced to Nella some months before by her fiancé and they had met casually on several occasions. He was, Douglas had told her, a man of leisure, who spent the greater part of his life on the Continent, and who made his headquarters in a pretty little flat in the busy Rue Lafayette in Paris. Kenyon had known him a good many years, and when in England he had frequently invited him down to stay at Casterton House. Indeed, Nella had heard a lot about Hutton's good qualities from her lover, and was therefore delighted that he should assist at the ceremony.

He was tall, grey-eyed, and slightly hollow-faced, his thinness being accentuated by his tightly-buttoned frock-coat. His garments were well cut, but in that unmistakable style which showed them to be the product of a Paris tailor; his lavender gloves fitted without a wrinkle, and his silk hat was of a shape which, although fashionable on the Boulevards, had not yet made its appearance in Bond Street. He was usually elegantly dressed, and was never seen without a flower in his lapel, but on this occasion, to do honour to his friend Kenyon and to Nella, he eclipsed himself.

Nella, the only member of the Squire's family who really knew him, liked him. What Douglas had told her long ago was quite correct. He was a thorough cosmopolitan of charming manner, and altogether an excellent fellow at heart, notwithstanding his outwardly dandified appearance.

The mellow old organ had broken forth into Mendelssohn's "Wedding March", and Nella, leaning on her husband's arm, laughing and happy, had trod over the flowers strewn in her path by the village children.

The wedding breakfast was a brilliant affair. The oak-panelled dining-room at the Manor, a big old room, was filled to overflowing, and, as usual on such occasions, the fun was fast and furious. The old Squire was in fine form, joking with everyone, and highly pleased at the successful issue of the wedding arrangements, while among the guests was the Squire of Lyddington, whose wit and humour was locally proverbial, and a number of women in their best frills and furbelows.

At a little distance down the table sat Mrs. Milbourne, and at her right hand Mr. Hubert Hutton, the bridegroom's best man. The young dandy was talking vivaciously with his hostess; indeed, such a good conversationalist was he that the Squire's wife was at once compelled to admit within herself that in putting him down as an over-dressed "bounder" she had done him a great injustice.

Sylvia, however, like most young girls, was a shrewd and critical observer. Few things escaped her, and while the others were gossiping, laughing, and raising their glasses in honour to the newly-wedded pair, she sat watching the man who, although he had called at the Manor twice before, was a comparative stranger.

He was talking with her mother, replying to some question she had put to him regarding his wanderings about Europe, when of a sudden Mrs. Milbourne casually remarked:

"My brother, Mr. Austen Leigh, was a great traveller. We had journeyed in Turkestan, Siberia, and also a great deal in the Sahara, and received the medal of the Royal Geographical Society."

Hutton started slightly and looked Mrs. Milbourne full in the face.

"Leigh!" he repeated. "Austen Leigh? And was he actually your brother?"

"Yes. But have you met him?"

The young man paused, then responded:

"Once. I—I knew very little of him. Where is he now?"

"He lived with us here for some time until his death, which occurred suddenly about six months ago."

"Dead!" he cried. "Leigh is dead?"

"Unfortunately, yes. My brother was not an old man, but the various changes of climate he had encountered undermined his constitution," she replied, adding with quick interest, "Under what circumstances have you met? Tell me."

"We met some time ago, at a hotel in Aix-les-Bains," was the vague answer. "Of course, your brother's fame as a traveller is well known. Curious that I should have missed the announcement of his death in the papers, for I suppose they gave obituary notices?"

"Some of them did."

Hutton was again silent for some moments, then he asked:

"After your brother's death were his papers examined?"

"Yes, by my husband and his solicitor. Poor Austen left a will in favour of myself."

"And into whose hands did those papers pass?" inquired the young man, with an eagerness which he was unable to suppress.

"I have some of them. But all those relating to his travels were handed over, according to his will, to the Royal Geographical Society."

"Did you examine the journals to ascertain their contents?"

"Yes, casually. My husband assisted me. They proved to be a bewildering mass of notes upon various subjects as well as upon travel."

"Only those relating to his travels were handed over to the society, I think you said?" he remarked, the expression of his face showing the tension of his mind.

"Exactly. The others I have kept."

"And they are still in your possession?"

"Certainly. But why do you ask?" inquired his hostess, now surprised at his undisguised eagerness.

"Well, I have a reason in asking," he replied, with a sorry attempt at a smile.

"Then I gather that you were interested in my brother and knew him rather better than you will admit?"

"I was much interested in him," he responded. "We were both travellers, and on certain subjects had many views in common. But, really, I had no idea that you were Austen Leigh's sister, and that Miss Nella—or Mrs. Kenyon, as we must call her now—is actually Austen Leigh's niece."

And he bent and looked along the table to where the radiant bride was sitting with her husband, and fixed his eyes long and steadily upon her.

His strange look of surprise and alarm did not pass unnoticed by Sylvia, who had been glancing furtively across at him for some time. As his eyes fell upon the bride, he started perceptibly, and the hand lying upon the table-cloth clenched itself tightly. His brows contracted, his lips moved as though he were speaking to himself, and his thin, hollow countenance went paler.

The reason why sight of Nella should so affect him sorely puzzled Sylvia. She scented mystery in it, and mystery always attracted her. It seemed as though the stranger had suddenly discovered in her sister some striking resemblance to someone he had known, and that the revelation had caused within him a sudden revulsion of feeling. The look that rested upon his face for a few moments was a distinctly evil one.

But his hostess was speaking again, and he was compelled to turn to her. He responded mechanically, scarce knowing what he said, for he had looked upon her daughter for the first time in light of the truth, and the sight of her held him spellbound.

"Mrs. Milbourne," he managed to gasp at last in a low voice, scarcely above a whisper, "I know what I am about to say will sound very curious to you, but I would beg of you to make me a promise. I ask it because upon your action and your secrecy depends the happiness—nay, the life—of two persons, who, although unknown to you, will never cease rendering you their thanks for your protection."

"A promise?" echoed the Squire's wife, much puzzled. "I don't follow you."

"Let me be brief," he said quickly, bending to her and looking earnestly into her eyes. "I want you to promise to lock Leigh's papers away secretly and let no one see them. Seal them carefully in a packet and hide them lest their contents are divulged. If other persons obtain a knowledge of what is written there, it will mean death. Do you understand?—death!"

"You are really most alarming, Mr. Hutton," the elderly lady said, with an endeavour to laugh. "I really did not think my poor brother's papers were of the least importance. True, some of them are written in the characters of a foreign language, so that I've never been able to make head nor tail of half of them."

"Has anyone else tried?"

"Mr. Tarbutt, the lawyer, of Peterborough."

"Ah! country lawyers we need not fear," he exclaimed quickly. "Who else?"

"Only my husband."

Hubert Hutton breathed more freely. If, as he hoped, none of the important papers were sent to the Geographical Society, then it seemed as if the secret had, up to the present, been kept. The secret! Ah! and what a secret! One which, if divulged, would startle the whole world.

Already he was racking his brains to devise a plan for obtaining the papers from his hostess, but, at the same time, he was compelled to admit that he had not acted with his usual discretion in explaining the value of the documents.

Again he bent and looked at the newly-wedded bride. Yes. He was not mistaken.

It was necessary for him to act. In half an hour she would start with her husband upon her honeymoon to the Riviera, for they were to leave by the half-past four train from Peterborough, and already he had overheard one of the bridesmaids remark that it was time she retired to put on her travelling-dress.

"I wonder, Mrs. Milbourne, if you would excuse me if I went out for a few minutes into the air," he managed to articulate. "The unexpected news of your brother's death has upset me—and—and the room is rather warm."

His hostess, noticing the pallor of his countenance, gave her consent and evinced considerable concern, but he merely smiled, staggered to his feet, and left the room.

A moment later the bride rose and followed him.

CHAPTER V

MYSTERY

NELLA had been absent perhaps ten minutes, and the mirth of the wedding breakfast was at its height. The two bridesmaids had risen when the bride had left the table, but Mrs. Milbourne had declared that there was still plenty of time and they had reseated themselves at her request.

Of a sudden, however, there sounded through the house a piercing scream, and next instant a frightened maid-servant dashed into the room crying:

"Miss Nella! Oh! poor Miss Nella. Help! Help!"

"What's the matter?" demanded the Squire anxiously, while in an instant every voice was hushed.

"Poor Miss Nella! She's—she's dead!"

"Dead!" gasped the guests in the same breath, and the men sprang to their feet and rushed out.

"Surely she's only fainted!" cried Mrs. Milbourne in distress. "Oh! go and see, someone. Tell me the truth instantly!"

"Mr. Kenyon's friend is with her," exclaimed another of the maids. "He says she's dead, and that we were to tell you, mum. Oh! it's awful!"

Kenyon was the first man out of the room, and, dashing across the big hall, he saw at the top of the square, old-fashioned staircase his young wife lying prostrate, and bending over her, supporting her head, was his friend, Hubert Hutton.

"God! Hubert!" he cried, springing up the stairs two steps at a time. "What's happened?"

"A tragedy," was the other's response in a hard, dry voice, as though he with difficulty suppressed the conflicting emotions within him.

"What do you mean? Tell me."

For answer his friend withdrew his hand from behind the prostrate bride and held it out with the palm towards him.

There was blood upon it.

"Your poor wife, Douglas, has been murdered."

"Murdered!" gasped the amazed man, who only a moment before had been making merry over his own nuptials. "Impossible!"

"Unfortunately it is so," responded Hutton, in the hearing of all the other guests who, pale-faced and anxious, had crowded round. "She has been killed with this!" And he took up from beside him a long, thin Italian poignard, a mediæval weapon with cross-hilt and pierced blade, which had blood upon it.

"Why," cried Grace Fairbairn, "that knife has always hung upon that nail there, over your head."

"I brought it from Florence two winters ago!" exclaimed the old Squire, in a husky voice. "The poor girl must have been struck at the moment she reached the landing to go to her room."

The scene was one of indescribable confusion. The guests were horrified. Mrs. Milbourne was upon her knees weeping and trying to obtain some response to her words, but all knew too well by the appearance of the waxen countenance that the lips that had only an hour ago repeated the vows at the altar were closed for ever.

In the first moments following the tragic discovery everyone stood dumbfounded. Then, when the terrible truth that young Mrs. Kenyon was dead had been realized, the women wailed and the men gave vent to expressions of utter bewilderment. Among the guests were three local medical men—Dr. Lewis, of King's Cliffe; Dr. Pink, the popular Squire of Lyddington; and Dr. Pridie, of Wansford—all of whom commenced an examination.

Dr. Lewis was the first to announce the result of his professional investigation.

"It is a fact," he said gravely, raising his head. "The poor, unfortunate young lady has received a fatal wound, and is already dead."

With this the other two medical men entirely agreed, but, although a hundred inquiries were directed towards them as to how she had been struck, neither cared to express an opinion before making a post-mortem. All the information they gave was that a coroner's inquiry would be necessary, and that the best course was to inform the village policeman at once, and set the machinery of the law in motion.

Then the great problem at once presented itself, Who was the murderer?

Hutton, rising from his knees with blood upon his hands and coat, briefly told his story, while several maid-servants, assisted by Kenyon and the three doctors, carried the dead bride to her room amid the sobs of the women.

"The atmosphere of the room grew too warm for me, and I went out and stood beneath the portico to get a little fresh air," Hutton explained. "While standing there I heard the rustle of silk behind me, and, turning, saw Kenyon's wife ascending the stairs. She remarked to me how warm it was in the dining-room, and gaily announced that she was on her way to dress. I walked to the foot of the stairs and urged her to remain a moment, as I wished to speak to her. But she declared that she was late and had a lot to do. She would, however, see me on her return downstairs. So I turned and walked out of the house and on to the lawn. Ten minutes afterwards, my faintness having passed, I returned to the hall, and as I passed along towards the dining-room something white on the landing upstairs caught my eye. I looked again, and, to my amazement, saw that it was young Mrs. Kenyon, who had fallen in a heap just at the top of the stairs. I rushed up to her, believing that she had fainted, but as soon as I raised her head I saw that a tragedy had been enacted, for blood was flowing from the wound. She was not then dead, for in response to my inquiry as to what had occurred, her lips moved. But I could distinguish no sound. Then a moment later with a long sigh her last breath left her."

"So she had died with her secret on her lips," remarked old Mr. Milbourne, utterly broken down. "We must discover who murdered her. No expense shall be spared, even if it costs me my last farthing. You saw no one, I suppose, Mr. Hutton?"

"No one, except one of the maids who passed me and entered the dining-room carrying a tray. Of course, when I raised the alarm, the butler and several of the maids came at once to the spot."

"The poor girl must have had an enemy," her father said. "The fact that she has been killed at the very moment of her triumph points strongly to the presence of some jealous lover. And yet I have never heard of her being courted by any man save Kenyon."

The local member of the Northamptonshire Constabulary, an unusually smart man for a village policeman, rushed over to the Manor without waiting to put on his uniform. He heard Hutton's story, saw the body of the unfortunate bride whose wedding he had witnessed little more than an hour before, and after taking some notes, bustled off to the telegraph office at Castor to report to headquarters.

In her own pleasant room, where the mullioned windows looked out upon the broad level lawns and the old-world rose-garden, the dead bride was laid upon her bed, still in her ivory dress and orange-blossoms. They crossed her hands upon her breast over the jewels that glittered there, and although the light was dim by reason of the drawn curtains, her upturned face seemed calm and sweet in death. The ugly dark stain upon the ivory satin they covered with spring flowers taken from the vases, so that with her eyes closed she seemed but in a tranquil and untroubled sleep.

Near by lay the travelling-gown of dark brown cloth, a triumph of a West End dressmaker, which she was to have worn on her journey to Cannes, and open beside it stood her silver-mounted dressing-bag, a present from Douglas, ready packed. Was it not a cruel freak of Fate that the wedding-gown should serve as her shroud, and that the same sweet-smelling orange-blossoms, emblems of purity, should crown her brow before the altar and also serve as floral tributes at her tomb? Truly nothing is certain in this insecure life of ours.

The doctors, being among the last to depart, were discussing the affair in the library, while the bereaved husband and his best man were closeted together in another room.

"There's more mystery in this than we imagine," declared Dr. Lewis, standing with his back to the fire and addressing his two friends. "That the poor young lady had a secret enemy seems beyond all question, and that enemy was in the house. Now, was it a guest, a servant, or was it a stranger who had entered the house unobserved and waited for the bride to ascend the stairs?"

"The police will have to solve it," Pink remarked in his bluff way. "For my own part, I believe she must have been struck by one of the servants."

Dr. Pridie, a younger man, spoke with the slow, deliberate manner of the Scotsman, asking:

"What motive could a servant have? If we wish to establish the murderer's identity, we must first get at the motive."

"With that I quite agree, my dear fellow," said Lewis, with just a slight Irish accent. "But, do you see, there isn't the slightest ground on which to seek any motive whatsoever. As far as I know her, she seems to have been a very level-headed girl, not in the least a flirt—generous, kind-hearted, and possessing all the qualities to make her popular. To me, the one feature of the affair that is most peculiar is the fact that the crime was not premeditated. Had it been, the assassin would have provided himself with a weapon. On the contrary, it was committed on the impulse of the moment by a deadly weapon which hung close to the murderer's hand."

"The blow must have been a very hard one," Dr. Pink remarked, taking a pinch of snuff, a habit of his when puzzled.

"No, I scarcely agree," Lewis said. "The poignard was fairly sharp, and a very deadly weapon. Its style of manufacture with the hollowed blade of ornamental openwork down the centre was such that it would enter deeply with a very moderate blow. I happen to know something about mediæval arms. That dagger was of a kind used by the Florentines in the days of the wars of the Blacks and Whites. It was, however, generally used for the purpose of secret assassination. Its blade was rubbed with poison mixed with grease, and the latter remained in the openwork of the blade. On a person being struck, the poison, of course, entered his system, even though the knife might be immediately withdrawn. If no poison was procurable, then the blade was rubbed with the root of garlic, which had the same fatal effect upon the victim. Certain it is that the crime was not premeditated, but it is equally certain that the murderer could not have chosen a more terrible weapon. The centre of the blade is almost as thin as paper, and so beautifully tempered was the steel of those old days that even though with the rust upon it in places it did not snap."

His two companions were highly interested at this explanation, and both propounded their own views upon the matter.

"Well, let the police try and solve the mystery," Pink said at last. "I don't see what more we can do here to-day. We shall all hear from the coroner to-morrow I suppose, and then we'll make the post-mortem. It seems that the constable has locked the door of the room and taken the key with him, so that nothing shall be disturbed before the arrival of his superiors."

"I really don't think it's any use remaining longer, Pridie agreed. "Our presence here just now can only be painful to the family."

So the three ordered their traps, and a quarter of an hour later were driving towards their homes across that long stretch of open country along the shallow valley of Nen.

CHAPTER VI

"GIVEN IN EVIDENCE"

MANY readers will recollect what a sensation the affair caused when it appeared in the papers.

On the second day following the tragedy the district coroner, Mr. Parker, of Wellingborough, held his inquiry at the "Fitzwilliam Arms," a long, old-fashioned, thatched inn on the Peterborough Road close to Castor Church.

The tragic facts had, on the day of their occurrence, reached the two Peterborough papers, the *Standard* and the *Advertiser*, and an account had consequently been transmitted to both the Press Association and the Central News in London, with the result that almost every daily newspaper throughout the kingdom had contained details of the startling affair. The assassination of a bride an hour after her marriage is by no means a common affair; therefore the newspapers who made a point of sensationalism "worked up" the story and outdistanced each other by giving imaginative pencillings called "Latest Details".

As may readily be imagined, so great was the interest and curiosity thus aroused that the room at the "Fitzwilliam Arms" was filled to overflowing, and a great crowd of persons who had come over from Peterborough, Oundle, Stamford, and neighbouring towns were compelled to remain in the high road, being refused admission by the two members of the constabulary posted as janitors. An hour before noon the excited villagers began to assemble, all eager to hear the latest development of the affair and to listen to the medical and police evidence.

The sudden death of a girl of Nella's popularity, therefore, created a deep impression locally, and all were on tenterhooks to hear the official declaration regarding the tragedy. Wild rumours were not absent. There were whispers of a secret lover who had come down from London, had been present at the ceremony in the church, had followed the happy pair to the Manor, and had laid in wait to kill the bride. Gossip, indeed, gave colour to the story by quoting the man's name, and alleging that he had often driven from Peterborough and gone for walks with her in secret across Castor field and over the old Roman way to Water Newton. One man declared in the bar of the "Fitzwilliam Arms" that he had once met the pair crossing Milton Park in company, and another was certain that one of two figures he met on the footpath leading across the pastures to the station about a month before was Miss Nella.

If a tragedy is enacted either in town or country distorted stories always reach the public, and more especially in a village where they lose no sensational element as they pass from mouth to mouth.

But at last the sweet-toned old bell in the Norman church tower chimed the hour of noon, and the Coroner took his seat to investigate the truth. Twelve jurymen, inhabitants of the two villages, were duly sworn, and, having elected Mr. Churchwarden Cook as their foreman, went forth to view the body. On their walk up to the Manor they were followed by a large and excited crowd who, with feelings of disappointment, watched them disappear through the big iron gates and up the drive. A quarter of an hour later they reappeared, and upon their walk back to the inn were again escorted closely.

When they had returned to their seats, Mr. Parker proceeded to formally open his inquiry by prefacing a few remarks outlining the tragedy.

"But," he added, "I think all of you, gentlemen of the jury, are acquainted with the case through the columns of the newspapers, so perhaps it is unnecessary for me to say more. You are here to-day not so much to fix the identity of the unfortunate young lady's assassin as to decide in what manner she came by her death. At present the matter is a complete mystery; therefore, I trust, gentlemen, that you will give the evidence your most careful and earnest attention."

Old Mr. Milbourne was the first witness. In a hoarse, choking voice he identified the deceased as his eldest daughter, and briefly related the painful circumstances of the tragedy while the expectant audience sat hushed, eagerly drinking in every word that fell from the old gentleman's lips.

"You had no suspicion that your daughter had an enemy, I presume?" asked the Coroner, "None whatever," was the reply. "Neither had she any other lover but the man to whom she was married."

Hubert Hutton was the next witness. Being a stranger in the place, the assembly were expectant of some revelations. Indeed, in the village there had been some wild gossip concerning him, and it had even been hinted that he had fallen in love with Nella, who, however, had preferred his friend Kenyon. In this the gossips discerned a motive for the crime. Hence all were attentive to his story.

Attired as usual with a rather graceful elegance and a flower in his lapel, he removed his glove before taking the oath and gazed around him quite calmly, although he was quite well aware that he was regarded with distinct suspicion. Mrs. Milbourne, although she was not present, had not forgotten his curious eagerness to suppress her dead brother's papers, and Sylvia, who sat near the Coroner and close to Guy Wingate, recollected the strange look on his countenance when he had leaned forward and fixed his gaze upon her sister.

Cool, and yet with a grave expression upon his thin face, he turned to the Coroner and said slowly so that it could be written down :

"I am Hubert Hutton, living at 90, Rue Lafayette, Paris. Mr. Douglas Kenyon, husband of the deceased lady, is my friend. We were at Charterhouse together. A week ago, while in Paris, I received a letter from him asking me to be best man at his wedding, and for that purpose I came to England. I was present at the ceremony at Castor Church, and afterwards at the wedding breakfast at Ailesworth Manor House. During the meal I grew faint, owing to the heat of the room, and left the table. I then walked to the entrance and stood out beneath the portico looking towards the lawn. I had not been there a few minutes when I heard a sound behind me, and, turning, saw the bride passing up the stairs. I endeavoured to stop her in order to speak with her, but she declared that she was late, and had a lot to do before her departure, and ran on up the stairs. That was the last time I saw her alive. On returning into the house my attention was attracted by something white upon the landing, and I saw that the lady had fallen. Believing her to be in a faint, I rushed upstairs, but next moment realized the truth, for there was blood upon her dress and a stiletto lying close by her side. The poor young lady was not dead, for she vainly endeavoured to speak, but before the arrival of assistance she expired in my arms. The stiletto had apparently been taken from a nail on the wall close to where the assassination took place."

"You heard no scream?" inquired the Coroner, looking up sharply from the paper whereon he was writing the depositions.

"At the time the poor young lady was struck I was out upon the lawn," Hutton replied. "The scream heard by those at the table was evidently that of one of the housemaids whom I called to my assistance."

There was a pause while the Coroner wrote down the witness's reply, and those assembled considered the story a somewhat lame and suspicious one.

"When you rose and left the table, did you notice if any other guest was absent?" inquired the Coroner, sharply.

"I think not. Mr. Milbourne, who sat at the head of the table, would probably know. Such functions, however, are not very formal, and to me there seemed a good deal of movement in and out previous to the heat overcoming me."

"Then you cannot say for certain if one of the other guests had not already left the table?"

"No. But someone might have left the table after me," was his clever suggestion, and those words caused his hearers to ponder.

Sylvia, seated close to where the young man was standing, watched him narrowly, and became impressed by what she saw. Her quick perception detected that he was now leaning heavily upon a chair back, and that his hand trembled nervously. The coolness which had distinguished him in the opening of his testimony had now deserted him, and the paleness of his hollow cheeks and his agitated manner showed that he wished to escape the ordeal of cross-examination.

"Then you are absolutely unable to throw any further light upon the tragic affair?" asked the Coroner, after a further pause.

"I regret that I cannot," was the answer.

Hutton returned to his seat, and his place was taken by his old school-fellow, Douglas Kenyon, grave-faced, and attired in deep mourning. In a low voice he explained how his bride had left the table to go upstairs to prepare for her journey. She had told him before getting up that she had a letter to write, and that it was unnecessary for her bridesmaids to leave the other guests for another quarter of an hour. Then about ten minutes later he, with the others, was startled by the loud shouting of a servant, and, on rushing out, made the appalling discovery that his wife was dead.

"That letter she wished to write at such a moment must have been one of considerable importance," remarked the Coroner, balancing his quill in his fingers. "Did she tell you its nature, or to whom she intended to send it ?"

"No. That is a rather curious point. I asked her to whom she was going to write, but she refused to tell me."

"A young wife usually has no secrets from her husband," Mr. Parker remarked.

"It was the first time she had refused to answer me a question, and I confess that I felt a trifle annoyed at the moment."

"Naturally. The circumstance would appear to you suspicious, and in the light of after events it now appears distinctly remarkable."

The result of the post-mortem examination was then ascertained, Dr. Lewis stating that, in conjunction with his friends, Drs. Pink and Pridie, he had made an examination, and found that death was due to a knife wound by which the carotid artery had been severed. The antique Italian dagger found beside the body, and which was produced by the police, would no doubt effect such a wound.

"And how, Doctor, in your opinion, was the blow delivered ?" the Coroner asked.

"From behind undoubtedly. The assassin must have drawn back against the wall and struck after the young lady had passed by. It is more than probable that the deceased never saw her assailant. At least, that is my own private opinion."

The two other medical men corroborated this theory, and the expectant public and busy reporter felt that they were as far from the truth as ever.

Mrs. Milbourne, heartbroken over her loss, was sorely puzzled when time after time she reflected upon young Hutton's strange words regarding Austen Leigh's papers. Only that morning she had gone alone to the box in which she had placed them, examined them carefully, but found that they were mostly in a strange language with which she was entirely unfamiliar. Truly hers was a curious inheritance. Hutton evidently knew the character of the papers which her dead brother had so carefully preserved, and she resolved to induce him to reveal the truth to her.

While she sat sad and alone in her long, old-fashioned drawing-room deeply pondering upon all the details of that abruptly terminated feast, the inquiry at the "Fitzwilliam Arms" proceeded and gradually increased in interest.

The medical testimony being completed, Mr. Harold Price, a barrister well known at the Criminal Bar, who had been instructed by Mr. Tarbutt to watch the case on behalf of the Milbourne family, rose, and asked the Coroner's leave to make some cross-examination. Obtaining permission, he recalled Hubert Hutton. Then those in court held their breath in the expectation of hearing some startling evidence.

"I would like to ask you, Mr. Hutton," commenced the barrister, fixing him with his monocle, "whether you had any previous acquaintance with the deceased lady before the day of the wedding?"

"I knew her slightly," was the prompt reply, although the witness went as pale as death when the inquiry was put to him.

There was a stir in court as the attentive listeners breathed again.

"Now, sir, there is a second question I would like to put to you, and kindly answer me honestly, upon your oath," said the cross-examiner. "Tell me, yes or no, whether you are not aware of the motive of the crime."

The witness was silent, apparently disinclined to commit himself. The court awaited his reply with feverish anxiety.

"Now, sir. We are waiting," exclaimed the barrister dryly.

"I—I have no knowledge of its actual motive," was the witness's tardy response.

"Well, may we take it that you have a suspicion?"

"Yes, I have a suspicion."

"Then, if you choose you can give the police certain information—eh?"

"No," replied Hutton quickly. "I cannot assist the police."

"Why, pray?"

"Because in this matter I am utterly powerless," was the hoarse response.

CHAPTER VII

A HERITAGE OF WOE

THE Coroner's inquiry was adjourned for a week in order to allow the police to make further inquiries. The statement wrung from Hubert Hutton created the most profound sensation. The gossips who had quickly formed a theory that he was the assassin were jubilant, and that night the conversation in the village inns over tankards of ale was whether or no he was guilty of the murder of "poor Miss Nella", as the villagers still called her.

The police were by no means inactive. The detective department of the County Constabulary had been reinforced by two of the smartest men from Scotland Yard, and Hubert Hutton, although he was a guest at Kenyon's house at Stamford, had no doubt that his antecedents were being actively inquired into. But he smiled within himself when he reflected at the inability of the police to establish any direct evidence. He had been a wanderer all his life, and if the police intended to trace his movements the task before them would be greater than they anticipated.

He denounced himself as a fool for having correctly answered the cross-examination. As he sat alone in his room at Casterton House that night prior to turning in, he thought it all over. Yes, he had been a fool to thus arouse suspicion against himself, but, after all, was not it the most secure course to adopt? He had spoken the truth, therefore he had nothing to fear.

In the silence of the night he sat in the big arm-chair deeply pondering.

"The whole thing seems incredible," he murmured to himself. "Austen Leigh was actually her uncle. Surely he must have died suddenly to leave such peril upon the family! Ah! If I could only warn Mrs. Milbourne! But it is now impossible. Every word I utter serves to implicate me more deeply. Besides, my lips are now sealed."

Then, sighing heavily, he rose, and, after pacing the room several times in feverish anxiety, at last retired to bed.

As he sat at breakfast with Kenyon next morning, his host returned to the subject. saying:

"You may surely tell me your suspicions, Hutton. It isn't like you to be so mysterious. Remember that before the Coroner yesterday you admitted that you held—well, a theory. What is it? Surely I, of all men, should know."

His friend looked across at him seriously and replied:

"No, my dear fellow. I regret extremely that I'm not in a position to tell either you or the police anything. I know this must sound curious, but the fact is I intend to pursue my own inquiries quite independently before giving the police a clue which may, after all, be only a false one. If the police commence their inquiries at this juncture, the ends of justice may be defeated; whereas if the matter remains in my own hands it is just possible that I may get at the truth. That's why I refused to give any satisfaction to the detectives last night."

"Well," remarked his host complainingly, "it hardly seems fair to me, your friend."

"I have already expressed my deep regret, old fellow," replied the other. "And I can only add that it is my intention to bring the assassin of your poor wife to justice. I cannot do more."

"Then, tell me, do you really suspect someone of the crime?"

"At present I only suspect the motive," was the response. "If it is as I believe, the motive was very extraordinary—stranger, indeed, than any theory that police or public could form. Mark me, when the truth is revealed, the sensation caused will be unparalleled in the history of crime. That's all I can say at present."

"You arouse my anxiety, and yet fail to satisfy my curiosity on any single point."

"We must not sacrifice the chance of bringing the murderer to justice to satisfy your curiosity or that of the police," replied Hutton calmly. "Be patient, and remember that in this I remain your friend, as I have ever been."

Kenyon, truth to tell, now shared the suspicions of the Milbournes. His friend's statement and actions had been so strange as to appear, even in his eyes, suspicious. It had originally been Hutton's intention to return to Paris directly after the wedding, and he had arranged to meet the happy pair in the French capital on their homeward journey from the honeymoon. But he was now compelled to remain until the Coroner's jury gave their verdict—hence, it had been arranged that he should remain as Kenyon's guest.

About eleven o'clock that same morning the Milbournes' coachman drove up in the light dogcart and handed in a note for Mr. Hutton, saying that he was to wait for a reply. Kenyon had gone down into Stamford; therefore, the servant found Hutton alone in the cosy little library.

The note was from Mrs. Milbourne asking him to come over and see her at once.

His first impulse was to write her a line of excuse, but, on reconsideration, he saw that it was imperative to play a double game at Ailesworth Manor, and that this would be an excellent opportunity for commencing it. So he put on his overcoat, and, leaving a message for his friend that he had gone to the Milbournes', he mounted into the trap and drove away through the lethargic Gothic town of Stamford, down the steep hill, across the brimming river, and out by the broad highway which skirts the noble park of Burghley.

An hour's drive, mostly along the Great North Road, brought them to the Manor, and, descending, he was ushered into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Milbourne, a slight, grey figure, in her deep mourning, stood awaiting him.

The first words from her lips were an expression of thanks at his prompt response to her wish, and when she had invited him to be seated, she prefaced her remarks by saying that she had sent for him secretly because she thought, for various reasons, it was unwise that the other members of the family should know of his visit.

He bowed his head, fully comprehending her meaning; but uttering no word. He saw, however, how altered she was by the great grief that had befallen her. The last time he had been at her side she was gay and radiant. But that morning, in the pale spring sunlight that slanted through the long windows opening upon the old-world flower garden, she looked anxious and prematurely aged, as though haunted by some constant dread.

"You will recollect, Mr. Hutton, that on the last occasion we met you were speaking of my poor brother, Austen Leigh. It was to resume our chat that I have asked you to come to me to-day."

The young man drew a long breath, and his pale face assumed a grave look full of deep regret.

"Ah! yes. Poor Leigh! It was indeed a shock to me when you told me that he was dead—a great shock. I believed he was still on one of those erratic journeys of his, but he has, alas! gone to the bourne of every traveller, the destination of which even the Geographical Society is without any data."

"You said you knew him," observed Mrs. Milbourne anxiously, leaning forward in her chair. "When and where did you meet him?"

"I first met him several years ago in Paris, at the salon of a mutual literary friend. We were introduced, and afterwards became very intimate. But he was a wanderer, and so was I. He had then just returned from his journey through Turkestan, while I had been along the shore of the Caspian. Strange that such a rolling-stone should finally settle down in a country village in England. And, forgive me for saying it, Mrs. Milbourne, but he was always just a little eccentric."

"Exactly. It was his eccentricity that troubled us so," she replied. "You will recollect that I was telling you how he disposed of his property," she went on. "Contrary to our belief, he was quite comfortably off, and left a legacy to each of my daughters, and the remainder of the property to me."

"Ah! of course," he remarked, as though suddenly recollecting. "You mentioned something about his papers being left to the Royal Geographical Society. Were there many?"

"About fifty, I think. We made a packet of them and sent them to the secretary, who duly acknowledged them. They consisted wholly of maps and diaries."

"Nothing else?" he asked, looking at her earnestly.

"Nothing. Of that I am quite certain. I have the whole of the remaining papers safely under lock and key. Greater part of them are entirely unreadable. We believe they are written in some secret cipher of his own."

"That's curious," Hutton remarked. "Have you not tried to obtain a key to it?"

"Well, we have never thought it worth while," was Mrs. Milbourne's response.

"I really wish you would let me have sight of one or two of them," he observed. "As I've already told you, I have some knowledge of the existence of the papers which, if they are what I believe them to be, are very important documents."

"You suggested that I should keep their existence a profound secret from everybody?" she remarked.

"And I repeat it," he said. "It would be better for everyone concerned if they were burnt."

"You arouse my curiosity, Mr. Hutton," said the Squire's wife frankly. "Do you suspect that my brother in the course of his travels discovered some El Dorado, and the secret is contained in those curious documents in cipher?"

"I know not what to suspect until I have seen some of the papers," was Hutton's reply. "If you will allow me to have sight of them, I may be able to tell you something of their character."

Mrs. Milbourne's curiosity, like that of most women of whatever age, was easily aroused, and she, therefore, after some hesitation decided to show him the papers discovered among the dead traveller's possessions. Conducting him along a corridor to a further wing of the old house, they entered the small, well-furnished room which was termed the boudoir, and with a key she opened the old oak bureau which had been in Leigh's study until his death.

In the pigeon-holes of the antique piece of furniture were several bundles of papers, one of which she withdrew and handed to her companion.

Eagerly he undid the pink tape which secured it, and, taking them to the table, spread out the first sheet of rather common foolscap. It was closely written, but in Roman capitals—evidently in cipher. But by the expression on Hutton's face and the eagerness with which he scanned it, Mrs. Milbourne became convinced that to him it was quite plain. Indeed, upon several of the folios were short lines composed of bewildering arrangements of capital letters neatly printed, but utterly unintelligible. Down these the young man ran his finger as though in search of some name. But, as far as the Squire's wife could gather, search was in vain.

Another and another of the papers he quickly handled, his brows knit, his countenance wearing an anxious, intense expression.

"Yes," he ejaculated at last, "it is just as I thought. Instead of destroying these, as he should have done, he has bequeathed them to you as a heritage of woe."

"A heritage of woe!" cried the lady amazed. "I don't understand you! Pray be more explicit."

"Unfortunately I cannot," he replied, very earnestly. "I can only tell you that if they were mine, I would burn them all, now and at once in yonder grate."

"But why? I don't see why I should before I know to what they allude."

Hutton was silent for a moment, then said:

"Ah! Mrs. Milbourne, I fear you will never know. They relate to a secret which was in the dead man's keeping."

"But you hold the key to the cipher? It is useless to deny it. You can read them."

"I have only seen sufficient to satisfy myself that my conjectures were well grounded," he replied. "Whether I know the key to the cipher or no is my own personal affair. But, tell me, did your brother leave behind him any articles of jewellery?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Were they of rather curious Oriental design?"

"They were. But why do you inquire?"

For answer the young man only smiled mysteriously, and taking up yet another of the dead man's papers became apparently absorbed in it.

Then, of a sudden, there occurred to Mrs. Milbourne the vain efforts of her brother at the moment prior to his decease and his curious injunction to hide some unknown object. "Hide it!" he had cried. "Or death!"

She briefly explained those last sad moments of her brother's life, and Hutton, listening attentively, made no remark.

He only bowed his head, as though he understood perfectly well the purport of that dying injunction to secrecy.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DEAD MAN'S PAPERS

HUBERT HUTTON fixed his eyes greedily upon the paper spread before him. It was fortunate, indeed, he thought that these people possessed no key to the cipher. Little did that household dream of the true import of those papers cast aside as unintelligible. To him the words written upon that paper were plain enough, and full of a terrible purport. The others he could not decipher.

What if they fell into other hands? He shuddered when the suggestion occurred to him. What, too, if an attempt were made to secure them by those to whom they would be of utmost value? There were a thousand, nay, ten thousand, men ready at that moment to stake their lives in order to gain that half-dozen bundles of documents.

The decipher of those papers, if published, would, he knew, create an unparalleled sensation throughout Europe. Now that he had seen them and handled them, he was not in the least surprised at the tragic death of Kenyon's bride.

"Did not your brother ever mention these papers to you?" he asked, after a brief pause, holding in his hand a large blue document with some curious signatures upon it.

"Never. They were found in his dispatch-box, which he had never opened in my presence."

"He made no stipulation that upon his death anything was to be destroyed?"

"None whatever."

"But, according to what you have told me, he struggled in his last hours to give some instructions to your daughter, but was unable. Without a doubt, he intended to speak of these, his most precious possessions."

"Precious?" she exclaimed surprised. "In what way are they precious?"

"In the fact that so long as they are not allowed to fall into any other hands than yours, there is naught to fear. If they pass from your possession, Mrs. Milbourne, then, as your brother has already declared with his dying lips—Death must follow."

"What you tell me is certainly alarming but I really cannot see in what manner these papers have influence for good or for evil."

"Your brother has left you a bitter inheritance, I fear," Hutton said gravely. "You have already had one tragic illustration of that in the death of poor Miss Nella."

"Her death! Do you believe it has any connection with my brother's curious prophecy?" she cried, in quick alarm.

"I certainly do," was the calm reply.

"Explain quickly," she urged. "Tell me all you know. You are holding back the truth from me."

"No, Mrs. Milbourne, I am not concealing the truth, for I myself am not yet aware of it. That there is a connection between your brother's injunction and your daughter's death seems to me most probable. From certain facts already in my possession, I have formed a theory which I intend to investigate. To speak quite frankly," he added, as his thin lips relaxed into a smile, "I am well aware that I am suspected as the author of the crime. That is but natural, because my movements chanced to be suspicious. All I desire, however, is that you will none of you prejudge the case. I think I have already shown you that I have some knowledge of your brother, of his adventurous past, and of those accursed papers now before us; therefore, I may perhaps be permitted to ask you to trust me still further."

"In what direction?"

He hesitated for a moment, wondering whether it were better to act boldly and tell her of his suggestion. He saw that what he had said regarding the evil which had fallen upon her house had impressed and alarmed her; hence his plan was made easier of accomplishment.

"I would make a suggestion," he said slowly, with his dark eyes fixed upon her. "As I have already explained, it is highly undesirable that these papers should remain under your roof. When I say that there are a number of persons who would not hesitate to commit murder in order to obtain possession of them, I think you will see that they should be placed in more security than in this bureau. What I suggest is that you should make them into a packet, seal them, and allow me to take them to London and place them in a strong room in one of the Safe Deposit Company's vaults. I will return to you with the key and the receipt."

Mrs. Milbourne hesitated. Truth to tell, she looked with no great favour upon the young man who seemed to be so intimate with her dead brother's affairs. She did not share the suspicion of the rest of the family that he was in any way responsible for poor Nella's death, yet the fact that he was apparently in possession of that puzzling cipher caused her to mistrust him.

But by dint of further argument and by impressing upon her the serious danger consequent upon the documents remaining in the house, he at last succeeded in gaining his object. With secret satisfaction he assisted her to take the remaining bundles from the bureau, pack them in brown paper, and tie them with string. In the escritoire there was a stick of black sealing-wax, but no seal, whereupon Hutton detached his own from his watch-chain and handed it to her.

She used it while he held the taper, and, with a woman's thoughtlessness, handed it back to him. She never for a moment reflected that he might wish to re-affix fresh seals!

But the packet being complete, Hutton announced his intention of travelling to Town from Peterborough without delay, in order to deposit it in safety that afternoon.

"I have no desire to keep this in my possession any longer than is absolutely necessary," he observed with a mysterious smile. "I shan't feel secure until it is safely locked away in one of the strong rooms."

"But would it not perhaps be best, after all, to burn them?" suggested Mrs. Milbourne with some hesitation.

"No, I think not. Had your brother destroyed them himself it would have been different. But they are evidently known to have passed into your possession, therefore it is best to act as we have decided—at least, for the present."

At that juncture Sylvia, with her sister Ethel, entered the room unexpectedly, and halted in surprise when they found their mother in conversation with the man whom they held in some suspicion. Both greeted him with some coldness, but their presence precluded any further conversation; thereafter, after a few brief commonplaces, he took his leave, carrying the precious documents with him.

"I shall return to-morrow—or, at latest, on the following day," he said to Mrs. Milbourne as he shook her hand. And wishing the two girls farewell he took his departure.

Shortly after three o'clock he arrived at King's Cross, but, instead of going into the City to deposit the papers, he took a cab and drove to Batten's, a private hotel in Cork Street, where he was well known. When alone in a private sitting-room, he lost no time, but, seating himself at the table, broke open the seals and proceeded to carefully examine the documents one by one. Only one of them he found decipherable.

Judging from the words that now and then escaped his lips it contained some very remarkable disclosures.

"God!" he gasped, eagerly scanning the lines of cipher. "Here is the list—the actual list! And yet none would believe it were it not down in black and white! Leigh had the heart of a lion. Any other man would never have dared to do what he has done. His niece, poor Nella, is, unfortunately, sacrificed," he went on, leaning back in his chair and staring straight before him. "But that was because his fatal seizure prevented him from making the statement which he evidently intended to make. Yet, who among those guests could be implicated? Who could have struck that swift, vengeful blow at the moment when I had stepped out upon the lawn. The instant was surely well chosen."

Then, resting his chin upon his hands and his elbows upon the table, he pondered long and deeply, with brows knit, trying to recall every detail of the wedding feast.

"No," he murmured at last, "there is not one person whom I can suspect. It must have been a stranger who had seen the bride in the church, and, following her home, had patiently awaited his opportunity to enter the house and lay low until she passed. I am suspected!" He laughed. "Well, let them entertain what suspicion they please. They will one day realize the fact that the only person who can assist them to a solution of the problem is Hubert Hutton." And, placing the paper before him aside, he proceeded to examine the others *ad seriatim*.

He had very cleverly obtained possession of Leigh's papers, and it now remained to be decided what he should do with them. The little ruse regarding the seal showed him to be endowed with considerable ingenuity. Mrs. Milbourne did not know that while she had gone into the adjoining room to obtain some string he had taken up her seal from the escritoire and placed it in his pocket in order that he might be able to offer her his own.

Through nearly two hours he remained engaged in trying to read the papers which the dead traveller had left behind him.

"Great Heavens! Her name and description!" he gasped suddenly when in the centre of a second document which he found he could read. The others were in another cipher of which he had no key. "I had never dreamed that! Surely she cannot be implicated. My God! No!" he cried, starting up. "I can't believe it. I won't!"

And he paced the small room in feverish haste from end to end.

"Why didn't Leigh destroy them? He was a fool—a culpable fool—to place so many lives in jeopardy. He was eccentric to madness. A good, well-meaning fellow, but mad—mad! What, I wonder, did he expect his heirs, executors and assigns to do with them? Perhaps, however, intending one day to destroy them, he kept them tenaciously until it became too late. I remember once, when we were walking one autumn afternoon in the Bois de la Cambre at Brussels, that he spoke to me of what he termed his 'most precious possession', and how he urged me, should he die suddenly, to rescue his papers. I gave my promise—and I have fulfilled it."

Again he returned to his task, and, although the light was fast fading, he examined every paper right to the very last. Then, when he had finished, he passed his hand across his brow as if to clear his brain, and exclaimed aloud:

"How many in this busy, bustling London dream that here beneath my hand I hold a secret which, if divulged, would cause all Europe to ring from end to end. Strange that I, of all men, should have been bidden to that marriage and should have been the last to speak with the unsuspecting victim of Leigh's carelessness in not removing all traces of the past. He warned them with his dying lips, it is true, but, not knowing the truth, how could they understand his meaning?"

He gathered together the papers, and, repacking them in the brown paper, tied them up with string. Once again he hesitated whether to follow the evil prompting within him and offer them in the quarter where he knew they would be too readily purchased or strictly to carry out his promise to Mrs. Milbourne.

At last, however, he made up his mind, and, taking the packet, he went below and drove in a hansom to a photographer's in Knightsbridge, who was about to close his shop.

He placed the secret documents down upon the table, stating to the manager that he desired the whole of them to be photographed by noon next day at latest, and that he would want one print of each as well as all the negatives. The papers were opened, inspected by the man, and the order taken, with the stipulation that the documents themselves, with the exception of several which were too voluminous and would occupy too much time, should be returned when he called at noon, and that the prints and negatives should be ready on the following evening.

"As you see," Hutton pointed out, "the papers are of a strictly private character, and I want photographic copies. You will, of course, take every care of them."

"They shall remain in my safe to-night, sir," said the man, "and we'll get on with them early."

Thus satisfied, Hutton left the shop and re-entered the cab. Then, as he drove back through the rain to Cork Street, he pondered deeply, at last exclaiming to himself between clenched teeth :

"No, I can't do it. I'll risk all for her sake and stand firm whatever happens. I cannot sacrifice her life. She is innocent and unsuspecting. I love her too well—far too well.'

CHAPTER IX

THE VISITOR AT THE "GRAND"

A FORTNIGHT had gone.

The Coroner's jury at Castor had returned a verdict, usual in such cases, that young Mrs. Kenyon was "wilfully murdered by some person or persons unknown", and thus the matter had been left in the hands of the police. The latter had tried by all the means in their power to induce Hutton to make some statement, but he strenuously refused, even at risk of arrest as an accessory after the fact. There was absolutely no direct evidence against him, hence the hesitation on the part of the two officers from Scotland Yard to apprehend him. His excuse for refusing to make a statement was that he was investigating the affair himself, and that he hoped at a date not far distant to be able to furnish the police with some reliable information.

As regards the secret documents, he had, true to his promise, placed them in the vaults of the Safe Deposit Company in Chancery Lane, and had handed Mrs Milbourne the key and the receipt. The Squire's wife, however, had no idea that when he left to return to Paris a couple of days later he carried with him clear photographic copies of every one of the papers, together with the negatives from which they had been printed.

As far as the public interest in the village tragedy was concerned, it was at an end. The newspapers, quick to dismiss an old sensation for any newer mystery, now no longer mentioned it. The affair was regarded as an enigma, like thousands of other mysteries of crime. None dreamed of its causes nor of its far-reaching effect.

Kenyon, utterly heartbroken at his loss, had gone to Germany to be away from the surroundings which reminded him so vividly of his dead love, and the Milbournes were in London for the same purpose, while in the pretty sloping graveyard of Castor Church, with its old lichen-grown tombs and new white marble monuments, there was a small, newly-turfed mound which marked the spot where the unfortunate victim of the tragedy had been laid to rest.

In Paris Hubert Hutton soon returned to that circle of idle bachelors wherein he was extremely popular. The little coterie of wealthy young Englishmen living in the French capital is a gay one indeed. Club life is not as we know it in London, hence each afternoon at four the kindred spirits assemble in the comfortable American bar of the Hotel Chatham, or in the pleasant room beyond looking out into the green old courtyard. Cosmopolitans all, they sip their Pernod or swallow the excellent cocktails manufactured by the ubiquitous Johnnie, a short, merry-faced Italian, whose knowledge of who is in Paris and who is out of it is absolutely encyclopædic. Johnnie, mixing his cocktails, receives and gives messages to all of his clients. He knows every one by name, as well as all that there is to be known about them, and takes a fatherly interest in their welfare, often interspersing his remarks with bits of advice regarding the numerous pitfalls of Paris life. The Orleanists once made the place their headquarters, and it is said that their comic opera "plots" were hatched over Johnnie's cocktails.

The habit of this little circle of idlers who prefer to live in Paris rather than in London is to gossip for an hour at the "Chatham", then to go round the corner to "Henry's", and afterwards on for an *apéritif* at "Maxim's" before dining. It is ever the same, winter or summer. The circle seldom enlarges, for, being composed of residents, no mere tourists are admitted to it.

When, on the afternoon of the day following Hutton's return to Paris, he entered the "Chatham", he found half a dozen of his friends there and was congratulated on his return. They knew he had been home to the wedding of a friend, but knew nothing of the tragic occurrence. Such men only read the *Journal* or *Figaro*, seldom an English paper. It is one of the tests of the true cosmopolitan to be able to do without his London newspaper.

As soon as he had seated himself, Johnnie came up and said, in his broken Italian-English:

"Gled to see you back, Meester Hutton. Meester Mirski was here las' night. He ask for you. I say you were in England."

"Mirski!" ejaculated Hutton, surprised. "I thought he was in Russia. Has he returned to live in Paris?"

"No. He stay at ze 'Grand'. He say he wait for you return. I tell him you would sure to come here when you get back. I forgot your number in Rue Lafayette."

"Thanks, Johnnie. I'll go over and see him. Bring me a dry Martini."

"Oui, m'sieur."

And then Hutton joined in the conversation of his companions, one of whom was a young French Baron, who did not understand English ; hence they spoke in French out of compliment to him.

The unexpected announcement that Witold Mirski had returned to Paris was by no means pleasing, and especially so when it seemed that the man was there specially to see him. Mirski had lived in Paris until about three years before, and had been a frequenter of the "Chatham", but of a sudden his affairs had called for attention, and he had returned to live in St. Petersburg. Since that day Hutton had heard but little of him, although for certain reasons he held the fellow in constant dread. The fact was that he had some years before borrowed money of him, and his increased inability to pay caused him considerable anxiety. No doubt the man had returned from Russia in order to collect his debt. His first impulse on hearing of Mirski's arrival was to quit Paris at once, but, knowing with what kind of man he had to deal, and that flight would place him in a more precarious position, he resolved to go at once and face the inevitable. As he turned from the Rue Danou and crossed the Boulevard des Capucines, the Grand Café and the Café de la Paix were crowded, for it was the hour of the absinthe when all Paris takes her ease and her *apéritif.* With some misgivings, he crossed the courtyard of the Grand Hotel, inquired for the Russian, and, following one of the page-boys into the lift, was soon afterwards ushered into Mirski's private sitting-room, a small but gaudy apartment, brilliant but lacking in comfort, as is the case in most Paris hotels.

The man who came forward and greeted him effusively in French was elderly and of marked personality. His grey hair was long, like a musician's. When he spoke to his visitor he had a queer way of putting his head close to Hutton's and peering into his face with twinkling eyes, as though he wished to read the other's thoughts, rather than to listen to his words.

"Well, my dear Hutton," he said, sinking into one of the blue silk chairs and motioning his visitor to do the same, "my presence here is unexpected—eh ?"

"Quite," responded the other in French. "I believed you had decided not to return to Paris. Until yesterday I was in England."

"Johnnie told me of your visit. You went to assist at a wedding of a friend ?" Then, with a smile, he added : "Why don't you marry yourself ?"

"Can't afford it," was the frank reply. "You know my unfortunate position. I've scarcely a sou to my name."

"And yet you are indebted to me fifty thousand francs," observed the Jew, his rather sallow face growing grave in a moment. "I had expected you would to-day repay me, for I recollect that it is now nearly two years overdue. You cannot reproach me for ever having pressed you."

"No. I must say you have been exceedingly lenient," Hutton said in a rather low voice. "But the fact is, I've gone the pace a little too much of late. But I've pulled up now."

"Because you are at the end of all your credit—eh ?" remarked the Jew quietly. "Most of us would pull up under similar circumstances. But can't you possibly raise the money from any of your friends in England ?"

The young man shook his head, saying : "I've tried. I've wanted to pay you this years past and get that letter back from you. Where is it ?"

"Here." And the old Russian drew from his pocket a greasy leather wallet, from which he took a letter secured by a large black seal.

Hutton eyed it greedily. It was the security he had given for the advance of fifty thousand francs. He had no property, and that letter was the only thing upon which the Jew would grant him the loan. His whole future—nay, his very life—depended upon his ability to obtain the return of that letter held by Mirski. Too well he knew that while it was in that unscrupulous man's possession his life was insecure, for its contents were such as would, if divulged, cause him to take his own life. Since the moment he had sealed it and handed it to the Jew in that little dark office in the Rue des Petits-Champs, he had never known the feeling of security. The fifty thousand francs had been advanced—not upon property—but upon the security of the life of Hubert Hutton himself.

"Ah !" observed the Jew smiling, as he replaced the letter in his pocket, "I see you are afraid, *mon ami*. Well, I really think I have up to the present been far too lenient. You promised to pay the whole in a year, yet all I have received is seven hundred francs of interest. Surely that is not business ?"

"I have been struggling for the past year to obtain money with which to pay, but things have been against me. My brother, who used to help me, is dead, and, contrary to my expectations, he didn't leave me a sou."

"Never count on expectations," growled the old man. "When you are as old as I am, you will have ceased to believe in anybody. You remember our compact ? You were hard up and came to me. You had nothing worth five huudred francs and you wanted fifty thousand. I suggested that you should give me this letter, which I was to hold for a year until you could repay me. That year has passed and two more ; therefore, being pressed myself, I must now be repaid. You will recollect that we stipulated that if you did not repay I might make what use I wished of your letter ?"

"Yes," cried Hutton, hoarsely, rising pale-faced from his chair, "and that would involve my death ! Surely you will be merciful, Mirski ?"

"If you can repay me I will return the letter. I have brought it with me from Russia for that purpose," replied the other coldly, still sitting in his arm-chair. "I intend to have my money, you understand ?"

"But won't you extend the time, say, for six months longer ? I am certain to be able to get it by that time," he urged.

"Impossible," was the hard response. "To-day is Tuesday. I shall give you until Saturday morning. After noon on Saturday this letter will leave my hands."

"And you will lose your fifty thousand francs ?" added the Jew's victim.

"That is my own affair, m'sieur."

"But you can't mean this ?" cried Hutton, dismayed. "You've come down on me so unexpectedly that you really ought to give me time. Such an action isn't like you, Mirski. Here, in Paris, you've done many little kindly actions to those men who were in your debt. More than once I've had occasion to thank you. Come, you must not be hard upon me now."

"I don't see that I'm hard on you. When a debt is so long overdue, no complaint can be made of an effort to collect it. Indeed, I have come right from St. Petersburg for that purpose."

Again and again the young man begged of the Jew to give him longer time. He pointed out how utterly impossible it was for him to raise the money within the stipulated time, especially as it was from his friends in England that he would probably obtain it. But the answer was always the same. Mirski the Jew was obdurate.

For Hubert Hutton the outlook was certainly as black as any he had ever experienced. If that fatal letter ever left the Jew's possession, then there was nothing for it but suicide. He knew that only too well. For two whole years he had been calmly contemplating it, facing the inevitable with all the coolness of a philosopher. Yet it seemed hard, indeed, that he, not yet thirty, should be compelled to ignominiously end his own life because of the demand of that scoundrelly Hebrew.

The temptation was strong within him to spring upon the old man, filch the letter from his wallet and destroy it; nevertheless he saw that such an action might only aggravate the situation and that arrest for theft must follow.

He paced the room several times, trying to see some way out of the dilemma. There was no one in Paris who would lend him fifty thousand francs without security. Money-lenders are not prone to accept simple notes of hand, notwithstanding the alluring advertisements.

At last, in sheer desperation, he halted before the seated Jew, and, looking him straight in the face, said:

"Mirski. Once or twice, years ago, you've given me advice. Tell me now—what ought I to do?"

The old man rubbed both hands upon his knees, and, at the same time, elevated his shoulders with a gesture meant to imply that to him it was quite immaterial as long as he got back his fifty thousand francs.

"It is not for me to advise, *mon ami*. You know your own business best. I have been from Paris so long now that I am unaware of your position."

"But now, suppose you had a son, and he was in the fix I am in to-day, what would you advise him to do?"

"Well, there would be only one thing for him to do," responded the Jew, his little eyes twinkling as he bent forward. "Marry a rich woman."

Hubert Hutton remained silent, his eyes cast upon the floor in deep reflection. The man's suggestion was, of course, a natural one, but, unfortunately, the woman with whom he had fallen in love was the reverse of wealthy.

"Ah !" he sighed at last, "I know no rich woman who would have me."

"Well, you used to be friendly with quite half a dozen when I was here." Then he added : "For instance, there was the Countess Lubomirska, with whom you used to carry on a pretty warm flirtation, and lots of others, for aught I know."

"Dolores ! Phew ! By Jove, no !" was the young man's quick reply.

"Well, she's got plenty of money. At one time it was common gossip here in Paris that she was madly in love with you. You, like a fool, were blind to it all. You flirted with her, drove her in the Bois sometimes, and dined at her house just to amuse yourself—eh ?"

CHAPTER X

BLOOD MONEY

HUTTON frowned. What the Jew had said recalled a chapter of his erratic life in Paris that he wished to forget. The handsome Russian Countess had fascinated him. She was fifteen years his senior, had been married at twenty and left a widow at twenty-one. With the great estates of Horyngrod and Ploska in the government of Volhynie, she was a wealthy woman, and kept a smart little hotel in the Avenue de Bois de Boulogne close to the Rond Point. She had never assumed her position as *Khazyaceka* on her estates. Seldom she visited the grim old feudal castle at Ploska, but preferred life amid the glitter of the Gay City, while in summer she usually retired to her pretty white, rose-embowered villa on the green slope behind Aix-les-Bains.

"Yes," he remarked sullenly, "I did amuse myself."

"And from what I heard to-day you are still one of madame's friends," remarked the old man.

"Who told you ?"

"I met several men I knew on the Boulevards this morning. They spoke of you with envy. Why not marry her ? It would save a world of trouble, and at once extricate you from your present difficulty."

A sudden thought crossed Hutton's mind. He must gain time, and in order to do so it would be necessary to apparently fall in with the suggestion of this man who held his life in his hands.

"But marriage is impossible, my dear Mirski. I've got no money. Why, I'm absolutely bankrupt, and haven't enough even to take the lady to dine at 'Paillard's'."

"Ah ! that is easily arranged," said the Jew, in a more agreeable tone. "If you could satisfy me that you are ready to marry, I would willingly let you have, say, twenty thousand francs more—the whole to be paid within three months of your marriage. Madame would, no doubt, pay your debts. I have heard she is generosity itself towards those to whom she takes a fancy."

The suggestion was certainly an alluring one, yet Hutton in his heart knew that he could never marry the pretty, giddy little woman who was the talk of half Paris, and with whose name that of half the young elegants had been coupled at one time or another. He loved, and when a man loves a pure, honest girl the artificiality of a woman like Dolores Lubomirska grates upon his better nature.

The offer of twenty thousand francs and an extension of time was, however, certainly one to be considered. He was clutching at the last straw, and, as Mirski continued his forcible arguments, he almost came to the conclusion that an advantageous marriage was the only thing to save him.

At length, after half an hour, Hutton promised to consider the offer, and, after borrowing a further three thousand francs from the Jew, the pair went forth into the Boulevard and turned into the Café de la Paix, now fast emptying as the dining hour approached.

After they parted the Jew entered the "Grand", scribbled a *petit-bleu*, or telegraphic card, dispatched it, and then went up to dress for dinner.

Later that night, while Hutton sat in his own sitting-room in the Rue Lafayette, smoking a cigar, and pondering deeply upon his perilous situation, Mirski received a visit from a tall lady, who swept into his sitting-room, threw off her rich sable coat, disclosing the fact that she was in a handsome evening toilette of black, glittering with silver trimming, and sank into a chair almost before the Jew was aware of her presence.

She was a decidedly handsome woman, dark, with great black eyes, a delicately-chiselled face, a fine nose, small, almost childlike mouth, and slightly protruding chin. From her chiffons there exuded the sweet scent of the latest triumph of the Rue St. Honoré perfumers, and as she seated herself she stretched forth her tiny shoe from beneath the hem of her skirt with a coquettish air, as though she wished to charm the white-haired old man before her.

"Countess," he had exclaimed, in Russian, as she entered, "I am honoured by your visit to me. I dare not come to you, you understand, fearing lest he might be already there."

"Ah! yes," she replied, "it was much safer for me to come to you. Well? What has happened? Tell me."

"Well, I showed him the security, and then, after very carefully approaching the subject, made the suggestion," responded the Jew, with a grim smile upon his sallow, wrinkled face.

"And how did he take it ?" asked the beautiful woman of whom all Paris loved to gossip, as she leaned forward in her chair in an attitude which showed her eagerness.

"With a lack of enthusiasm. Indeed, my dear Countess, I think the young Englishman must be in love."

"In love !" she cried, starting up and knitting her brows. "In love with whom ?"

"Ah ! Madame," exclaimed the wily Hebrew, still speaking in Russian, "how can I tell ? These English are a strange people. Here you are, the smartest woman in Paris or Petersburg—if you will permit me to pay you compliment—ready to marry this ruined young fellow, and yet because of some sentimental attachment in another direction, he refuses."

"Refuses ?" she cried. "He actually refuses ? Why, you told me that he only lacked enthusiasm. Come, Mirski, explain to me what actually occurred. I have to go on to the Princess d'Essling's dance, and have no time to spare."

"He has not yet refused, because he dare not, but he intends to do so. From his manner I suspect that the tender attachment is a new one."

The Countess Lubomirska bit her lips. Men were always her puppets, to be taken up and cast aside at will. She was not accustomed to be thwarted when she had set her mind upon a plan.

The Jew quickly perceived that she was annoyed, yet, as those of his race can, he preserved a countenance Sphinx-like and utterly impenetrable.

She tapped the carpet impatiently with her tiny shoe and picked nervously at her gloves. Then, after a brief silence, she asked :

"Do you recollect what I told you a month ago when you dined with me in Petersburg ?"

He nodded. She had uttered some wild words when that night they had dined *tête-à-tête* at her beautiful palace in the Sergiefskaia, and she had first laid before him her plan of marrying the young Englishman. Indeed, those words of hers were so wild that he had then refused to believe her in earnest. Yet it seemed as though she were, now that she thus repeated her determination.

"I intend to marry him, Mirski. Do you understand?" she went on, the expression of her face showing how desperately in earnest she was. "When Dolores Lubomirska has made up her mind she is not easily turned from her intention. That you know quite well."

"Then Madame confesses that it is not mere caprice, but actually affection?" exclaimed the Jew, his small eyes brightening.

"Yes. To you I confess it," she replied, with a slightly contemptuous glance. "You, a dried-up old fossil, are too old to fall in love with me, or you would have done so long ago. Therefore, I can speak to you in confidence, without fear of betrayal. Yes. I love Hubert Hutton. Strange, isn't it? I don't really think I've ever loved a man before."

"Not your husband?"

"Bah! He was forced upon me by my father. I hated him always, and he is better dead."

The Jew smiled at her quick, impetuous words. The situation was certainly an interesting one. Here was a wealthy and popular woman, one whose chic was remarked everywhere in Paris, and whose escapades during the past few years furnished many stories for the gossips, actually hopelessly in love with the penniless Englishman who had innocently fallen into his clutches. He had known the Countess for years, both in Russia and in Paris, but had never credited her with the folly of falling in love. When a woman allows herself to love, then her chic vanishes and her vogue disappears.

"But is it not rather indiscreet to love this man?" the Jew remarked, even at that moment mystified by her latest caprice.

"You can't understand," she snapped, turning upon him fiercely. "I love him, and intend that he shall marry me. For you that is sufficient. I require no advice from you. I pay you for your services. I pay you for your presence here in Paris, and I guarantee you fifty thousand francs, plus interest, for the letter you hold as his security. What more, pray, do you want?"

"Nothing. Madame, I fear, misunderstands me. It is with the best of intentions that I ventured——"

"You know my intention," she interrupted. "He will marry me, or I shall purchase the letter from you."

"And that will mean death to him," remarked the Jew calmly.

"I mean it to be so," she answered with cold determination. "If he loves some other woman, then she shall not have him. That is my revenge."

A silence fell between the pair. The old Jew was sitting with his hands chafing his knees, a habit of his when puzzled. Dolores Lubomirska was a very remarkable woman, he knew, and certainly not one to be trifled with. She seemed to have set her mind upon marrying this young Englishman, but he personally considered the thing an absurd self-sacrifice. He sighed, and thought to himself that women were strange creatures. Dolores and he were old acquaintances. He had known her through a good many years, always as a capricious and erratic woman. More than once she had sought his aid in various little schemes which were not altogether creditable to her—schemes which in their conception showed how ingenious she was, and how utterly indifferent wherever men's hearts were concerned. Her husband had been a dissolute tyrant, and perhaps that back in the early days of her womanhood had broken her faith in man's constancy and honesty.

A month ago Mirski had received a letter summoning him to the Lubomirska Palace in the Sergiefskaia, and sitting in her pretty Louis XV boudoir she had carefully unfolded her plan. She intended to marry Hubert Hutton, the man in far-off Paris who once had been fascinated by her charms, but who seemed now to have forsaken her. The old Jew had at first laughed at her. But by her earnestness, he quickly saw that she actually intended to carry out her design, therefore he sat and heard her to the end. Briefly, she had become aware that Hutton was in his debt, hence she had summoned him to help her. She ordered him to return to Paris, put pressure upon the unfortunate young Englishman, and then make the suggestion of a wealthy marriage.

A more wily man she certainly could not have employed. In all Europe there is no more unscrupulous fraternity than the Russian money-lenders. Compromising documents are sometimes a more valuable security for the repayment of a loan than even landed property—a fact that was recently revealed in a very striking manner in a Russian Government inquiry. When, some years ago, the enforcement of the edicts relating to the residence of the Jews led to the emigration of thousands of their poorer co-religionists, the wealthier Jews, the capitalists and money-lenders, were very rarely disturbed. Even when, as a formality, they were "expelled" from the country districts, they generally returned a few months later when the storm had blown over, and thereafter remained unmolested.

It was because of this temporary expulsion from Russia that Mirski went to Paris, lived there for a couple of years, and carried on his very lucrative business. But when, three years ago, he considered it safe to return to Petersburg, he at once did so, and resumed his old operations from his dingy, dirty little office facing the Catherine Canal. As a well-known writer on Russia has put it, no European race is so liable as the Russian to fall victim to the money-lender. Good-natured, easy-going, absolutely thoughtless of the morrow if only the disagreeable pressure of the moment can be got rid of anyhow, most of the official classes have a very real difficulty to face. Even with the strictest economy, a Russian official can rarely live upon his pay alone. Unhappily, the life that strict economy entails would generally be fatal to any chance of promotion. Cards and gambling are the chief distractions of society, and refusal to play would often be as ruinous to an official's chance of promotion as administrative capacity would be. Thus the usurer reaps a golden harvest always.

It had long been the habit of Dolores Lubomirska to inquire of her friend Mirski if she wished to ascertain the financial position of any of the young Russians who followed in her train, for in his position as one of the best known financiers in Petersburg he received the patronage of the majority of the young nobles who lived beyond their means. Many a time she had received from him information that had been of great value to her in dealing with a too importunate lover, and now in this latest caprice she had again sought his assistance.

In a moment of confidence two years ago, Hubert had told her of his indebtedness to the old Russian who lived so merrily in Paris and frequented the "Chatham" of an afternoon. She had made a mental note of the fact, and was now using her knowledge to advantage. On that night a month ago in Petersburg she had been quite frank with Mirski in announcing her intention of marriage, while he on his part sat before her utterly confounded. Surely no one either in Petersburg or Paris suspected in Dolores Lubomirska's heart was any spark of the tender passion. She had amused herself for years, and had been first in all that was chic in Paris, in Nice, in Monte Carlo, and in Rome, but that she actually contemplated re-entering the marriage state—well, not a soul who knew her ever dreamed of such a thing.

"You are silent, Mirski," said the woman at last, fixing her dark eyes upon him. "I know you are puzzled at my decision," she laughed. "But I repeat that I intend he shall be my husband before long, although at present the matter is a secret between us."

The old Jew exhibited his palms, and gravely shook his head.

"Ah ! I see. You anticipate that, loving another, he is tired of me—eh ?" she asked.

"Madame has accurately divined my thoughts," was the long-haired old man's reply.

"And you do not believe in your power to induce him to marry me ?" she asked quickly.

The Jew did not at once reply. But, after a pause, he answered :

"Suicide is a far easier way out of his difficulty."

"But we must prevent that !" she cried quickly. Then, reflecting for a moment, she saw that with the pressure now upon him Hubert might well give way to despondency, as many others, alas ! have done. "I really believe, Mirski, that, after all, I have made a mistake in asking you to assist me," she said at last. "You have no tact. Your demands may drive him to desperation. If, as you tell me, he loves another woman, then I must await my opportunity. It is useless to be too precipitate in such matters. No," and she paused a moment toying with her rings, and contemplating the fine diamonds that glittered beneath the light. "No, I am fully alive to the situation. Tell me, have you any idea of the identity of this new attraction ?" she asked, in a hard voice.

"None whatever."

Again la belle Russe was silent. Then she said with an expression of disgust and impatience :

"I see, Mirski, that, after all, you are a blunderer. You should have discovered everything for me. It seems that you have put your presence upon him without finesse, like the rest of your class. I do not intend that he shall be driven by you to take his own life."

"Ah ! Madame loves him !" observed the Jew contemptuously.

"Yes, Mirski. That is true. I sometimes think I do love him. Droll, isn't it? Well, for the present we will agree to differ as to the wisdom of my choice. Meanwhile, I will take over the security you hold—now, at once, if you will give me a sheet of paper."

The Jew glanced at her with some surprise, but quickly assented, secretly glad to be able to wash his hands of the affair.

"As Madame wishes," he replied, and, taking a sheet of paper and pen from the rack, placed it upon the little table near which the Countess was sitting.

"I will give you a draft on the Crédit Lyonnais for both principal and interest," she said, with the pen poised in her slim, white hand. "What is the whole amount?"

"Fifty thousand francs first loan, three thousand loan to-day, and twenty-five thousand interest. In all, seventy-eight thousand francs."

"Very well," she said, in a hard voice, commencing to write a draft upon her bankers. "I pay the whole in return for that letter of his which you hold as security."

The draft signed and blotted, the Jew took it, examined it carefully, and, finding it in order, gave her in exchange the sealed letter from his shabby wallet.

"Ah! to be sure it really is droll," he laughed, highly pleased at being able to so easily obtain his money. "Madame falls in love and buys her husband for seventy-eight thousand francs. What a strange caprice!"

CHAPTER XI

SYLVIA LEARNS THE TRUTH

THE white mists which rise from the Nene valley in winter and hang almost perpetually about Castor and Ailesworth were gradually being dispelled by the sunshine of summer. The winter is always a long and damp one over those wide meadow-lands. The only life in that rural district in the dark, winter days is the hunt—always the hunt. The sport of fox-hunting is contagious, even to the villagers.

Old Mr. Milbourne was a true fox-hunter. He hunted with the Fitzwilliam each time they went out, no matter what the weather, often also with the Cottesmore, rode his own covert hack long distances, and looked upon his sport as one of the most important duties of his life, which was no play, but downright hard work, that rejoiced him even as such.

After the mysterious death of poor Nella, neither the old Squire nor his daughters were seen in the field again that season. The loss had been a serious one to the old gentleman, for Nella was his favourite, and there was no more daring or enthusiastic rider in all the hunt than she. So the season, as far as the Milbournes were concerned, had been cut off abruptly, and the family spent much of their time away in London and at Bournemouth.

The disinclination of Sylvia's parents to allow her to have any communication with the young Peterborough doctor had very soon borne fruit, as they expected. She spoke of him less frequently, wrote secretly to him less often, and Mrs. Milbourne, watching closely, was gratified at last to notice that an estrangement—the natural death of the first love—had taken place. Girls of twenty may always be forgiven their first love-sickness. It is one of the maladies of youth, just as is measles or whooping-cough.

The change had been effected by the most natural law of consequences. For over two months Sylvia had been absent with her parents, and, during that absence, a girl friend in Peterborough had written her a gossiping letter in which some remarks were made about Guy Wingate and his marked attentions to the daughter of a comfortably-off tradesman and prominent town councillor. The girl made careful inquiries in other quarters, and, to her dismay, the story was corroborated. All the vows he had made to her before her departure were false. Then, for the first time in her young life, she knew the bitterness of love.

But she was brave. She neither wrote to him nor reproached him. Only once did she shed tears in the solitude of her room in the Bournemouth hotel, and sob herself to sleep. After that, she made a resolve and kept it.

She had been back at the Manor only a week when she received in secret a note from Wingate making a clandestine appointment with her for the following afternoon at a spot on the footpath which runs for a mile or so across the level meadows to Castor Station. Few people pass that way, and from the gate where he suggested their meeting a path branched off away into quite an unfrequented district where no one would meet them. Arm-in-arm they had often traversed that path before, therefore she knew it well.

In his note he gave no reason for wishing to see her. Indeed, she had written him no word of regret or upbraiding. She had merely allowed his letters to remain unanswered.

At first she was filled with indignation that he should have the cool impudence to write to her and suggest a meeting after what had already taken place. Yet she slipped from the house on the following afternoon on the pretence of making some calls upon folk in the village, and sped across the Normangate field to the trysting-place.

She presented a smart little figure in her short black skirt, black coat, and small felt toque, and certainly she was a strikingly pretty girl, whose complexion still retained all the freshness of youth, and whose sweet and refined beauty would make a sensation anywhere.

When, at last, having followed the long, straight path, and passed the white swing-gate which gave entrance to a ploughed field, she turned quickly into the footway to the left, a moment later the straight, well-set-up figure of young Wingate came into view. He was dressed in a rough brown coat and riding-breeches, and carried his hunting-crop in his hand.

"At last, Sylvia !" he exclaimed, striding eagerly towards her with his cap in his hand. "I feared that you intended to disappoint me."

"It would surely not have been much of a disappointment to you if I had not come," the girl responded in a hard tone. He saw that she had no word of welcome for him after their two months' separation, but he half-suspected that she knew the truth.

"Where's your horse?" she asked.

"I left it over at the mill at Water Newton."

"And you have come out to see me," observed the girl, glancing straight in his face. "Why?"

The young doctor hesitated to tell her the real reason. He did not wish to pain her, yet she must know the truth sooner or later. Next week the local papers would, he knew, announce his engagement to the daughter of the worthy town councillor. The latter had already sent notes to the *Advertiser* and *Standard*. If a young doctor starts in practice in a country town, marriage with the daughter of one of its magnates often means his fortune. Guy Wingate knew this quite well, and, although he admired Sylvia's beauty and charm of manner, yet he knew that his union with Miss Ada Thomas guaranteed a successful future.

"I've come to see you, and to welcome you back again," he responded, placing his hand upon her arm and walking slowly at her side along the path. The high hedgerows wore their freshest green, the sun shone brightly, and the fluttering larks were high above their heads trilling forth their joyous song.

The pair had, however, not shaken hands. The estrangement between them was well marked.

"I should have thought you had no need to welcome me," the girl said, with a touch of bitterness in her voice.

"Why not?" he asked quickly, wondering whether she really knew the truth.

"Surely it is unnecessary to deceive me any longer?" she said in a quick outburst of anger. "I am aware that you have broken your pledge to me, and are already engaged."

He hung his head. Hers was a hard reproach. Well he recollected how, a year ago, he had declared his love for her, and how she, with childish simplicity, had in secret accepted him as her chosen husband. Guy Wingate was not a deceiver at heart, but merely one of those men who keep their eye upon the main chance, and who will sometimes, as in this case, sacrifice their love for financial reasons.

"You have heard the truth, Sylvia," he said in a low voice, grasping her hand and holding it firmly as he looked straight into her eyes. "I have deceived you—I have been forced to do so, and I am here to-day to ask your forgiveness."

"Why were you forced to deceive me?" she asked in a low voice, her eyes brimming with unshed tears.

"Because of my position. As you know, I am a struggling doctor, practically penniless. Without local influence I shall never obtain a lucrative practice. I have to marry in order to obtain that necessary standing."

"And you prefer a tradesman's daughter to me!" she said abruptly.

"No," he cried. "No, Sylvia. You do not regard the matter from a philosophic standpoint. I have no money; you, unfortunately have none, for your father has already told you that he can give you nothing. Therefore, how are we to marry? The thousand pounds left you by your uncle will not go far, I can assure you. No, my marriage with Miss Thomas is to me a matter of dire necessity. Would that it were not."

"And when is your marriage to take place?" she inquired coldly.

"In August."

"And after that I shall meet at the houses of our mutual friends, and in the hunting-field, the woman who has usurped my place?"

"Ah, my dear Sylvia, I know how hard these words of mine must sound to you," he said with a ring of sympathy in his voice, for he saw too well how acutely she was suffering. "But in a few months you will forget me, and learn to love some man richer and far worthier than myself. I know that in your eyes I am a brutal deceiver, because I have jilted you. But, mark me, in a year from now, you will smile at your anger of to-day, and we shall know each other as friends—and not lovers. Our love was a mistake. Romance may be forgiven in you, but in me, a man of the world, it was unpardonable. I regret that I ever allowed you to entertain any affection for me, because by so doing I have brought upon you the first bitterness of love, and I have shaken your belief in man's honesty for ever."

"Yes," she sighed, "you have."

"But, believe me, Sylvia, I am anxious to make amends," he went on in a deep, earnest voice, bending towards her. "I hate to think that we should part ill-friends, for I feel that, although we may not marry there is no reason why we should not still entertain an interest in each other. For my part I am ready to serve you, Sylvia, in any way you command me. Some day in the future you may perhaps want a friend. I pledge you that I will always serve you faithfully in that capacity."

"You gave me your pledge of love a year ago, and it is broken."

"I admit that," he answered quickly. "I readily bear all the blame you may heap upon me, for I was in the wrong from the first. But—well, you were young and charming. I saw that I attracted you, and it gratified my man's vanity to be loved by a girl still in her teens. I do not deceive you now, Sylvia. On the contrary, I admit everything. For that purpose I have come to you to-day in all humbleness. Yet the past cannot be recalled, therefore I beseech of you to grant me forgiveness."

Sylvia's heart was torn by conflicting emotions. It wounded her pride to think that this plain, yellow-haired daughter of a Peterborough tradesman should successfully rival her in Guy's heart. She had never met Ada Thomas, although she knew her by sight, having seen her cycling. Her father, Mr. Councillor Thomas, was a very big man in Peterborough.

The silence that had fallen between the pair was prolonged as they strolled along, he still holding her hand, until at last he repeated his appeal.

"How can I answer ?" she asked, bursting into tears. "How can I withhold my forgiveness ?"

"No," he said with an effort to comfort her. "Do not give way like this, Sylvia. It is painful to us both. You will very soon learn to love another, and happiness will be yours. Bear up. I know I have done wrong, but what I have done was imperative. Your parents look with no favour upon me, a poor, struggling medico. It is best that I should marry another—best for you, and for me."

"Ah," sobbed the girl bitterly, "that is all very well, Guy. But—I loved you—I loved you !"

"I know ! I know," he cried in a low, earnest voice. "But you will quickly learn to forget."

"And shall you forget ?" inquired the girl, looking up at him with her tear-stained eyes.

"No, Sylvia," he responded frankly. "I shall never forget you—never."

"Then, in the past you havereally loved me?" she demanded, laying her hand upon his arm. "Tell me the truth."

He was silent for a moment.

"Yes," he answered hoarsely. "I have loved you, Sylvia. It is because of that I ask you to forgive."

"And if I forgive, you will ever stand my friend?"

"I swear to you I will," he said. "My only hope is that you may find some man worthier of your affection than I am, some man who will love you and hold you as his ideal, as his all in all, as a wife should be held. You are young, Sylvia—ten years younger than I am. You are beautiful above the average of women; your face makes a sensation wherever you go, and your heart is just as pure as it was when you were still a child. Therefore, for you happiness is not unattainable. You will marry soon the man of your choice, and if you will take my hand in forgiveness to-day I will, as I have already promised, ever be your adviser and your friend. Can I say more?"

"No," she responded. "To-day you have at least been perfectly frank with me. You must know how I have suffered in secret these past few weeks, ever since I heard of your engagement. I had no member of my family in whom I could confide, and was therefore compelled to bear my trial alone. But I see the force of your argument. You must make an advantageous marriage, and I—well, I," she added bitterly, "must shift for myself. Still, I forgive you, Guy." And the jilted girl stretched forth her hand even though a flood of tears was in her fine dark eyes. "No," she faltered, with a sob, "I bear you no malice, Guy. I—I wish you every happiness, just as you wished me. Only recollect that in your life you have had one woman who has loved you better than your wife can ever love you—and that she was Sylvia Milbourne."

Vainly she tried to suppress her emotion, until, covering her face with her hands, she suddenly burst into a torrent of tears.

And Guy Wingate stood with bowed head, his hand tenderly laid upon the shoulder of the sobbing girl, but tongue-tied, not knowing what further words to utter.

He had grossly deceived the unhappy girl, and to endeavour further to palliate his offence was, he knew, quite futile. He had sacrificed her young enthusiastic love for his own sordid ends, and her girlish heart was broken.

CHAPTER XII

GIRLS' CONFIDENCES

SYLVIA understood it all.

She returned slowly homeward across the fields, rebellion and fury gathering in her heart.

She was very beautiful—beautiful with all the beauty of woman now, not with the beauty of the girl. And as with halting steps she followed the long straight path across the meadows, there came back to her all the recollections of her sweet and secret love for the man who had so cruelly cast her aside. She remembered all the past—the first meeting in the hunting-field where the hounds met on that sharp winter's morning at Bedford Purlicus; their first chat as they rode home together along the Great North Road; Sheringham, the shore and the forest; his fervent declaration of love; silent, sacred kisses exchanged on those long clandestine walks; the roses he had given her as a pledge of his affection. And, again, there was that dance at Milton—the first bitter jealousy; the first serious tears followed by vows of constancy and passion's impetuous embrace. And all was gone! gone for ever!

Directly she got home she sought Grace Fairbairn, whom she found sitting at needlework in the small upstairs room which the Milbournes gave to the girls' companion. Then, flinging herself into a chair, the girl burst again into tears.

"Why, Sylvia, dear, whatever is the matter?" asked Grace, starting up and throwing herself on her knees beside the unhappy girl and taking her hand. "You are so pale! What has happened? Tell me. Remember, you can confide in me everything."

The girl looked straight into her companion's face, and, seeing truth and sympathy mirrored there, gripped her hand but remained silent. Her heart was full, but she hesitated to confess that Guy, her ideal, had played her false.

"You are silent. Surely you may tell me the truth, dear? Any secret of yours is safe with me."

"Will you promise to say nothing if I tell you the truth, Grace?" she asked after a pause.

"I have never divulged a word of your secret love for Guy Wingate," the other replied. "Therefore you may surely trust me. Is it of him?"

"Yes," cried the unhappy girl. "It is of him. We have parted for ever."

"Parted!" exclaimed Grace in surprise. "What! Have you quarrelled?"

"No. He has decided to marry," responded the girl in a choking voice.

"Ah! He has grown tired of you," exclaimed Grace with a quick frown, for she saw how acutely the poor girl was suffering this first reverse in her young life. "It is like all the men! Tell me everything."

The girl burst again into tears, sobbing bitterly. But the other placed her arms tenderly around her neck, comforting her with words of sympathy until at last she succeeded in calming her. Then, after considerable hesitation, Sylvia explained how she had that afternoon met her lover, how he had spoken with cruel frankness to her, and how they had parted for ever.

Grace Fairbairn, with one arm around the neck of the unhappy girl, heard her to the end. The sudden ending of the little romance was certainly unexpected. She had heard rumours of the young doctor's frequent presence at the house of Mr. Councillor Thomas, and had made the only logical deductions, but she had never dreamed that he intended to forsake the sweet, charming girl who was so utterly devoted to him, and to whom he had apparently been so deeply attached.

"Well," she said at last, after some words of sympathy and reassurance, "it must be a terrible blow to you, dear. But bear up. We all of us, both women and men, have our trials and disappointments. You are still young, dear, and you will get over it."

"Never!" sobbed the grief-stricken girl. "Never!"

"There are plenty of other men ready to fall in love with you," Grace said smiling. "Unlike myself, you are pretty, and your father, if he wishes, can give you a substantial dowry. If you were ugly and penniless like myself, you might well despair."

"I can never love another man, Grace," was the girl's declaration through her tears. "Now that Guy has deceived me so cruelly, I could never listen to words of affection from another. My confidence in man's constancy is utterly destroyed."

"For the time being, perhaps," was Miss Fairbairn's rather philosophic remark. "No, Sylvia, this grief, poignant as it is to-day, will very soon pass, and you will find yourself one day attracted towards a man more worthy of you than Guy Wingate."

"Do you know, Grace," she said, after a few moments' silence, "to me there seems a curse upon our family where love is concerned. Think of the fate of poor Nella just at the moment of her happiness. And now myself. Ethel is surely fortunate that she has no lover. Where is she?"

"Gone over to Sutton to see old Widow Palmer. The poor old woman is very ill, I believe, and she has taken her some beef-tea."

Ethel was the one member of the family who took an interest in the welfare of the poor. Through the three parishes of Castor, Ailesworth, and Sutton, she, just as Nella had done, worked devotedly on behalf of the coal, clothing, and other clubs, the Maternity Society, and the local Sunday-school. Assisted by the curate of Castor, and a couple of ladies living in the vicinity, she strove almost daily to relieve the suffering of the poor. She was one of those rather plain, matter-of-fact girls whom one so often meets in country villages, the blue-stocking of the family. She had never cared for the same sports and pastimes as Nella and Sylvia, neither did the vanities of feminine dress attract her. She was a sedate girl who never talked frocks, hated tennis, and dressed always in severe black with a neat *canotier*.

Sylvia sat thinking, her head bent in deep despair. Grace saw how keenly she felt the sudden parting from the man she loved, and again sought to comfort her. But words are of little avail when the heart is broken.

"No," she said, shaking her head sorrowfully and looking at her companion with those great dark eyes that were everywhere admired. "No. It is all finished. I shall never love again."

"Ah, my dear!" said Grace cheerily, "it will be your own fault if you are not loved, and if you don't obtain a worthy husband."

"I couldn't marry a man I do not love," declared the girl quickly. "I will never marry for money, no matter how mother entreats me. I know all the arguments in favour of a girl marrying a man who is rich. I've had them dinned into my ears a thousand times. Father and mother both intend me to marry some gross, beefy-faced man with five thousand a year. I know it quite well."

In the household Ethel had been nick-named "Auntie" by her dead sister Nella because of her old-maidish ways and her primness of attire. Poor girl. Her well-meaning efforts at dispensing charity gave rise to a good deal of good-humoured banter and ridicule on the part of her sisters.

"You certainly need not remain an old maid," Miss Fairbairn remarked presently. Then, after a moment's hesitation, she added: "I myself know at least one man who admires you in secret, although he is almost a stranger."

"Admires me?" cried Sylvia quickly interested, as is every girl who is told that she has attracted a man. "And pray who is he?"

"Have you no idea? Think for a moment."

"No, Grace. Please don't tantalize me with riddles. I can't bear them. Tell me who the person is who is smitten by my charms."

"A rather nice man whom you met under tragic circumstances," was the response.

"Tragic circumstances? Poor Nella's death, you mean?"

Grace Fairbairn nodded.

"Perhaps you did not notice that one man invited to the wedding-party was held spellbound by your charms when he was introduced to you. Probably you did not, for your whole life was wrapped up in Guy and his doings, and——"

"Ah! Do not mention him," the girl sighed, interrupting her.

"Well, I have quick eyes, Sylvia, and I noticed something that escaped you," her companion went on. "I noticed that the man was so fascinated by you that he scarcely took his eyes from you all through the wedding-breakfast—nor through the inquest afterwards."

"And who was it?" Sylvia inquired, half-inclined to believe that Grace was joking, for she had a keen sense of humour and was fond of giving a semblance of truth to facts that did not exist, and afterwards laughing at her success.

"He was Kenyon's best man—Hubert Hutton."

"Hubert Hutton!" she cried, starting up and glancing at her companion. "Do you really think he was attracted by me."

"I am certain of it," was the response.

Then the girl fell to musing, and Grace Fairbairn saw that her words had already awakened within her an interest in the man who had been the last to speak with poor Nella, and upon whom strong suspicions rested.

Sylvia had that day for the first time experienced love's rapture, its fickleness, its torments, and its despair. All her brief past life rose before her with memories of sweet stolen hours and the bitter moments of solitude; experiences both entrancing and dolorous.

She had trod love's path into its cul-de-sac, as many a young girl had done. A sweetness seemed to permeate her brooding melancholy—the sweetness of love-dreams, of fervent vows, of delirious prayers and sighs full of yearning—transports of delight.

Grace's suggestion had taken full possession of her.

CHAPTER XIII

A FEW INQUIRIES

Mrs. Milbourne was secretly overjoyed at the outcome of Sylvia's romance. She had never taken to the rather shallow young doctor, and had always declared that he never looked her straight in the face. That he was good-looking, and that his family was a respectable one were undeniable. Nevertheless, with a mother's keen perception, she had discerned from the outset that he was not the kind of man she would prefer as a son-in-law.

She heard the story from Grace Fairbairn that same night, and repeated it to her husband an hour later.

"The fellow is a rascal!" exclaimed the bluff old Squire. "I always told you so. I'd rather see Sylvia share poor Nella's fate than marry such a man."

"No, no," exclaimed his wife. "Don't speak like that, George. I can't bear to recall that terrible day. The mystery of it worries me always."

"And so it does me, my dear. But we're no nearer the truth than at first. The police have bungled the whole thing from the very beginning."

Then the subject, so often discussed in that grief-stricken household, was again allowed to drop.

One day, several weeks after Sylvia's parting with Guy, she accompanied her mother over to Alwalton to a luncheon-party at the Frenchs'. Mr. French hunted, played golf and whist, and was popular throughout the district as a good all-round sportsman. His wife, a very pleasant, sociable woman, and his daughter, a tall, dark girl, who dressed smartly, and who had been completing her education in Germany, were well-known in local society.

Luncheon-parties at the Frenchs' were a distinct feature. Served in the old-fashioned room which Mrs. French had had decorated with exquisite taste, the repast was always excellent, and the company a merry one.

On the morning on which Mrs. Milbourne and Sylvia lunched there the party consisted mainly of local friends, including the golf-playing parson from Orton, the neighbouring village, Dr. Pridie from Wansford, and Douglas Kenyon, who had only a few days before returned to Stamford after some erratic wanderings through Germany and Hungary.

His meeting with Mrs. Milbourne was somewhat painful, but both concealed the bitter thoughts that passed within them, and Kenyon, turning, extended his hand to Sylvia. Contrary to her hopes, Sylvia was not placed by Kenyon's side, but after luncheon when the men rejoined the ladies, they walked out to the lawn, and he joined her, strolling together to the rustic arbour to watch the tennis.

"Well, Sylvia," he said, "and how has everyone been during my absence ? It seems years since I was last at Ailesworth." And he sighed at recollection of the tragic circumstances of his marriage.

"Oh ! things are just the same," she replied frankly. "Mother is as unkind as ever."

"Won't let you have exactly your own way—eh ?" he laughed. "Well, we all of us declare our mothers and fathers brutal—until we lose them. Even poor Nella used sometimes to complain to me of your mother's severity. Poor girl."

"Have you discovered nothing further regarding the tragedy ?"

"Absolutely nothing," he replied. "I have employed two of the best private detectives in London, but their inquiries have resulted in failure to establish the identity of the assassin. I fear it must be given up now. I can do no more."

"It's scandalous that the police should have remained so inactive," declared the girl angrily. "I've heard that the French police are far in advance of ours. Is that so ?"

"Yes. I believe that is a fact. But the matter has been in the hands of the smartest men at New Scotland Yard, and they have utterly failed."

Sylvia was silent for a few moments. She longed to ask him a question, but hesitated to do so lest he might wonder at her motive. At last, summoning courage, she said in a tone of unconcern :

"And your friend, Mr. Hutton ? Have you heard anything of him of late ?"

"He is still in Paris, where I fancy he has a very merry time of it, for one can always be gay there. He wrote to me a few days ago saying that he expected to be in England shortly and would run down and stay with me. His presence will, I fear, bring back to me certain events which I am striving hard to forget, nevertheless he's a good fellow at heart, quite misunderstood by most people. Few of his friends ever really know him."

"What do you mean ?" inquired Sylvia eagerly.

"I mean that outwardly he is a gay, reckless cosmopolitan, without a care or a thought of the morrow. Yet those who know him intimately, as I do, are aware of the sterling qualities he possesses and of his loyalty to his friends. In Paris Hubert Hutton is known among that reckless crowd of cosmopolitan idlers who prefer the boulevards to Piccadilly and the bois to the park, and who live in France because they can get a greater amount of amusement out of life there than they can in London. I, myself, was for three years an associate of that careless easy-going crowd, and know it well. I know, too, that although Hutton is in it, he is not of it, and he has no tastes in common with it. He has the misfortune to have become a cosmopolitan, and as such is unable to endure the monotony of English life. That's the whole truth of the matter."

"You seem to admire him," she said, rather thoughtfully.

"He is my friend, Sylvia—one of my best friends," he replied. "I have every confidence in him, therefore I look forward to his visit to me. I only wish I could induce him to forsake Paris and settle in England."

"Why ?"

"Because Paris must be his ruin, sooner or later. A man cannot live amid that circle upon a small income."

"I wonder he doesn't marry," the girl remarked artlessly.

Douglas Kenyon raised his brows slightly and pursed his lips. His face wore for an instant an expression of mystery, as though he were well aware of his friend's little affairs of the heart, but did not intend to discuss them.

"Oh !" the girl said, regarding him quickly. "I see that there is a reason. Won't you tell me ? I'm dying to know."

"Well," he remarked with an ambiguous smile ; "every man falls in love at some period or other of his life."

"Then you infer that your friend is in love with somebody?" she exclaimed with quick eagerness.

"Oh, no !" he said promptly ; "I infer nothing. In fact, I wonder myself that he has not married long ago. Half a dozen women I have known have been ready to fall in love with him. But his life is a strange riddle."

His words struck her as curious. What, she wondered, could he mean ? Was there behind the outward show of careless recklessness some hidden secret of his past ? If that were so, did not it tend to increase the suspicion against him of knowing more regarding the murder of poor Nella than he had told ?

And yet his most intimate friend held no suspicion. The thought reassured her.

There was a pause. "But," she said at last, "what do you mean by a strange riddle ?"

He saw in an instant that his remark had been indiscreet, and hastened to reply :

"Oh ! well, I really don't know how to define it. All our lives are riddles more or less." And then he made an effort to change the topic of conversation.

Soon afterwards, however, Sylvia returned to it, saying :

"All this about your friend, Mr. Hutton, makes me wonder. He was so intimately connected with the terrible tragedy that fell upon our house that we all feel a personal interest in him."

"You need not wonder, Sylvia," Douglas said, a trifle abruptly. "I do not. He is a good fellow and my best friend. As that he will, I hope, ever remain. His life has been full of adventure, and his story, if written, would prove more exiting than the most sensational novel. But it is never likely to be written, I think. He is not the kind of man to carry his heart upon his sleeve. My only regret, as I have already told you, is that he refuses to quit Paris and return to England."

"He has reasons for remaining, I suppose ?" the girl remarked thoughtfully, twisting the golden bangle around her wrist.

"Yes. Strong ones, I believe."

"But when he comes to visit you he may be influenced by your persuasion. He will listen to you because you are his friend."

"No," Kenyon responded, shaking his head. "He refuses to listen to any argument." Then he added with a mischievous laugh : "Perhaps you, a woman, might have more influence with him."

"Oh ! Mr. Kenyon. Why, I scarcely know him !" Sylvia protested, her cheeks nevertheless flushing slightly. "I could not refer to his private affairs."

But Douglas Kenyon was a man of the world. He had not failed to notice the girl's unconcealed eagerness to learn about his friend's life. That final blush told him the truth, and when he rose a moment later and crossed the lawn with her to where Mrs. Milbourne was awaiting them, he was very puzzled, for at that time he knew nothing of her separation from Wingate.

"Poor Sylvia !" he murmured to himself, when half an hour later he was walking with swinging gait towards the little wayside station of Overton. "She's just as fickle as the rest of them. Thrown over Wingate, I suppose, and now ready to fall in love with the first man who whispers half a dozen words of affection. Sweet, and twenty."

And he sighed heavily when he recollected his own burden of sorrow. The image of his dead love was always before him. Hither and thither, to Riviera paradises, French *bains* and German *bads*, he had wandered, striving to put the remembrance behind him, but before his eyes there ever arose a vision of that sweet face with the Titian hair—the countenance of the woman he had so dearly loved, and who had been so cruelly snatched from him by an unseen hand.

CHAPTER XIV

"THE PROFESSOR"

THE night wind was cold, and Hubert Hutton turned up the collar of his light overcoat as he turned from the Avenue de Clichy into the Boulevard. The broad thoroughfare was still thronged with promenaders, for it was only a few minutes past eleven o'clock, and, besides, it was Saturday. He had looked in after dinner at one of the minor music-halls, but, becoming tired of the rather silly if frisky entertainment—got up for the especial delectation of the foreign visitor—he had left it in disgust to walk home to the Rue Lafayette.

With a cigarette in his mouth, he mused as he walked, without taking heed of the life and movement about him. Indeed, he was almost a child of Paris, and knew the city in all her varying moods, capricious as a woman, as easily moved to laughter as a babe, as quickly aroused to howls of rage as a savage beast.

Already people were coming from some of the theatres, and every vacant café table was becoming speedily occupied, while hawkers offered the *Soir* with strident cries—now and again some miserable wretch would dive beneath the café table to pick up the disused end of a cigar, while *viveurs* strolled gaily westward for supper and baccarat. A strange little world truly is the Montmartre at midnight, unique and unequalled, for joy runs hand-in-hand with sorrow, and even holy things are openly travestied in the cabarets of "Heaven" and "Hell".

Hubert Hutton knew the Montmartrois well. As he turned into the Boulevard de Magenta he was suddenly aroused by hearing himself addressed by name, and, glancing behind him quickly, came face to face with a tall, rather modestly dressed girl who had apparently been following him for some time.

He halted and looked at her. They were standing near one of the gas-lamps, and he saw that, although a flimsy veil half hid her features, she was young and decidedly pretty.

In the light from the lamp she looked quite charming in her little mantle and her simple yet tasteful gown. Gold was gleaming in her fair hair, and, though the veil blurred the outline of her cheeks, he saw her lips full and red and a little dimple in her well-rounded chin.

"You certainly have the advantage of me, mademoiselle," he said, raising his hat politely. "How is it that you know my name?"

The girl laughed lightly, replying ambiguously in French:

"M'sieur Hutton is well-known in Paris."

"But I do not remember having met Mademoiselle before," he said, with a smile.

"Look again," she said, and for an instant she raised her veil, pulling it again across her face with a quick movement.

"What!" he cried, in surprise, recognizing her in that brief instant. "You! Pauline! Wherever have you sprung from?"

"From home," the girl laughed. "But don't let us talk here. Take me across to the café yonder. I want to speak with you."

He acted at once upon her suggestion, and when a couple of minutes later they were seated upon the "terrace" amid a crowd of chattering idlers, she leaned her arm upon the table, and, bending to him, said in a low voice:

"I hope you are not annoyed that I accosted you in that manner, M'sieur Hubert. But it was imperative."

"I'm always most delighted to see you, Pauline," the young man laughed. "I had no idea you were in Paris. How long have you been here?"

"Nearly three months."

"And the Professor?"

"He is here also. Poor father. He has aged terribly this past year," she sighed.

"Well, if the Professor has aged, you have grown more beautiful, Pauline," he declared, looking at her sweet, almost childish face gleaming through the veil She was about twenty-three, slim and delicate, with an inborn grace and chic.

"Ah! You are still complimentary," she cried, blushing slightly. "You always were, and will always be."

"Well, no wonder that I at first failed to recognize you," he said. "Why, it's nearly two years ago since we last met in Petersburg. Do you remember that evening at the Strelka ?"

"Remember it ?" she exclaimed, in a low, rather hard tone. "Yes. I recollect it all, just as though it happened but yesterday. And I also know that to you alone my father owes his liberty. Ah ! M'sieur Hubert, do not think that we could ever forget ! Were it not for you we should have both been in exile long ago, my father in Siberia and I in Sakhalin."

"No, no, Pauline," he laughed, with a deprecatory air. "I really did very little to assist you. You had enemies, and I acted as your friend—that was all."

"Friend !" she echoed. "Why, you risked your own liberty in order to save us."

"And that was not so great a sacrifice. I was quite confident of my own safety."

"Ah ! in our own poor Russia one must never be confident of anything. You know our old proverb, 'When the Tsar makes straps, the peasant must provide the leather.' It is useless for you to deny the service you rendered us."

"Oh ! well, let us drop the subject," the young man said with a smile as he sipped his demi-blonde and lit a cigarette. Then he added : "You mentioned a moment ago it was imperative that you should see me. Why ?"

"I will tell you later," she said. "My father wishes you to go at once and see him. He has some information to give you."

"About what ?"

"No, not here. Recollect there are ears open everywhere. In Paris there are just as many spies as in Petersburg, since the Secret Police have made their headquarters here."

"Do you wish me to accompany you this evening ?"

"No. You must not accompany me. Here is an address. I shall leave you, and then you must follow half an hour later." And she slipped a tiny scrap of paper into his hand.

He glanced about him and saw that discretion was necessary. Among that crowd there might be some spy or other who had followed her.

Having slipped the paper into his glove, he asked :

"And why is it that after three months in Paris the Professor has not called upon me before this ?"

"There were reasons," the girl replied. "We have been so closely watched ever since we arrived that we feared to implicate you. Life in Paris is not at all gay for us. Father gives lessons in Russian sometimes at the Commercial College in the Rue Bizet, and I am working at Paquin's. But living is so dear here—double the price of Petersburg. But I must go!" And she drained her glass and put down her veil. "I will make a feint of bidding you adieu," she whispered.

Then he rose, shook her hand, and raised his hat, and in another moment she had disappeared among the crowd on the *trottoir*.

CHAPTER XV

BY WHOSE HAND?

"WELL?" exclaimed Hutton after a brief silence. "What of Leigh?"

"Have you seen him of late?" inquired the Professor eagerly. "You used to be one of his most intimate friends."

"I have not seen him since I left Petersburg," was the young Englishman's response.

It was no lie. He evaded the question because he was undecided whether it were politic to explain how the man referred to had died in the seclusion of an English rural village, leaving his papers at the mercy of anyone who cared to take possession of them. He well knew the importance of those documents which he had had photographed, and as Leigh had been his friend he was by no means anxious that approbrium should be heaped upon the dead.

"He disappeared suddenly from Russia about two months after you left," the old man went on. "Some believe that he was secretly arrested and placed in the Fortress of Schusselburg, where he still remains in his living tomb; but others, and they are in the majority, declare that he was seen here, in Paris, and afterwards in London some six months later."

"Well?" inquired Hutton, not quite understanding the drift of the old Professor's remarks.

"Well. It is more than curious that if he is still at liberty he should have made no communication with the Executive, nor given any sign of his whereabouts."

"Is nothing known of him?"

"Nothing whatsoever. The Centres all over Europe have been making most careful inquiries, but without result. According to certain apparently authentic reports he was seen crossing the Pont Neuf six months after his disappearance, and a month later it is said he was noticed one evening walking down the Strand, in London."

"He was always rather eccentric," the other remarked reflectively.

"Oh, of course," the old man agreed. "Like all the English—no personal insult intended—he was extraordinary in his ideas and erratic in his movements. He had been a great traveller, I believe, and had explored certain regions of the Sahara hitherto unknown."

"He was a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society of London, and a corresponding member of those of Paris and Berlin," Hutton remarked, at the same time offering the old man his cigarette-case. "In England he was a noted explorer, and did much to complete the maps of the Sahara."

"Exactly. That is why his strange disappearance is so very puzzling."

"Under what circumstances did he disappear?" inquired the young Englishman, anxious to ascertain the truth.

"Well, it happened like this. Just at the moment of your departure we had, as you know, been betrayed by some woman whose identity, unfortunately, remains still hidden. Whoever she was, she turned traitor to the Cause of Russian Freedom, and gave certain information which led to wholesale arrests in Petersburg, Moscow, Warsaw, Kharkof and Nicolaef. No fewer than four hundred men and women were sent to prison, the majority without the slightest cause. So cleverly was it all done that even to this day we have no knowledge of the identity of the spy. If we had, well—" and he refrained from concluding the sentence. "When it was known that someone had given information regarding the plot," he went on after a moment's pause, "half Petersburg lived in hourly dread of arrest. You will remember on that last night we were together I told you of our own peril, although I did not explain the cause. But you, M'sieur Hubert, with that ardent desire to serve a friend which has always characterized you, at once exerted yourself on our behalf, with the result that the police passed us by."

"Well, what has that to do with Leigh's disappearance?" the young man asked.

"There was evidently some connection with it," was the response, "although up to the present we have failed to establish exactly what it was. Whether the information given by the mysterious female implicated him and the police descended upon him at night with their grey cart and drove him out to Schusselburg, or whether, fearing arrest, he was ingenious enough to get out of Russia unobserved by the authorities, is an absolute mystery. All that is plain is that he has disappeared as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed him up; and further," he added, dropping his voice, "at the time of his disappearance he had in his possession certain papers which, in the hands of the police, would enable the latter to practically stamp out the movement."

"Then your great fear is that the documents in question have actually fallen into the hands of the police in Petersburg?"

"That is our fear," was the old man's reply. "If they have, then woe betide every one of us. The Ministry will await its time, but assuredly every one of us, either in Russia or abroad, will fall. You know our police well enough to be aware that they never do anything by halves. The characteristic trait in the Muscovite is patience. To-day the police are acting quietly, and with patience, knowing well that one day they may, at a single swoop, wipe every Nihilist out of existence."

"Then you really believe that Leigh's papers are actually in the hands of the police?"

"There seems but little doubt of it. A month ago two arrests were made at Elizavetgrad which most conclusively point to information obtained from the papers that were in the missing Englishman's possession. The persons arrested were a prominent landowner and his wife, and only I myself was aware that they were affiliated with us."

"But the papers? What were they—and how came they in his possession?"

The old Professor paused as though hesitating to tell the truth.

"I gave them to him," he answered at last. "In those exciting days when all of us lived in hourly terror of arrest, I saw that it was policy to get rid of such compromising documents, and Leigh, being a quiet, studious Englishman, would, I believed, not be suspected of revolutionary principles. Indeed, like yourself, he was personally intimate with many of the higher police officials, and I saw that if there were a man in Petersburg with whom the papers might be safe, it was with him. So with the consent of the Committee I handed them over, with injunctions that he should guard them as he did his life. He was a man whom we all trusted implicitly, and as he was well aware of the thousands of lives which those lists and statements of the propaganda might imperil, we had perfect confidence that he would retain them in strictest secrecy. I may explain to you that the papers in question contained practically all the secrets of the organization, the lists of its chief members, the constitution of the circle who are to make the forthcoming attempt to strike a blow for freedom, and a statement of the new propaganda which will in a few months be promulgated. All were in cipher, but unfortunately we know that the police, when they arrested Vera Palkin, obtained a copy of the key, and have, no doubt, more than once made good use of it. Such, then, is our present perilous situation."

Hutton was debating within himself whether he should tell the Professor of Leigh's death. At present, at all events, he might keep the truth to himself and no harm would be done. He was intent upon clearing up the many mysterious points in connection with those papers and with the strange death of Nella Milbourne, and saw that from the old Professor he might learn some further facts regarding the life of that erratic Englishman whose career had long ago attracted him. The old Professor was Hutton's friend, it was true, but he saw that by silence he might be able to render greater assistance than by at once telling the truth.

"You mentioned that some mysterious woman had been the cause of all those wholesale arrests before I left Petersburg," he said. "Have you no idea of her identity?"

"None."

"Some woman must have turned police spy."

"Most certainly," answered the Professor. "It was, I suppose, the old story. She was arrested, treated to a week in one of the *oubliettes* below the Neva, and then interrogated and told that she would have her freedom if she chose to turn spy. Fortunately for us the majority of women affiliated to us have the courage to remain silent; but there are a few—a very few—who are induced to speak by the terrors of those dark, rat-infested cells. Yet in the end their fate is the same. They escape prison or exile, but the source of information is sooner or later traced, and the secret hand of vengeance strikes them a fatal blow at the moment when they believe themselves safest from detection. You know exactly what I mean. You, M'sieur Hubert, have known more than one woman from whose lips the police have forced confession."

Hutton nodded. He knew to whom the old fellow referred.

"But was it not a rather unwise proceeding to give papers of that importance into the hands of an erratic man like Austen Leigh?" he observed.

"I admit that it was," the other answered quickly. "But I thought them safer in his possession than in mine."

Then there was a long pause, broken only by the sharp clanging of the bells of the steam-trams passing outside.

"Now, be frank with me, M'sieur Hubert," resumed the old man presently, fixing his visitor with his dark eyes. "Leigh was an Englishman, and you, as one of his own compatriots, were far more intimate with him than I was. Tell me truthfully, are you aware of his intimate friendship with any woman?"

Hutton was somewhat taken by surprise, for he had not expected such a question. There were many secrets of the dead man's life that were known to him, but he did not see why they should now be exposed after his decease. The past was buried, and surely it were best so.

"A woman?" he repeated with well-feigned surprise. "What class of woman?"

"A lady."

"No," he answered abruptly. "I had little knowledge of his private affairs. He was a very close man regarding his daily life."

"Ah, yes, I know. But think. Has he never mentioned to you any woman who was his friend, and who lived in Petersburg?"

"He had lots of friends," remarked the Englishman evasively. "As you know, he was very popular in a certain circle of society. I don't recollect that he ever told me of any woman who was more particularly his friend than any other. He was, as far as I know, a man who never indulged in flirtations and called all men fools who did."

The old Professor gave vent to a low grunt of dissatisfaction, and said fiercely:

"Well, whatever may be said, one point is quite clear. Certain information contained in the missing documents has leaked out to the police. Someone has turned traitor, and it is known that the person is a woman."

"The peril, I foresee, is very great. But the information at present is very vague. What do you really suspect?"

"Suspect?" echoed Lomonseff, his eyes flashing fire, "I suspect that Austen Leigh has gone into hiding, and is using the information contained in those papers for his own personal ends. He is undoubtedly using a woman as tool—probably some woman who is absolutely unconscious of his dealings with us. Most probably it is some Englishwoman. See"—and he took from a ragged wallet a torn piece of paper, a portion of a letter—"I have here a scrap of her handwriting. It will serve to convict her some day. Examine it, and tell me whether, although written in Russian, it is not the hand of an Englishwoman?"

Hutton took it eagerly and bent towards the lamp. The paper was of that grey tint known as Silurian, thick and of good quality, evidently of English manufacture. The handwriting was large, sprawling, and essentially feminine, undoubtedly that of an educated person who was certainly not Russian by the manner in which she formed her characters.

That scrap of handwriting gave an entirely new phase to the mystery, and he examined it closely, puzzling out the words written there. Apparently it was only a formal note, and the words conveyed to him no hidden meaning.

"You are not in possession of the other portions of the letter, I suppose?" he asked the old man as he handed it back to him.

"Unfortunately, no. This is the only piece I was able to secure. The envelope, which no doubt bore a postmark, and the other pieces are lost."

"Ah, a pity," observed Hutton. "It might have told us something."

"Yes," responded the Professor, adding with an air of confidence: "But this piece will ever remain as standing evidence against her. We know that a report which reached the Bureau of Police in Petersburg was upon the same paper and in the same hand."

"Then you conclude that an Englishwoman acquainted with Leigh is his accomplice?"

"That is the only conclusion that we can possibly base upon it. The Centre in London is making active inquiries, but can discover nothing either of Leigh or of any female associate."

"But the papers?" said Hutton, his brows knit in deep thought. "Were they of such very great value?"

"Value?" cried the old man. "Why our whole existence as an organization depends upon their recovery. I, fool that I was, gave everything into his hands—everything."

The young Englishman sat gazing straight before him and pondered. The key of the whole situation was in his hands, but alas! to act or even to relate the truth would cause his own downfall—perhaps, indeed, his death. Assuredly the mystery was stranger than any conceived by the writers of fiction, and the chain of events that now surrounded him was unbreakable.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GREAT PLOT

"REALLY, Professor, I don't see how I am to assist you to a knowledge of the truth," Hutton protested at last. "It is over two years since I parted with Leigh. The night before I left Petersburg I met him quite accidentally in the Newski, and we dined together at Copen's. He was then just the same—enthusiastic in the cause of Russian freedom, and the very last man I should suspect of playing you false."

"Ah, my dear M'sieur Hubert, there is an old adage that says 'Opportunity makes the thief'. In this case, opportunity has made a traitor."

"But may not Leigh be innocent after all?" suggested the Englishman. "The documents may have fallen into the hands of some enemy."

"And, if so, how could she read them when they are in cipher?" asked the old fellow with clenching argument. "No. He has divulged the cipher to her. That is quite plain. Were it not a fact that he and the Countess Lubomirska quarrelled violently and made all sorts of allegations regarding each other, I should have suspected her."

"You think, then, that she has had no hand in it?" asked Hutton quickly.

"I think not. Recollect, she is not English."

"But she was educated in England—at Bournemouth, I believe."

"The handwriting," said the old fellow tapping his breast pocket, "is not hers. I have compared them. She may, of course, have got some Englishwoman to write for her." Then, after a moment's silence, he added: "I hear that you are often at her house. Why?"

The young man shrugged his shoulders. He was inclined to resent the old fellow's unwarrantable inquisitiveness. If a man be attracted by a woman's beauty or by her brilliancy of conversation, he never cares to undergo a cross-examination upon his reasons.

"Ah! I see," exclaimed the old fellow bluntly, with a sigh. "She has fascinated you, as she has done the others. I thought you were proof against her wiles in Petersburg, but here, in Paris, you seem to have fallen into her net. Mark me, M'sieur Hubert, Dolores Lubomirska's influence upon a man is never a good one. She is beautiful, you will say. Ah! yes. I admit all that. She is chic, brilliant, interesting and talked about—one of the smartest women in Paris to-day. But do take an old man's advice and beware of her. She has Tartar blood in her veins, and there are sharp claws beneath those small, soft, velvet hands. You are not the first. Ah, no!—no!—no!——"

And of a sudden, entirely without warning, the old man covered his face with his hands and burst into a flood of tears.

"Why, Professor!" Hutton cried, starting up in quick surprise. "What is the matter? What pains you? Tell me."

"Ah, M'sieur Hubert," the old man sobbed, his white-bearded chin resting upon his breast. "Mention of that woman brings it all back to me—all, everything. My poor dear Ivan!"

"Ivan!" echoed the young Englishman. "Who was Ivan?"

For a moment the heartbroken man endeavoured to suppress his emotion, which he at length succeeded by dint of great effort.

"Ivan was my son," he said. "You never knew I had a son. Ah, no! I never speak of him, for the memory of it all is far too painful. He was about your age, a lieutenant in the Imperial Guards. He was tall, well-set-up and handsome, just as you are; the hope and pride of my old age. I was then in better circumstances than those in which you have known me, and had the entrée to the Court circle. One evil day, at a fête at Peterhof, my Ivan, who was quartered with his regiment there, met the Countess Dolores. Need I go into the painful details? It was a case of love at first sight, and she fascinated him just as the unshaded lamp attracts the moths. He succeeded, after much difficulty, in obtaining an introduction to her, and then became one of the crowd of cavaliers who followed in her train. I warned him. I begged, I entreated, I threatened; but it was all useless. He, my devoted and dutiful son, scorned my prognostications. Why? Because her beauty held him as absolutely as though he were beneath a wizard's spell. For a year he basked in her smiles, following her everywhere, acting as her escort, and staying with others as her guest for the wild boar hunting at the château. But at last," sobbed the old man brokenly, "the awakening came, just as I had predicted. He declared his love for her, and she laughed him to scorn. Was it possible, she asked imperiously, that he, a poor lieutenant with a burden of debts, was aspiring to her hand—the hand of one of the wealthiest women in Russia? She even went so far as to make open ridicule of the poor boy before her friends. Ah! it was cruel and heartless—the work of a fiend of hell!" And his brows knit and his fist clenched; beneath his breath he uttered a fierce curse upon her.

"He loved her?" suggested the young Englishman.

"Loved her? Why, he worshipped her, and she had led him to believe that his love was reciprocated. He confessed to me how he had dined with her *tête-à-tête* and spent long delightful evenings alone with her in her rose-coloured boudoir, inhaling the perfume of her chiffons and basking in the bright sunshine of her smiles. You know that apartment in her palace in Petersburg, M'sieur Hubert," he added. "You can understand it all."

The man addressed nodded, but said no word. He had often wondered why the Professor was always so incensed against Dolores Lubomirska, but he understood it all now. The story was entirely unexpected, and therefore interesting.

"Well, the end came," the old man continued in a hoarse, broken voice. "On her account my poor boy had contracted heavy debts for flowers, jewels, opera-boxes and the thousand and one articles with which a man seeks to please his well-beloved. His creditors were pressing, the woman's ridicule had made him the laughing-stock of his regiment, and he became desperate. One night he went to her and succeeded in seeing her alone. What passed between them no one knows. After half an hour he went forth again—to his death."

"Death?"

"Yes," said the old man, his voice choked with emotion. "Next morning he was found in his room dead, his revolver by his side. She broke my poor boy's heart, and was the direct cause of his suicide. Can you wonder that I hate her? Is it strange that mere mention of her name causes the blood to boil within my veins? She killed my poor Ivan!"

A silence fell between the pair. Hubert saw how incensed the old man was, and how fierce was his desire for revenge. Although he had known him for some years, he had never heard him mention his soldier son, and pretty Pauline had never spoken of her brother. He pitied the poor old fellow, outcast and exiled, and the more so when he noticed how great a change had come over him, and how rapidly he had aged.

"Ah, Professor," he said at last, "you have all my sympathies. Your poor son's end was assuredly a tragic one. Most probably she has since experienced the pangs of conscience which are oft-times more torturing than the revenge of man."

"Yes, she must have done," he answered. "But I tell you that Ivan's death shall not go unavenged!" he cried in anger. "She is rich, powerful and surrounded by influential friends, but she shall suffer one day. Mark me."

Hutton was rather puzzled at the threat, and more especially so as he knew that she was his friend. He, however, knew well that the old gentleman who had been—and still was, for aught he knew—the Head Centre of the great Terrorist movement in Russia, was not a man to utter menacing words without a set purpose. Slow, cautious, and acute of perception, the very life of the Party of the Will of the People had for years past been in his hands. Secretly he had directed the wide ramifications of the Nihilists, yet by his ingenuity and careful actions he had escaped arrest even when all those about him had, in the dark watches of the night, been hurried away to an unknown bourne.

His was, indeed, a curious personality. Cool and level-headed where the personal safety of his fellow-conspirators was concerned, he was nevertheless one of the wildest advocates of that impossible policy known popularly as Nihilism. It was he who had succeeded in establishing the secret press which always reappeared in spite of the repeated seizures of its machinery and type; and likewise it was he who had completed the vast organization so perfectly that even the Tsar himself, trembling for his safety, was forced to remain a prisoner in Gatchina.

"Then you are intent upon revenge for your son's death?" the young Englishman observed after a pause.

"It will not be my vengeance," the Professor said in a hard voice. "It will be the vengeance of the Almighty. She will fall. Watch, and you will see."

Words were upon Hubert's lips in mitigation of the woman's offence, but he held back, recognizing how useless it was to argue with him. He had lost his son through her, therefore his hatred was but natural.

"*Ach!*" went on the old man, fixing his visitor with his dark, deep-set eyes. "You are her friend, perhaps her admirer, as my poor Ivan was! But be warned, M'sieur Hubert. Be warned by my poor boy's fate. You are young, with all the world before you. Steel your heart against her wiles and machinations; do not allow yourself to be dazzled by her beauty or overcome by her soft words or tender graces. Much has already reached my ear regarding your fondness for her, and I have been sorely grieved on your account. Every movement of the Countess Lubomirska is known to me, and I warn you that if you allow yourself to be drawn into her net, it will result in your degradation and your ruin."

Truth to tell Hubert Hutton rather resented the old fellow's prognostications, because, like most other strong-headed young men, he felt himself perfectly competent to manage his own affairs.

"Oh!" he laughed, "have no fear on my account. I'm not the kind of fellow to make a fool of myself over a woman."

"Every man says that at first. The heart, however, is always stronger than the will."

"Ah! I fancy my heart became ossified years ago, Professor," laughed the younger man.

But the old fellow shook his head dubiously, replying:

"Forgive me for saying so, M'sieur Hubert, but you are far too fond of that woman. Be advised by me," he urged. "Cast her aside. Leave her—leave Paris, even, if you must, but do not follow longer in her train. If you do, the result must prove fatal."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because in her downfall she will carry you with her."

"Her downfall? What do you mean?" he asked eagerly. "Tell me. I can keep a secret. What form do you propose your vengeance to take?"

"Ah, no," responded the other. "You are her friend. One does not warn one's enemies."

"I have been privy to your secrets on many occasions," Hutton protested, "and yet you now lack confidence in me."

"No," replied the grey-faced old man, leaning across the table to him. "I have still the most perfect confidence in you, M'sieur Hubert, because you are my friend. I owe my present liberty to you, and it was mainly in order to tell you the tragedy of my son and to warn you of your own peril that I asked you here to-night. I cannot tell you how I intend to avenge myself, for it is a mere personal matter. Still, to show you that I have still the same confidence in you as ever, I will impart to you a secret which must, however, never pass your lips—recollect that!"

"I shall be silent, as I have ever been," was the reply.

"Then let me tell you that we are at the very dawn of a new era in Russia," said the old fellow in a low whisper, first glancing around to make certain that both doors of the meagre room were closed. "The Tsar goes to London in September. The blow will be struck there on the ninth of the month."

Hutton pursed his lips.

"Is the place arranged?" he inquired.

"Yes," the other replied, and taking from the shelf behind him a map of London, he spread it upon the table, and pointing to a mark in blue pencil, explained: "At that spot."

Hutton examined the map closely, and ascertained that the place where the attempt was to be made was in one of the busiest thoroughfares in the metropolis, at that narrow point in Fleet Street exactly opposite the corner of Bouverie Street.

"And who are to make it?" the young Englishman asked.

"Six of the chosen," responded the Professor in a low voice, again fixing him with his eyes. "The plot is complete in every detail save the choosing of the six. It is so well planned that in this case it cannot fail. But, remember, as before, not a syllable must pass your lips."

"No," declared Hutton. "Not a syllable."

CHAPTER XVII

THE COUNTESS'S CAPRICE

On the following evening at eight o'clock Hubert Hutton threw off his overcoat in the big hall of a mansion in the Avenue de Bois de Boulogne, and followed the silk-stockinged flunkey over soft carpets through several passages, until they came to a pair of high white doors, which the man threw open, announcing:

"M'sieur Hutton."

"Ah! *mon cher!*" cried the pretty Countess, rising quickly from her soft nest of skins on the opposite side of the room and advancing towards him. "Here you are at last!"

He took the white bejewelled hand she held out to him and, bowing gallantly, kissed it.

"I regret, Madame, if I am late," he said in French, "but I had an imbecile of a *cocher* who took me a mile round so as to make a double course."

"Oh, you are not late," she laughed. Then taking up a small bouquet of Nice violets she pinned it in the lapel of his dinner-jacket with her own hands, as was her habit when he dined alone with her. "Now, come and sit beside me, here, and give me your excuses for not seeing me yesterday. You promised you would drive out with me, you know, and I waited nearly half an hour for you. Antoine was, of course, in a bad temper, for he is always so careful of his horses, and to wait two minutes before the house is to him a most terrible thing. I had to tell him that you were the culprit." And her small mouth parted in a mischievous smile.

"It was quite unavoidable, I assure you, Countess," he responded, seating himself beside her upon the big lounge covered with rich Siberian skins. "I have to express my regrets, but I had some private affairs to attend to, and believed you would receive my *petit-bleu* in time."

But she raised her finger with the air of scolding a naughty child, and shaking her head, said:

"It was not right to disappoint me like that. You know how I hate to drive in the Bois alone."

Hutton looked upon her, and thought he had never seen her look more lovely than that night. Beneath the shaded light of the many wax candles in that splendid gilded *salon* she looked perfectly bewitching. Her black hair coiled deftly by a maid of the first order surmounted a face that was perfect in its symmetry, and both sweet and innocent in its marvellous beauty. Her cheeks were soft and dimpled like a child's, and her slightly prominent chin gave her a pert almost impudent air. Could any evil lurk beneath such perfect loveliness? Only a physiognomist would, by close observation, have detected one little flaw—the tiny lines that sometimes appeared at the corner of that puckered mouth, lines that betrayed the veneer of ingenuousness and gave the true keynote to her real nature.

She was dressed superbly, as she always was of an evening. No woman in Paris spent more upon her gowns than Dolores Lubomirska, and to do her justice it must be said that she possessed great taste.

That night she wore black. It was her favourite when she dined *tête-à-tête*. With a woman's estimate of her own charms, she knew that nothing set off the whiteness of her chest and arms like black, and the gown in question, being one of Doeillet's latest productions, was indeed a work of art, striking on account of extreme simplicity, its marvellous fit, and the daring ornamentation of the skirt—great birds, like storks, in white velvet around the hem.

She only wore a single jewel, a big emerald of great beauty and fabulous worth, a stone from the Urals that had been an heirloom of the family from the Middle Ages. The gem was set in an antique claw setting, and scintillated with her every movement. From the crown of her black silky hair to the point of her dainty shoes, she was superb, perfect.

"You will forgive me, Countess, won't you?" Hutton asked humbly in French, for he saw that the capricious beauty was somewhat offended although she was concealing her annoyance.

"Forgive you, why, of course, you silly boy," she laughed airily. "It is Antoine, my coachman, who is angry, not I."

The two long doors on the opposite side of the *salon* opened, and a fat butler of English type appeared, announcing:

"Madame la Comtesse. Dinner is served."

She rose, gathered up her lace handkerchief and fan, and went in upon his arm. They made a handsome pair assuredly, even though she were some years his senior. He was a frequent visitor there, and when there were no guests, almost invariably dined *tête-à-tête* with her. Indeed, more than once the servants had discussed the possibility of Madame marrying the smart young Englishman.

The room in which they sat at a small round table was not large, but just as full of splendour as the *salon* they had quitted. It was the small dining-room which she preferred when alone. The big *salle-à-manger* on the opposite side of the house was used when there were guests. Decorated wholly in white, panelled with a ceiling of English Jacobean design, the only colour was the pale strawberry of the carpet, and the handsome coat of arms of the House of Lubomirska in relief and emblazoned in the centre of the ceiling. For the rest, walls, furniture, table-covering, flowers—even the dinner-service—were all white, and against it all stood out the beautiful woman in black, who, after bowing to him with quaint, old-world grace, seated herself.

With the men in the room the subjects of conversation were limited, for Dolores Lubomirska, whatever might have been her faults, was never indiscreet. She was a clever woman to the very tips of her tapering fingers. An exquisite soup, sterlet from the Volga, and a brace of Scotch grouse that had been kept in cold storage since the commencement of the close season, formed the principal dishes, while the wines were of renowned vintages, and the fruit was the best procurable in the Paris market. Brilliant, sparkling, overflowing with wit and good spirits, Dolores sat chattering on, criticizing, chaffing, ridiculing and mimicking, just as she always did. Assuredly such an accomplished and beautiful woman could fascinate the most ascetic anchorite.

Dinner ended at last and they passed together into her little rose boudoir, an apartment that was an exact replica of the room in the palace in Petersburg. It was her caprice to have it so—an essentially Russian room, with its high stove and double windows, right in the heart of Paris. She would sit there and well believe herself in Petersburg, for every feature of the room was there reproduced, pictures, furniture, lounges, carpet, decorations—everything.

"Well, *mon cher* ? " she exclaimed at last as he handed her her coffee after she had thrown herself upon a low settee in graceful abandon. "Now tell me of all you've been doing these past two days. At the 'Chatham', of course, talking scandal with your compatriots. Oh ! you English. What a scandal-loving nation you are !" she laughed.

"Yes," he said, holding a light for her cigarette and afterwards lighting his own. "It is true I've been at the 'Chatham', but at present there is no scandal—not even a good story worth repeating."

"Have you seen the *Journal* to-day ?" she asked. Then added : "It appears that his Majesty has decided not to come to Paris, after all—afraid of certain undesirables who are believed to be in hiding here, I suppose. Ah !" she sighed, "the Tsar's crown does not protect him from headache."

"True," he observed, somewhat surprised, however, at her reference to the "undesirables", and wondering if she referred to the Professor and his friends. "Our English writer Shakespeare made the same remark regarding monarchs in general centuries ago. The King business, as the American humorist terms it, is not the most tranquil of professions nowadays."

"No," she said, "it is not." And he saw that she had grown suddenly thoughtful.

As he sat gazing at her, recollections of the old Professor's story flashed through his mind. Was it anything remarkable that the young lieutenant had killed himself for love of her ? No doubt he was one of those hot-headed lovers who rushed recklessly to self-destruction. There are far more suicides through love than through financial ruin.

The young man's name had never passed her lips and he wondered whether it were policy to approach the subject and to endeavour to ascertain the truth. He had long ago calmly analysed his feelings towards her and found that he had no real deep-rooted affection for her. She was the most admired woman in all Paris—hence it flattered his vanity to be her chosen cavalier. Her extreme beauty held him in fascination, it was true, but there is a line to be drawn, even though not well defined, between fascination and love. Only once, long ago in Petersburg, had he ever kissed her on the lips, and she, on her part, often upbraided him for his apparent formal coldness towards her.

"You are far too ceremonious, *mon cher* Hubert," she would say, laughing. "You would have made a model lover in the eighteenth century."

As she lounged lazily in her long chair blowing a cloud of cigarette-smoke from her lips, their eyes met.

"Well ?" she asked. "Why are you so moody and thoughtful to-night ? You don't seem well pleased. Have I annoyed you ?"

"Annoyed me, Countess ! Why certainly not," he laughed.

"Why not call me Dolores ?" she urged in a soft voice, bending slightly towards him. "Haven't I forbidden you a dozen times to use my title ? Surely we are old friends enough that you may call me by my Christian name ?"

"Very well," he answered with a smile, "it shall be Dolores, if you wish it."

"Bah !" she cried, raising herself and tossing away her cigarette end. "You are just as formal as years ago when we first met in Petersburg. Will you never thaw ?"

"I think, Countess—I mean Dolores—that you misunderstand me," he said in deep earnestness. "When a man of my humble position becomes the intimate friend and confidant of a woman of yours, there must necessarily be a line separating them. I think that up to the present I have proved myself your friend, at least I have endeavoured to do so. Your secrets are mine, and your house is always open to me. The confidence you have reposed in me I have never abused, because I have ever held you in high esteem as an honest and upright woman. To-day you are Queen of Paris, and scandals about you are naturally whispered everywhere. Unfounded scandal is the penalty every woman pays for notoriety. But I know well the truth."

Her white chest rose and fell quickly, causing the big emerald to gleam with a brilliant fire.

"Ah !" she sighed. Then in a voice broken by emotion she added : "You know, Hubert, that although I may be a smart woman, the admired of Paris, how very dull and lonely is my life. I am practically friendless. Women avoid me because they are jealous of my success, and men—well, the majority of men are, after all, worthless."

"And I am one of those," her companion observed.

"No. You are the exception," she said quickly, turning her wonderful eyes upon him. "You are almost the only man I've ever met who thoroughly understands me, and who is alive to the fact that a woman may have caprices without vices."

"Caprices are always to be forgiven in a pretty woman like yourself, Dolores," he said.

"No. Don't pay me that kind of compliment, Hubert," she said seriously. "We are not lovers." And, with a sigh, she added sadly: "Unfortunately, perhaps, for both of us."

"Why unfortunately?" he asked, resting his elbows on his knees and looking straight into her face. Her words held him in surprise, for it was the first time she had spoken to him directly of love.

For answer, she gave her shoulders a little shrug and laughed.

"From a common-sense point of view, Dolores, it would be sheer madness were I to love you," he said. "I am not in a position to become your husband, even if I wished. If you marry, it should be to some man of birth and wealth, and not a poor unknown fellow like myself."

"Ah!" she burst forth, "I see you will never love me, Hubert!"

"Why should I? It would surely be madness on my part to do so."

"Because you think me incapable of reciprocating your affection," she said reproachfully. "You judge me just as the world judges me, as a *papillon*, a mere butterfly alighting upon every flower according to its caprice. You believe, like the rest, that I am without a woman's heart, and that affection has no place within me. I know! I know!" she went on, almost in desperation. "My past actions have, of course, lent colour to such a theory. The woman who is smart in society and *mondaine* in thought and action, is always believed to be heartless. It is but natural. Of nine-tenths of the Parisiennes it is true, but there are exceptions, Hubert; there are exceptions to every rule. Some of those women are yearning for the love of an honest man."

CHAPTER XVIII

LOVE'S AFTERMATH

HUBERT HUTTON was silent for several minutes. He saw how intensely in earnest she was. She had never before exhibited to him the sentimental side of her character, and the revelation came upon him as an utter surprise. He was convinced that she was not acting; every word indeed that she uttered came direct from her heart. He had never believed her capable of the tender passion.

"But," he said at last, "is not the love of such women in the majority of cases the outcome of mere caprice? The Parisienne changes her mode with each day, even to her dogs. Toto is the fashion to-day, but to-morrow it is Dodo. With her fashion, so, I fear, it is with her loves."

"With many, yes; but there are exceptions."

"Are you one, Dolores?" he asked after a brief pause.

"Yes, I can honestly say I am," she responded in a low voice. "Ah, Hubert, you know all the secrets of my life—how heavy my heart has been even though I have displayed a reckless exterior. My face has, I am sufficiently egotistical to say, never been an index to the true loneliness of my life. Believe me, I am tired to death of my present existence. It is pleasant enough to occupy the position I do, of course, but a woman quickly tires of posing on a pedestal, and no one's life is complete without love. True love is the only real genesis of happiness."

"I quite believe that," he said, refusing to see the point of her remarks, and that she was leading him to a direct acknowledgment of his own feelings towards her. With ineffable cleverness she had led him upon very dangerous ground. "Ah," he said, "that has been fairly acknowledged ever since the world began."

"And if any of my friends, the smart women of Paris, were to hear me moralizing, how they would laugh, wouldn't they?"

"Well, I believe they would," he declared with a smile.

"The word 'affection' is not in their vocabulary, although their world is supposed to bow to *L'Amour.*"

"Yes. That is just how I myself differ from them," she said. "I have never sought success through scandal."

"No, Dolores, I admit that," he said. "You never have. You have earned the social position you occupy to-day by fair means ; by your honesty, your wealth, your good taste, and your good name. For that, even your worst enemy must give you full credit."

"My enemies give me credit for nothing," she said with a touch of regret. "Indeed, I have few friends if the truth be told, and you are my best."

"I am loyal to you," Hubert answered, "even though I am not of your circle. Chance threw us together in Russia—I, a careless cosmopolitan, and you, a notable woman. Our friendship has all along been a strange, incongruous one, which has set many a tongue agog and many a man and woman wondering."

"Why should they wonder ?" she asked, opening her great, dark eyes wider. "Surely it is not strange that I should have found a true friend in you ?"

"Well," he said, "gossips have not been idle in coupling our names."

"And do you object to it ?" she inquired.

"Yes," he responded frankly.

She glanced at him quickly as though not quite understanding his meaning.

"Why ?" she asked.

"Well, because it is unfair to you. We have never been lovers."

"And you never intend to love me ?" she said. "Now, admit the truth." And she fixed him beneath her glance.

He was somewhat taken aback by the directness of her question. He was unprepared for it, and saw that he had made a mistake. Yet, with an honesty of purpose which characterized all his actions, he was determined not to lie to her, even at the risk of giving her offence. He well knew how many were her caprices, and how the thing which delighted her to-day disgusted her to-morrow. Yes, she was essentially a woman of the world.

"Dolores," said he, with a voice of intense feeling, "I can never love where I know that affection would be fatal."

"Then you don't love me!" she cried, starting up and facing him. "Confess! You have no spark of affection in your heart. I am to you just as any other woman, a mere dressed puppet to be petted, admired, humoured, but not to be loved. Ah! yes. I see it all. I guessed as much. Your heart, to me, is hard as adamant. You do not trust me, Hubert. You will not admit it, but in your inner self you believe me to be just a woman like any other—fickle, capricious, thoughtless and heartless."

The old Professor's warning words flashed through his mind and for a moment he remained silent.

"No," he said quietly, rising also and facing her. "I do not deny that I am utterly untouched by the bond of sympathy between us, Dolores, and I certainly consider you peerless above other women, but any love between us would, I have long foreseen, be a fatal mistake."

She glanced at him quickly.

"And now tell me the truth. After five years, you still admire me, but you do not love me? Why not confess it at once."

"I have nothing to conceal," he replied. "If we are, as you have said, firm friends, there is surely no reason why the secrets of our hearts should be hidden from each other."

"Ah, *mon Dieu*! Hubert," cried the woman wildly, "cannot you see that these cold, heartless words of yours are killing me! Think what this confession means to me," she went on tears welling in her fine eyes. "Think what it means to me, who have entertained for you a greater passion than for any other man."

"But, Dolores, I have never given you cause to believe that I was in love with you!" he cried, bewildered by her mad words. "I never dreamed this—that you were actually in love with me."

"You have been blind," she cried, "blind to all my hints! You have forced me in my desperation to make a confession that no woman should make. A man is given liberty to speak the secrets of his heart at any time, but that is always debarred to a woman. She must listen, but she must not make confession."

"I must confess, Dolores, that your words have taken me utterly by surprise," he said, placing his hand tenderly upon her arm, yet nevertheless still retaining his coolness amid that passionate scene. He saw that, overcome with emotion, she was palpitating with a desire that he should fall upon his knees and worship her.

If the truth were known, this was the first time any devotee had refused to worship at her shrine. She expected that he would bend and kiss her hand, and afterwards her lips. But she was disappointed. Hubert Hutton remained almost unmoved, save by the surprise which her words occasioned him.

"Surely you recognized the truth long ago?" she cried. "You cannot be so utterly indifferent to a woman's smiles as not to know when she is natural and when she wears the mask, when she hates and when she loves."

"I know that you have always been my friend," he said, "but I never dreamed that you had so far forgotten yourself as to fall in love with me."

"Forgotten myself! What do you mean?"

"I mean that my position does not warrant it. Ours would be a terrible *mésalliance.*"

"Many *mésalliances* are very happy ones," she urged with a touch of sadness in her voice. "And besides, I am so far *mondaine* as to utterly disregard whatever the world may say."

"A rich woman may always do that," he said with a philosophic air. "La Lubomirska could do no wrong."

What he had said was perfectly true, and she knew it. Her position as Queen of Paris gave her an immunity from all breaches of the convenances.

"But tell me, Hubert," she asked very seriously a moment later, placing her white hand suddenly upon his shoulder and looking into his eyes, "tell me why it is that you absolutely refuse to entertain any affection for me?"

"I—I don't refuse to," he faltered. "I love you dearly, as a friend."

"As a friend, yes," she exclaimed impatiently. "But I mean as a wife?"

"To speak honestly, I have never given such a suggestion a thought," he answered. "To me you have always been a woman above others, peerless among all. I have admired you, I have followed in your train because I've been fascinated by your wonderful beauty and by your many charms, and if any indiscretion of mine has misled you into believing that I loved you, I can only deeply regret it."

"*Dieu!* You speak like a parish priest!" she cried. "Have you no heart—no soul? You are destroying all my illusions, Hubert," added the passionate, capricious woman with deep bitterness in her voice. "I—I believed that you loved me!" she cried, bursting at last into tears.

He took her hand tenderly in his, striving to console her, but she could control her emotion no longer and gave way to a wild tumult of sobs.

"But, Dolores," he said, "these words you've used to me, you must recall. Let us dismiss them as never having been said. I now know that you love me, and, believe me, it has pained me to tell you that there has been no reciprocal feeling within my heart. See, I am perfectly honest and straightforward. Some men would have been flattered by your confession, and even though they might not really have loved you, would have feigned affection and thereby held you beneath their thrall. On the contrary, I have told you the truth, as I would speak to my own sister. You surely cannot condemn me for refusing to deceive you?"

"No," she said, dabbing her eyes with the wisp of perfumed lace that served her as handkerchief. "You have been honest in your reply. But it is the cause of your refusal that is my most bitter trial."

"The cause? What cause?"

She paused for a moment, her lips moving convulsively, although no sound came from them.

At last, however, she spoke, saying in a hard voice quite unusual to her:

"You refuse to love me, because you love another."

"Another?" he cried, utterly surprised. "Whom?"

"Ah! you cannot deny it," she went on fiercely, withdrawing from his grasp. "You cannot seek to cloak the truth from me. You love her, and therefore scorn my affection and cast aside my love because you have tired of me."

"True friendship knows not fatigue," he replied coolly, adding: "I am quite unaware to whom you allude. I hold no woman in greater esteem than yourself."

"You lie!" she cried fiercely. "I saw you with her last night."

"With whom?"

"With that little snub-faced wench, Pauline Lomonseff."

He held his breath. So she had discovered that the

Professor and his daughter were in Paris and, being jealous of Pauline, would probably give information at the bureau of the Russian Secret Police attached to the Embassy. In an instant he foresaw a thousand perils.

"Ah !" she went on, "you do not deny it, because it is useless. Surely association with a family of suspects is extremely dangerous. I know all. You love that little black-faced witch," she cried wildly. "But recollect that Dolores Lubomirska is not the woman to stand by and see her lover stolen from her—recollect that I——"

"No, hear me, Dolores," he implored. "I have never uttered one single word of love to the girl."

"Do not deny it !" she said in a low, hard voice. "I made inquiries long ago in Petersburg and know everything. You believed that you could deceive me. You posed as my friend and confidant, while at the same time you were the intimate friend of that little slut and her scoundrelly father. I, fool that I was, believed that you loved me until—until I saw that I had a rival. And that rival is now in Paris, and you go on nocturnal walks with her. You have told me the truth that you do not love me. Oh, yes, I believe it to be true. A man cannot love two women, and you, Hubert, have been cruelly stolen from me. Stolen, do you hear me ? Very well ! My revenge is now in my own hands, and I tell you that ere long your thin-waisted, snub-faced beauty will plead for mercy at my feet, but I shall then be as deaf to her entreaties as you are to-night to mine. That is all," she added, her white chest rising and falling rapidly with the fierce passion of jealousy which she vainly strove to suppress. "Further words are useless."

For a full hour he tried to argue with her in an endeavour to convince her that he had never entertained one spark of affection for the Professor's daughter, but with the obdurate pertinacity of a jealous woman she would listen to no protests, however logical. It became plain that she wished him to take his leave, and at last he did so, bowing with cold formality and kissing her hand while she turned her head aside as though to avoid him.

"Adieu, Dolores," he said in a melancholy tone. "To-night you have cruelly misjudged me."

"Adieu !" was the only word the brilliant woman snapped. And then he turned and took his leave.

For some minutes after he had gone she stood there motionless, her hands clasped and her tiny foot beating a nervous tattoo upon the carpet. Then, with a sudden movement, she swept across to a small Empire escritoire in the corner of the boudoir, and, unlocking it with a key she wore upon a chain, she took from one of the drawers a letter, the seals of which were broken.

This she read and re-read, standing within the zone of light shed by the high silk-shaded lamp.

"Yes," she murmured with a dark ominous look upon her face as she replaced the letter in its envelope. "It is true that I paid that crafty old villain Mirski seventy-eight thousand francs for it. A high price, certainly. But it is worth that—worth all that!"

And she smiled contentedly, the bitter, cynical smile of a woman into whose heart the iron of a fierce and unrelenting hatred has entered.

CHAPTER XIX

AUSTEN LEIGH'S CONFESSION

THE situation was decidedly insecure. Hubert Hutton saw that the woman in whose smiles he had idly basked for so long meant mischief, and a difficulty presented itself how to appease her.

In his high-up sitting-room in the Rue Lafayette, he stood next morning looking down upon the busy thoroughfare below—one of the great arteries of Paris traffic—moodily reflecting on his foolish indiscretion of the past evening. He saw that he ought to have made pretence of affection in order to avoid giving her annoyance. Indeed, he would have done so had he but dreamed that she had discovered Pauline's presence in Paris. That discovery had, of course, made it plain that the arch-conspirator and head of the Party of the Will of the People, Professor Lomonseff, who had escaped from Petersburg, was in hiding in the French capital. Her jealousy of Pauline was, of course, absurd. He had been very friendly with her in Russia, had taken her to the theatres sometimes, and had made little excursions to Peterhof and other places around the capital, but never once had he spoken to her of love. They were good friends, nothing more.

What had given rise to La Lubomirska's mad jealousy he could not imagine. It seemed very much as though she were but making it an excuse for her vindictiveness.

That he should at once warn the Professor and his daughter of their discovery was imperative. The story related by the old man regarding his son was sufficient to show that they were bitter enemies. The Countess was, moreover, a frequent guest at that great grey house in the Rue de Grenelle, the Russian Embassy, and more likely than not she would give information regarding Lomonseff's arrival in Paris which would set in motion the whole of the ingenious machinery of the Secret Police to discover his whereabouts.

Pauline had certainly been indiscreet in accosting him in the street, and he, on his part, had been foolish in sitting with her openly before a café in full view of the passers-by. Yes, the whole situation was one of distinct peril.

With his hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets he stood with his eyes fixed upon the opposite houses, lost in thought. Much had indeed happened in those past couple of days. First, he had learned the great Nihilist secret of the forthcoming attempt in London, the city where a monarch always believes himself safest; and secondly, he had mortally offended the Countess by refusing to bow down before her.

In the latter he had been an infernal blunderer, and as he turned from the window he cursed himself for it. On hearing the tragic story from the Professor, he had at first been disinclined to believe that the lieutenant's death was owing to Dolores. He had always considered her one of those smart but harmless women who are to be found in every grade of society everywhere—unfettered women who, although they allow followers in their train, are nevertheless honest and upright. There had been gossip about her, of course, but so there is about every pretty woman, be she a serving-maid or a reigning sovereign. He who knew her intimately was well aware that there had been no foundation for it. If there had been, indeed, she would very soon have been debarred from the entourage of the Empress. Yet, on the contrary, she was a personal friend of the Tsarina, and often stayed at the palace-prison of Gatchina for weeks together.

Therefore the revelation of her character on the previous evening had come upon him as a thunderbolt.

Happily for his peace of mind he was in ignorance of the purchase she had made of the Jew Mirski, and that she had actually read that sealed letter which he had given the Hebrew as security for the loan.

Once or twice of late he had wondered why he had received no communication from the old scoundrel regarding the repayment for which he had pressed. Inquiry showed, however, that he had left the hotel, and was now in all probability back in Petersburg. Hence Hubert, with all a cosmopolitan's disregard for the future, had dismissed the recent annoying interview with the money-lender from his mind.

As he stood there in the golden light, his brows knit in deep reflection, all that the old Professor had said regarding that curious person, Austen Leigh, came back to him. Apparently not a single member of the revolutionary organization was aware of his death. He had disappeared suddenly from Russia, carrying with him what were practically the archives of the Party of the Will of the People, and these, their most valuable and most secret possessions, had utterly disappeared. Little wonder was it that every Nihilist within the Russian Empire and out of it was anxious to discover the whereabouts of the mysterious, erratic Englishman into whose hands the documents had been entrusted for safety, so that they might be smuggled beyond the confines of the Tsar's dominions.

To Hubert Hutton alone was the truth known. By that very fortunate word let drop by Mrs. Milbourne while seated at the wedding-breakfast of the unfortunate Nella, he had learnt the truth, and had succeeded in placing the documents in question beyond the prying of the inquisitive.

He was not a Nihilist. As a thorough-going Englishman, even though a careless cosmopolitan, he had at heart no sympathy with revolutionaries who endeavoured to reform the State by the murder of the monarch. By a curious combination of circumstances, he had in the several years he had resided in Petersburg been thrown into contact with Leigh, and with Lomonseff, Vera Gradski, Ivan Feodorovich and others of the noted Terrorists. Once or twice he had been able to render them a service at the moment when they were in desperate straits; hence they counted upon him almost as one of themselves.

Austen Leigh, however, had always been a complete mystery. Morose, reserved and silent, he had ever been a lonely man whose past, save that he had travelled extensively and explored regions hitherto unknown in Siberia and Northern Africa, was as a sealed book. Who he was, what were his family, or whence he came no one in Petersburg had known. He was on the best of terms with the Ministry of the Interior on account of his valuable services as an explorer, and hence he was unsuspected by the police. That he had a secret leaning towards the propaganda of the Nihilists became very soon plain, and his acquaintance with the head-centre of the Terrorist Party, Professor Lomonseff, soon ripened into a firm friendship.

Yet to Hubert, as to all the others, he was a man of profound mystery whose actions were so erratic as to be utterly incomprehensible.

As he stood there, Hutton suddenly recollected the photographic reproductions of those cipher documents which he had had made in London previous to consigning the originals to the keeping of the Safe Deposit Company. He had not yet sought to decipher them, feeling somehow that the less he knew of the secrets of Nihilism the better. A great and desperate revolutionary organization like the Terrorist wing of the Will of the People is by no means a desirable movement to be actively associated with. He knew of more than half a dozen persons in Petersburg alone who had been secretly "removed", or, in plain English, assassinated, because of suspicion that they were spies. Although so closely allied with the Nihilists, he nevertheless held their doings in awe, and had never sought to penetrate into the secrets of their many conspiracies. He admitted within himself that the bureaucracy of Russia oppressed the people, but he did not hold with the vain endeavour to institute reform by the sacrifice of the life of the sovereign. The violent propaganda of the Terrorists was distinctly in opposition to all the maxims of an Englishman.

What the Professor had alleged against Leigh aroused within him a keen desire to decipher those documents which the dead man had so foolishly left to fall into anyone's hands, and with the suggestion suddenly crossing his mind, he unlocked an old English bureau in the corner of the room and took therefrom a large cartridge envelope, about a foot square, which contained prints of the negatives.

These he took to his small writing-table in the window, and having seated himself and lit a cigarette, drew them forth one by one and examined them.

The photographs were excellently done, and quite clear and distinct. But all the writing, being in cipher, told him absolutely nothing. He had mastered two of them in England, the rest were undecipherable. For fully an hour he examined them closely with the aid of a large circular magnifying-glass, folio after folio, list after list. Some of the documents containing several folios had been photographed each page separately and afterwards fastened together—one of them consisting of some forty or more pages, and containing amid the text of unintelligible letters and numerals certain curious geometrical figures which looked like plans.

As he had anticipated, he could make nothing of them.

He was aware of the construction of the cipher, but lacked the key without which the writing could not be made plain. Hence, to his disappointment, these documents to which Lomonseff attached such extreme importance were a closed book.

He was about to gather the whole of the photographs together and place them away, when one of them—considerably smaller than the rest—written in a crabbed hand, attracted his attention. It was writing which differed from the others, somewhat finer and more angular. They were all, with that exception, printed in a firm, heavy hand in Roman capitals. This, however, was in a pointed cursive hand, which he closely examined through the glass, which was so powerful that it made each letter fully half an inch in length.

Taking up a pen and a sheet of plain paper he proceeded to copy the first dozen of the cipher words, and afterwards tried to reduce them to some intelligible language. For almost an hour he worked, but without success, until of a sudden he discovered the truth: that document was written not in Russian, but in French, in the cipher with which he was acquainted, and contained a full explanation and key of the secret cipher in which the more voluminous documents were written.

The discovery overjoyed him. He held the photograph in his hand with bated breath and transcribed every word into its French equivalent, until at last he had before him the whole key to the secret!

The keen desire to read what was contained in those papers which he had so fortunately been able to place under lock and key, grew upon him, and consumed by eagerness to fathom the mystery, he took up one, a larger one than the rest, and commenced to carefully decipher it.

To his amazement he found it to be not in Russian or French, but in English; and at the very outset it was plain that it was not a document connected with the revolutionary organization, but a statement of fact by that mysterious and erratic person, Austen Leigh himself.

Hubert Hutton's excitement knew no bounds. At last he was about to penetrate the veil of mystery that had so long overshadowed his strangely silent friend.

It seemed like a confession, written with touching candour, though carefully reduced to that unintelligible cipher in order that none might read it. But as gradually Hubert deciphered it and wrote it down word for word in plain English, its commencement read as follows:

"When my boyish days were over, if I had only found a friend and adviser in whom I could have reposed my whole confidence, I should assuredly have grown up into a sincere and active friend of my fellowman. I had indisputably a good heart, deep and vehement feelings, ready to shed tears in compassion for every misfortune however far removed from me, and energetic also to help others, even beyond my ability. If I had had a friend like-minded with myself, who would have cherished these feelings in me, I would gradually have outgrown all the childish element that might still cling to them, and the succeeding gravity of maturer age would have doubtless confirmed me into a genuine man. But such a friend was not given me, and I became ridiculed and mocked for those sentiments of mine. This drove me back on myself. I began to be ashamed of my humane feelings, and to despise the men who ridiculed me on account of them. I thus began to deem myself better than others, and the contempt I cherished for many imperceptibly extended to still more, and at last to almost all of my own age. I took no trouble to come nearer them and to acquire their love. I have, therefore, down to these, my last days, never had a true friend, nor learnt the art of gaining such. The respect of others I well know how to procure myself, but never their love. Nobody loved me; I loved nobody. Love, however, is a necessity for man. I therefore loved—myself. So, at least, I explain to myself my unlimited self-love through all my adventurous life."

Hubert paused when he had arrived at this point. Leigh's moralizings were interesting of course, but he was naturally impatient to get at the real secret of the strange man's life, and, laying down his pen, he skipped several of the photographed pages with that aim.

CHAPTER XX

THE CONFESSION CONTINUED

In a few moments he came to where the narrative apparently recommenced, and with infinite care slowly transcribed it.

In order to make the dead man's remarkable confession quite plain to the reader, it may perhaps be best to print it just as it was written down.

"Years have now passed. I shall die with this secret within my heart, but let he who reads what is herein written take warning lest he find himself in similar case, and let those whose duty it is, avenge themselves. It happened in this wise. I had returned from a twelve months' journey in the Areg Desert, and was spending the spring in Rome. Times without number as in the afternoon I trod the narrow Corso with its block of smart equipages and well-dressed foot-passengers, I noticed one neat, female figure which always attracted me. Young, not more than twenty-two, she was invariably attired in white, with the waist girt by a narrow band of pale blue or rose, the colour always matching that in the hat she wore. Her costume and millinery were doubtless products of the Rue de la Paix, and her face was pure and innocent looking as a child's. Once, in passing, our eyes had met for an instant. Hers were of a dark brown, but in their unfathomable depths was an expression half of fear, half of ineffable sadness—an expression full of mystery. She lowered her gaze modestly and passed on. Sometimes she was alone, but often there hobbled at her side a decrepit old fellow, attired in shabby, ill-fitting clothes; a white-moustached man whose furrowed face bore an expression saturnine and forbidding.

"They were a strangely assorted pair—she young and lovely, he old and eminently ugly. Many times on those bright days in early spring, when I strolled from the Piazza Colonna to the Porto del Popolo, I met them and amused myself by trying to read her story in her face. That it was a strange and mysterious one I felt confident. The expression of abject terror in those eyes was unmistakable. . . .

"One sunny afternoon an opportunity to speak to her presented itself, and I was not long in taking advantage of it. I was sitting upon one of the seats upon the Pincian Hill when, either by design or accident, she came also to the same seat, and presently, while absorbed in a French novel she had brought with her, the wind carried away her little lace handkerchief. The latter I recovered, being rewarded by a smile and a soft, modest word of thanks in French. This, of course, gave us an opportunity for conversation, and soon we were chatting merrily, discussing Rome and its gay cosmopolitan crowd, the prospects of Carnival, and other topics uppermost in the Eternal City.

" 'I have seen you so often,' I observed at length, 'that you seem already a friend.'

"She laughed lightly, looking gay and bright beneath her cool white sunshade.

" 'And I also have passed you many, many times,' she answered. 'You were at the Constanzi two nights ago.'

" 'Yes,' I replied, surprised. 'I had no idea you were present.'

"She smiled again, a mysterious smile, the meaning of which I could not exactly determine.

" 'Do you often go to the play?' I asked.

" 'Sometimes,' she answered. 'It is so dull here without friends.'

" 'But you have a friend. I see you with an elderly gentleman.'

" 'Gentleman!' she laughed. 'He is my servant. I take him out in order to have someone to talk to.'

" 'Well,' I answered with increasing astonishment, 'I, too, am alone here. I should be delighted if sometimes I might be permitted to take your servant's place. I'm at the "Grand".'

" 'The pleasure will be mutual,' she assured me. 'I am staying at the "Quirinal".'

" 'Then we are actually neighbours!' I observed, enthusiastically. 'I shall be delighted to stroll with you sometimes.'

" 'It is not pleasant for a woman to be alone here!' she exclaimed, sighing, after a brief pause. 'There is, of course, plenty of freedom, but a lonely woman in Rome is at once classed with the *demi-monde*.'

"Presently, after we had been chatting half an hour, while the shadows had lengthened as the sun declined, we exchanged cards. She took one from her silver case and handed it to me.

"The name upon it was 'Dolores Zassouloff.'

" 'So you are Russian!' I exclaimed, surprised, having believed her to be French.

" 'Yes,' she answered, 'and you are English—from London.'

"I began to question her about herself, but to evade answering she declared that the wind had grown chilly, therefore we rose, and I walked with her to the door of her hotel, where we parted, having arranged to meet on the morrow.

"We met almost daily through the bright, pleasant weeks that followed, and I make open confession that I admired her. Such infinite grace and wondrous beauty, such charm of manner I had never before witnessed as that of my divinity. I grew to love her with the whole strength of my being, and sometimes when she smiled upon me flattered myself that she reciprocated my affection. At times, however, she was strangely cold and preoccupied, and would walk for hours scarcely uttering a word, while at others she was bright and vivacious, overflowing with mirth and good spirits. She no longer took Ivan, her servant, on her walks, but regarded me as her constant companion. I did not like Ivan. Somehow, I had an instinctive antipathy towards him, for he was keen-eyed, crafty, and apparently unduly anxious as to the movements of his young mistress. Once I thought I detected an evil glint in his eyes when at Dolores' side I passed him in the Piazza di Spagna. At first I was puzzled over this circumstance, but at length grew to regard it as mere imagination on my part.

"Thus the weeks slipped by. King Carnival enjoyed his brief but mirthful reign, and had been immolated amid the dancing of clown and columbine; the battles of confetti and flowers had been fought, and the season was already on the wane, when one evening, after dining, we were seated together in the hotel garden, and she turned to me suddenly saying:

" 'I leave Rome to-morrow.'

" 'To-morrow! So soon!' I cried, dismayed at the mere suggestion of parting. 'I had no idea you intended to leave just yet.'

" 'It is imperative,' she answered in a low strained voice quite unusual to her, and she sighed, passing her tiny hand slowly across her brow.

" 'Some trouble weighs heavily upon your mind,' I said sympathetically. 'Cannot you confide in me? If I can assist you, I will.'

" 'Ah!' she cried, turning her beautiful eyes to mine with an imploring gesture, 'if you only would.'

" 'Certainly!' I exclaimed. 'I shall be delighted to assist you.'

"Then, in a moment of passion, I seized the hand lying in her lap, raised it quickly to my lips, and told her of my love.

" 'No! no!' she implored in a tone of distress, making an effort to rise. 'There must be no love between us. None whatever. You may love me to-night, but you would hate me to-morrow if you only knew.'

" 'Knew what?'

" 'If you knew my secret.'

" 'Is it such a terrible one?' I asked, surprised at her strange and sudden air of tragedy.

" 'No! no!' she said. 'Do not let us speak of it. A moment ago you expressed your readiness to assist me. It is not a difficult task, if you are willing to undertake it. By doing so you will save my life.'

" 'Your life!' I gasped. 'What do you fear?'

" 'Death,' she answered, in a hoarse whisper. 'I may die to-morrow.'

" 'Well, what do you wish me to do?' I inquired, amazed at the strangeness of her manner and the despairing tone of her voice.

" 'Return with me to the hotel. I will show you.'

"We arose, and retracing our steps entered the Hotel Quirinal and ascended to her little private sitting-room. Here I waited while she went to her own chamber, and presently she returned, bearing in her arms a box of bright tin about eighteen inches square. She shook it before placing it upon the table, and I could hear a liquid within.

" 'This,' she said, regarding me gravely with her clear, trusting eyes, 'contains ten litres of petroleum.'

" 'Petroleum!' I observed, astounded.

"She nodded. 'To the eye it contains nothing but petroleum, but there is a secret within. At the bottom of the tin is a narrow air-tight compartment, in which are secreted certain documents of the greatest importance to my family, together with some jewels which are heirlooms and absolutely priceless.'

" 'Well ?' I said, failing to understand her meaning.

" 'Ivan has left, and this evening an attempt has been made to steal them,' she explained. 'To-morrow I must fly ; but before leaving I must deposit this hermetically sealed tin in the care of some person whom I can trust.'

" 'Then you trust me ?' I cried joyfully.

" 'Certainly. Are you not my friend ? Indeed, you should be my lover were that possible.'

" 'Why not ? I adore you, Dolores,' I declared passionately.

" 'At present, no,' she said, raising her tiny bejewelled hand with a gesture of warning. 'When you have successfully accomplished the task I am imposing upon you, and I find myself in comparative safety, then we will again discuss the matter. Until then, no more need be said.' She spoke decisively and with determination.

" 'And what am I to do with this box ?' I inquired.

" 'Take it into your keeping, and deliver it to me intact on the night of the sixth of January at the railway station at Warsaw, on the arrival of the midnight train from Alexandrowo, the frontier.'

" 'At Warsaw !' I gasped.

" 'Yes,' she said. Then asked : 'Is the journey too great for you to undertake ?'

" 'Not at all,' I hastened to assure her. 'No distance is too far to travel to meet you again.'

"She smiled, contemplated her rings for a few moments in silence, then observed that the present was not a fitting time for compliments. I longed to clasp her slim form in my arms and imprint a kiss upon her lips, but dared not, she seemed so deeply in earnest. Even as she stood before me her breast rose and fell quickly beneath its lace, and in her eyes was an expression as if she were haunted by some terrible dread.

" 'You, too, must leave here to-morrow,' she said, a moment later. 'If you remain, an attempt may be made to obtain possession of the documents. Therefore, leave Rome, and travel to some quiet, out-of-the-way French town. Remain there a week, and then take the box to London. For the customs examination you have only to unscrew this metal disc and allow them to smell. The thing is quite easy. The tin is above suspicion, for it is a traveller's sample, such as passes the frontier every day.'

"It had not been my intention to leave Italy just then, but in pursuance of her wishes I expressed my readiness to go, and half an hour later, when I had wished her a fond and lingering adieu, I carried the mysterious tin of petroleum to my room at the 'Grand', and sat for a long time gazing at the address in Warsaw which she had given me in case we did not meet.

"Her last words to me had been strange ones.

" 'As you are my friend, do not allow that box for one instant out of your possession. The secrets it contains are such as would startle Europe from end to end; but for the present they must be preserved or I must pay the penalty of their exposure. My life is, therefore, in your hands. . . .'

"Through several hours that night I sat thinking over this remarkable declaration, and wondering what could be the nature of the strange documents contained in that unsuspicious-looking case which bore the name of a well-known firm of oilrefiners. It was an ordinary square tin of petroleum such as is used in almost every household in France and Italy, and as I shook it I could hear the liquid bubbling.

"Next day, however, having called at the 'Quirinal' and ascertained that the woman I loved had gone, I too left Rome, and on the following night arrived at the quaint, old-world town of Carpenteras, in the hills behind Avignon, and a week later carried the mysterious box with me to London, where I placed it with my bankers for safety.

"That Dolores was enshrouded by some very remarkable mystery I felt confident from the very first moment we had met, but this was increased when, about a month after my return to London, I chanced to attend one of the Marchioness of Milford's balls at Milford House, and there in the drawing-room saw my well-beloved herself enter.

"Her costume of pale blue chiffon, trimmed with silver, was superb, and her diamonds the most magnificent I had beheld; but I stood gazing at her dumbfounded, for she was leaning on the arm of a man who was no stranger to me—her keen-faced servant, Ivan. The man, though bent and apparently decrepit, was well-dressed, and across his white shirt-front was the broad blue and white silken sash of some foreign order, while suspended at his neck was the glittering star of the Order of St. Andrew, one of the highest of Russian distinctions.

"Why, I wondered, should this man masquerade as a person of note amid that crowd of English statesmen and notables? Instinctively I disliked him, and held back to watch his movements. The pair were introduced by the Marchioness here and there, and were evidently regarded as persons of distinction. Presently, however, when dancing commenced, Dolores gave the first waltz to young Lord Kenmure, one of the Under-Secretaries, and at its conclusion stood for a moment alone. Quickly I approached her, and expressed pleasure at meeting her. But with a cold supercilious glance she regarded me with dignified surprise, then simply observed in broken English:

"'I am not in the habit of speaking with gentlemen to whom I have not had an introduction.' And she turned away, leaving me alone and discomforted. This rebuff crushed me, for I felt that all standing round had noticed how utterly I had been snubbed."

Hubert Hutton at this juncture placed down his pen and leaned back into his chair to rest.

This Dolores who had so cleverly masqueraded—could it possibly be his Dolores—Dolores Lubomirska?

CHAPTER XXI

THE TRUTH OF A TRAGEDY

THE dead man's story was certainly a curious one, and had evidently been written some years prior to his death.

The man engaged in deciphering it was all eagerness to read through to the end, but the process of reducing that jumble of letters and numerals was a long and very fatiguing one. So ingenious was the cipher that a treble calculation had to be made for every letter, and even though his man had half an hour ago announced that his luncheon was served in the tiny *salle-à-manger* beyond, he still remained absorbed in the work before him.

He took up his pipe, filled it mechanically, and having lit it, resumed his task, writing the continuation of the eccentric man's romance as follows:

"When walking slowly away, deeply puzzled over the curious determination of Dolores not to recognize me, I suddenly encountered a man who was an animated Debrett.

" 'Tell me, Fergusson,' I asked quickly, 'who's the woman in blue over there? See, she has just joined the old man who accompanied her.'

" 'That woman!' he answered. 'Why, don't you know? She's the Countess Dolores Lubomirska, lady-in-waiting to the Tsarina.'

" 'Dolores Lubomirska!' I gasped, remembering what I had read in the newspapers regarding her extraordinary beauty. 'And the man?' I asked.

" 'That is General Grinevitch, Governor-General of Warsaw—the best hated man in Poland, and one of the Tsar's principal advisers. Do you know them?'

"I nodded, tried to smile, and making an excuse left him, and returned to my hotel, deep in bitter thought that Dolores, already a wife, could never, alas! be mine. She had deceived me and refused to recognize me, yet, when I reflected upon all the facts and recollected the love-light in her clear eyes during those never-to-be-forgotten days at Rome, I refused to denounce her as altogether false and heartless. On that night when she had entrusted to me her secrets, she was indeed desperate. And had she not declared that her life was in my hands?

"It was this latter fact which induced me to keep the appointment I had made, and in accordance with my promise I took the mysterious tin, packed it securely in my large dressing-case, and on the fourth of January left for Poland, travelling by way of Ostend and Berlin to Alexandrowo, the Russian frontier. Here, after nearly forty hours of incessant travel, my passport was examined, the sample tin of petroleum unearthed, the quantity it contained carefully measured, and upon it I was compelled to pay twelve roubles duty.

"Then after many delays and a great show of officialdom on the part of the frontier guards and great-coated police, I was allowed to enter the train for Warsaw and proceed. The weather was cold, snow covered the ground, and the windows of the carriage were so obscured by ice that it was impossible to see outside. My only companion was a small wizened-face Russian woman, muffled in costly furs, whose countenance, half-hidden by her shuba and hood of fine wool, was decidedly ugly, and as my Russian vocabulary was limited, I did not venture any remark to her. Once or twice when I lifted my eyes from my book I detected her gaze fixed curiously upon me, but attributed this to the fact that I was an Englishman. The long hours dragged by slowly as we crawled across the limitless frost-bound plain, white beneath the bright moon and unrelieved by anything save a few clumps of high, dismal-looking pines. I glanced at my watch at last. It was nearly midnight. Therefore I gathered together my traps, in the happy knowledge that in a few minutes I should be at my destination, and should once again meet the woman I adored.

"I had turned from my companion to adjust the straps of my rugs when I was startled at hearing my name uttered, and turning quickly was astounded to find that my fellow-traveller, having cast off her furs, sat with her neat, well-dressed figure revealed. It was Dolores.

"'My disguise was evidently complete!' she exclaimed, laughing, at the same time stretching forth her hand and expressing thanks that I should have kept the appointment.

"'You, Dolores!' I exclaimed, amazed. 'I had no idea it was you. Your face——'

"'Yes. It is wonderful the changes a little theatrical "make-up" will effect in one's features. My maid can render my face old or young, just as she pleases. But you have the box there,' she added in a lower tone. 'I stood beside you when the customs officers examined it. They suspected nothing.' And she laughed lightly at the recollection of how ingeniously the tin had been constructed so as to deceive the prying officers at the *douane*. Then she added: 'I was growing anxious, for I feared lest, after a certain incident in London, you would forget your appointment with me.' And she fixed her luminous eyes calmly upon mine with unwavering glance.

"'Why did you refuse to acknowledge me, Countess?' I asked gravely.

"'Not Countess,' she protested hastily. 'Am I no longer Dolores to you?'

"'Yes, yes, of course!' I cried gladly, snatching up her small hand and imprinting upon it a passionate kiss. 'I still love you. I shall love you always.'

"'Ah, no!' she answered, sighing sadly. 'We must not love. When you know the truth you will no longer regard me with affection.' And before I had time to demand further explanation the train had come to a standstill, the door of the compartment opened, and a bearded Russian railway porter, in his heavy winter coat, stood before us, ready to do our bidding.

"In an instant, recognizing the Countess, he touched his cap, and said:

"'Your highness's carriage is waiting. I will call it.'

"Then we stepped out upon the snow-covered platform, shivering, and were soon afterwards driven away to the outskirts of the city.

"'You have performed for me a service for which I cannot sufficiently thank you,' she said presently, bending towards me with an affectionate gesture. 'Some day I will endeavour to repay you.'

"'I desire no repayment, Dolores,' I answered. 'You know how fondly I love you.'

"'Ah, yes. But I cannot love you in return. I am already married.'

"The carriage stopped suddenly, preventing her from finishing the sentence, and I found we were before the great palace of the Grand Duke Paul, which stood alone on the dreary snow-covered high-road, where only the telegraph posts marked the track.

"We alighted, but ere I had put foot upon the snow I found myself seized by two muscular men, while at the same moment Dolores shrieked:

" 'Ah! the police! We are lost. The Professor has done this!'

"Not an instant was allowed me for reflection, for I was hustled into a hired carriage apparently held in readiness, and, with an officer on either side of me, was driven away, not, however, before I had overheard my well-beloved in altercation with the Chief of Police. She defied him, declaring her immunity from arrest without an order of the Tsar himself, as she was one of the Imperial entourage.

" 'Ah, you will go to the mines soon enough, my pretty one!' I heard the man exclaim with a brutal laugh. Then I was driven off.

"That night, tired and hungry, I spent in a squalid police cell, and next morning was driven to the palace of the Government and ushered into a small room, where at a table sat the evil-faced man whom I had known in Rome as Ivan Ivanovitch, Dolores' servant.

"He was attired in the imposing white uniform of the Guard, his breast covered with medals and crosses, and as I entered he glanced up and gave a grunt of satisfaction. Before him stood the bright tin box.

"I bowed and began to complain of the extraordinary treatment I had received, when, with a low imprecation, he silenced me, and in obedience the three police officers who had accompanied me at once set to work upon the mysterious box, unscrewing the metal stopper, emptying the oil, and then, turning the empty case on end, commenced ripping open the tin with extreme caution by means of a small pair of sharp shears.

"Slowly they cut the metal around all four sides, being watched breathlessly by the General and myself, until suddenly the whole of the bottom was raised, and then, to my amazement, I saw, concealed in a narrow air-tight compartment and packed carefully in wadding, a small casket of repoussé silver such as ladies use upon their toilet-tables. Gingerly the police officials withdrew it, examined it minutely, and then handed it over to the scrutiny of an elderly, spectacled man in civilian attire, who felt its weight, and then, by means of a small chisel and with infinite care, removed its lid.

"Inside was a quantity of delicate mechanism. The silver trinket-box was nothing less than an ingeniously constructed bomb filled with explosive! . . .

"The General, fixing his keen eyes upon me said: 'This is a conspiracy against the person of his Majesty. To-morrow you start for Siberia.'

"At that instant one of the officials took up the opened bomb to examine it, when suddenly there was a frightful explosion which shook the building and caused the walls of the room to collapse and fall. I have a distinct recollection of witnessing a bright flash, blinding as lightning, pass close to the Governor's face, but in an instant I became stunned by the terrific force of the explosion, and choked by the dust. But only for a few moments. Then, recovering consciousness and extracting myself from the fallen masonry, I glanced around, and saw to my horror that all five men who had been my fellow-occupants of that room were terribly maimed, and were dead or dying. The limbs of all were shattered, while the evil face of General Grinevitch had been blown out of all recognition.

"Across my mind the thought flashed that by the explosion all who had held knowledge of Dolores' secret had been swept away. I alone remained uninjured. Therefore, I bent, squeezed myself through a crack in the wall, and found myself outside in a barren, snow-covered garden. Behind me I could hear the shouts of the excited crowd assembling in the street; but I rushed forward, brushing my clothes as I went, and soon gained the railway station. Within an hour after the explosion I had started on my long journey back to Paris.

"When safe on French soil, three days later, I wrote to Dolores, using well-guarded language, but to my letter received no reply. That my divinity was a Nihilist there was no room for doubt. Indeed, in the following spring we met again at Rome, and then she admitted to me that it had fallen to her to make an attempt on the life of General Grinevitch, the Governor-General, who, on account of his inhumanity and cruelty towards political suspects, and his autocratic power to send batches of persons to Siberia by administrative process, had been condemned to death. She, a lady-in-waiting to the Empress, had feared herself to introduce the bomb into Russia, and had, therefore, induced me to do so. Grinevitch had, however, obtained knowledge of the conspiracy and arrested me, only to meet with his death in the manner I had witnessed.

"During that season we often met, and frequently walked and dined together, but no further word of love I spoke to her. I now saw how mysterious were her actions, how desperate she was, and what a terrible and passionate enthusiasm possessed her whole being.

"One evening, in her private sitting-room at the 'Quirinal', I saw lying on the table a man's pair of white buckskin gloves, and, taking them up, inquired whose they were, and made a feint to put them on.

"In an instant she dashed towards me with a cry of terror, and snatched them from my grasp. I asked the reason, but she evaded my question. That night, after dinner, we discussed the political situation, and she spoke of the approaching death of the Tsar Alexander as if the date were fixed, declaring that it would be a glorious day, for Russia would then be free.

"We parted when the season waned. She returned with her servants to her husband's palace in Petersburg, and I set forth on my wanderings beyond the Caspian.

"Six months later, however, the whole civilized world was startled by the sudden and mysterious illness of the Tsar at Livadia, and a few days later Russia was plunged into mourning.

"On my return to Paris I received by post a report of the tragic event. In a spirit of exultation it stated that the Nihilists had succeeded in 'removing the autocrat' by simple means. In the finger of one of his gloves there had been placed a pin smeared with a deadly arrow poison, and that the laceration of His Majesty's finger had caused death.

"The postmark of the letter was Petersburg, and the fine angular signature was that of the Countess Dolores Lubomirska. . . .

"It will thus be seen that I was tricked by a clever and unscrupulous woman, who, although moving in the Court circle, was directly responsible for the death of the late Tsar Alexander. I alone know her secret, and it is written here so that he who reads after my death shall have knowledge of the truth. By association with her I became friendly with the

Professor Peter Lomonseff, the head-centre of the Terrorists, and soon became privy to his schemes. So cleverly, however, did the woman Lubomirska carry out her private vengeance against General Grinevitch, and afterwards against the Emperor himself, that even the Professor has never suspected her of revolutionary tendencies. On the contrary, all believe her to be entirely loyal, whereas she has been proved to be one of the most dangerous and unscrupulous women in Europe. Indeed, of late years Lomonseff has held her in dread, lest she may inform against him and cause his arrest. She has played the double game with extraordinary cleverness, more especially so since the death of her husband. Therefore, whoever succeeds in deciphering this narrative should hold the secret within himself, uttering it to no single person, until such time when Dolores Lubomirska shows herself antagonistic to the Party of the Will of the People. On that day this record of the truth should be presented in order to secure the condemnation which she so righteously deserves. . . .

"Written with my own hand at the Manor of Ailesworth in the county of Northampton, England, August the twelfth, 1896.

"Austen Leigh."

CHAPTER XXII

PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT

THE revelation was a startling one.

Leigh had actually been first drawn into the conspiracies of the Terrorists by the cunning of Dolores Lubomirska, a woman believed by the Nihilists themselves to be antagonistic to their plots. She had, he alleged, conceived and effected from motives of personal vengeance two of the most terrible coups, both of which had been attributed to the Terrorists.

And yet this woman still posed as a loyal subject of the Emperor!

The situation had become far more complicated than Hutton had imagined, for on the one hand he could not go to the Professor and denounce her without placing the documents before him and explaining the circumstances of his death, while on the other it seemed very likely that the woman's fiery jealousy being aroused, she would act quickly and give information to the police.

He was mechanically turning over the document he had transcribed when at the foot of the last folio he noticed a note that in the original had evidently been written in pencil, so faintly did photography reproduce it. This he at once deciphered, and found it to read:

> To whoever is successful in learning what is herein written be it known that I have in my possession the "Great Ishak". It is carefully hidden always, lest death should ensue. When I die it must be returned to Its lawful guardian, but it is my earnest hope that It may work no further evil in this world.
>
> A. L.

The Great Ishak! That footnote added to the mystery tenfold.

Had Hubert Hutton been present at the deathbed of the writer of that confession, he would have been aware how anxious he was as to its safety.

"The Great Ishak!" the dying man had cried with his last effort. "See! In there! Hide it!—hide it—or death!"

That strange, earnest supplication to Sylvia had puzzled the Milbournes, as well it might. Even to that day it was frequently mentioned in the family circle, while all endeavours to discover what the Ishak was had proved complete failures. A hundred guesses had been made, just as the reader of this narrative may have already hazarded, but all were equally wrong, and equally wide of the mark.

It was a profound enigma.

But the young Englishman was reflecting upon the double cunning of the woman who only the previous night had endeavoured to induce him to declare his love. For what reason? He rose, and pacing the room in feverish haste tried to discover what motive she could have for thus openly telling him that she loved him. Such a proceeding was surely an outrage on all the canons of the art of love. She had without shame, without even a blush upon her cheeks, confessed her love for him, and with such emotion that he had no doubt but that her affection—or rather let it be called caprice—was genuine.

He, however, knew her as a remarkable woman, and had, until the reading of the dead man's statement, attributed the whole scene to mere feminine caprice. But the record Leigh had made combined with what Lomonseff had told him showed plainly that behind that wild declaration of love and passion of tears was hidden some deep sinister motive.

That she had long ago entertained a hatred of Lomonseff was shown by Leigh's statement regarding his arrest, how she had declared the Professor had betrayed her. Yet if the head-centre of the Terrorists had believed her to be loyal to the Government, he could certainly not have secretly given information against her. while, on the other hand, if the attempt she was making upon Grinevitch was actually a Nihilist attempt, surely that arch-conspirator Lomonseff would say nothing. No. The whole narrative, exciting and interesting as it read, was a strange and unintelligible one. It was, however, plain that Leigh's chance acquaintance with Lubomirska in Rome led to his subsequent alliance with the Terrorists and his intimate acquaintance with the meek old Professor, who, deep in his palæographic studies among the musty parchments in the Imperial archives, had never been suspected of revolutionary tendencies.

He paused, and walking back to the writing-table turned over the remaining photographs. There were many of them—sufficient to keep him closely occupied for two whole days, he calculated. It was already past two o'clock, therefore he locked them away and passed into the adjoining room and ate his light luncheon alone, as was his wont.

His mind was full of his discovery. The key he held opened to him the whole of Leigh's secrets written there—secrets, indeed, which eventually proved to be of the greatest possible importance, and involving some of the strangest and most sensational circumstances outside the realms of fiction.

Presently he returned again to his sitting-room and resumed the work of deciphering the photographed documents.

The first half-dozen folios which occupied his attention were evidently a portion of the papers which Lomonseff had given into the deceased's charge. Why he should have bolted with them and hidden himself in an English village was utterly beyond comprehension. As far as Hutton could see there had been no motive for his concealment save that most of his actions were marked by an unusual eccentricity.

From the nature of the documents he saw that it was not surprising that the Professor was so deeply anxious as to their whereabouts. Assuredly if they ever fell into the hands of the Secret Police, the latter would discover that they had a haul such as they had never before made during their twenty years of striving in vain to stamp out the revolutionary spirit among the people. However regrettable it may be, police work in Russia with its evil system of espionage is utterly futile. Thousands upon thousands have been arrested or exiled to Siberia or Sakhalin, but the Government cannot close its eyes to the alarming fact that Nihilism steadily increases, and that the Terrorist wing is just as active as ever.

Those compromising documents showed it to be so. They revealed a state of things which, even to Hutton, well aware as he was of many secrets of the most far-reaching organization of modern times, was astonishing. Names were mentioned of persons high in society in Petersburg, men and women who were entirely unsuspected of revolutionary leanings, otherwise they would long ago have been banished to their estates or exiled beyond the Urals. Some of them he knew personally, and certainly he had never entertained the least suspicion that they were associated with that old decipherer of musty parchments so well known beside the Neva as "The Professor".

For more than an hour he searched the lists of names in order to find that of Dolores Lubomirska, but in vain. Even the crafty old Professor himself had never suspected her. The tragically sudden death of the Tsar Alexander III had always been a profound mystery in Russia as well as out of it. The Emperor, a man of iron constitution and remarkable physique, had travelled to the south in his usual health, and a few days later was seized with a sudden and mysterious illness. Doctors were summoned in haste, but almost before they arrived the Emperor expired.

The mysterious circumstances surrounding his death were kept secret, and the doctors officially declared that the sudden end was owing to a malady from which their august patient had long been suffering. This, however, was but a blind, and although it was believed throughout Europe that the White Tsar had really been assassinated, the means employed remained a mystery.

The Terrorists themselves who, had they been responsible for such an effective blow against the autocracy of the Romanoffs, would have been the first to boast and to declare that it was a further step towards freedom, officially denied having played any part whatsoever in the tragedy. In a letter addressed to the Tsarevitch they even deplored the death of Alexander, and at the same time implored the new Tsar to give his sanction to certain reforms which they enumerated.

Now, however, for the first time was the astounding truth revealed. The woman who had actually killed the Tsar was the Empress's favourite lady-in-waiting, the Countess Dolores Lubomirska!

And that very woman had only the previous night declared her love for him.

Hutton pondered deeply. It was certainly necessary, he decided, to again see Mrs. Milbourne and to learn further facts regarding her brother's life of seclusion, even though it might be extremely difficult to approach the subject without being compelled to give explanations. Indeed, it seemed to him that in order to avoid La Lubomirska, he should leave Paris without delay and return to England. With the Professor plotting in Paris and with Pauline arousing the jealousy of La Lubomirska, he saw himself hedged in by a network of complications, to escape which it would be necessary to leave the city of which he was so fond.

He took from the stationery-rack before him one of those convenient fifty-centime telegraphic cards used in Paris, and addressing it to Lomonseff, scribbled a few words of warning inside.

> I saw the Countess Lubomirska last night, and she has discovered that you are in Paris [he wrote]. She may give information to the bureau of Russian police, therefore I give you warning. We shall meet again very soon. H.H.

Then he sealed it, and sent it to the post office to be transmitted by the pneumatic tube. Truly the postal arrangements in this particular are in Paris far in advance of our messenger service of London.

It was nearly four o'clock, and he was still busy deciphering the official documents of the Terrorists, when his man tapped at the door and announced :

"Madame La Comtesse Lubomirska."

He sprang up, pushed the photographs and papers hurriedly into a drawer, smoothed his hair before the glass, and then gave permission to the man to show her in.

She swept into the room with a triumphant air, and he bowed before her without uttering a word. He could not imagine the object of her visit. She had been there before on rare occasions, but had always declared that the long flight of stairs fatigued her. That afternoon she wore dead black, a gown exquisitely made but of somewhat funereal appearance, the only touch of colour being a spray of lilies of the valley fastened in her rich, sable cape.

"Well ?" she said addressing him.

"Well ?" he said with equal curiosity.

"Ah ! I am not welcome—eh ?"

"You are always welcome in my home, Dolores," he answered with diplomatic suavity, for he was anxious to ascertain her motive in coming there after their distant parting of the previous evening. He could see that she was possessed by an agitation which she was unable to adequately conceal.

For a few moments she stood in silence before him. Then, of a sudden, she snatched up his hand, and, holding it, said in a low, trembling voice :

"Hubert, I have come to crave your forgiveness for my wild, foolish words last night. I was mad—mad! Can you forgive me? Can you let bygones be bygones, and treat me as though those words of mine had never been uttered? Tell me," she implored.

"Dolores," he said very seriously, "they are already forgotten. You were not yourself last night."

"No," she cried bitterly. "True, I was not myself. I shall never be myself now that I know you cannot love me."

"As I have already told you," he responded in the same meaning voice, "love between us is utterly impossible."

"And that is your decision?" she asked hoarsely. "Is it irrevocable? Can you never love me—never?"

"No, Dolores," he replied firmly, "I never can."

She stood still for a moment, her eyes cast down, her lips pursed, her small hands trembling.

"Ah!" she sighed. And then in a hard voice said: "I know your decision now, and I have the honour to wish you adieu once more."

"Adieu," he said, as her gloved finger-tips rested for an instant in his hand. Then after he had touched the bell and his man appeared, she swept by him, bowing coldly as she passed out.

But at that moment their eyes had met, and he saw in hers a look of open defiance such as he had never before seen there.

That the woman meant mischief he was absolutely certain.

CHAPTER XXIII

HUBERT HUTTON PAYS A CALL

Douglas Kenyon was surprised, but nevertheless highly gratified, when his intimate friend, Hutton, sent him a wire from King's Cross saying that he would be down at Stamford that same evening.

Since that terrible blow that had marred his happiness, he had developed into something of a misanthrope. Hitherto he had been extremely popular in the local society of that quiet, old-world Lincolnshire town, but since Nella's tragic end he had refused all invitations and had grown moody and morose. Therefore he welcomed the advent of Hutton with his cosmopolitan chatter, his amusing stories, and his witty gossip about men and things.

"Got sick of Paris, my dear fellow," Hutton laughed, as he entered the hall and gripped his old friend's hand, "so I thought I'd run over and spend a week or so with you. I know I'm always welcome—eh ?"

"Welcome ? Why, of course, Hubert," rejoined the other enthusiastically. "You know you are. I've been your guest in Paris lots of times, and put you to no end of bother, I know."

And after the man had divested the cosmopolitan of his travelling-coat, the pair entered the fine old panelled dining-room, to have a nip before dinner.

"Well, old chap," asked Hutton, in his cheery way, when they were seated that same night over their coffee and liqueurs, in the cosy room which served Kenyon as a den, "any news in this quarter ? Tell me," and as he lit a cigarette he watched the other's face across the flame.

"News ?" responded the young landowner. "There's never any news in this dead-alive hole."

Hutton smiled, saying : "No, Stamford always strikes me to be a place where no one ever stirs out, save on a market day. But how are they at Ailesworth ?" he added, for he had led up the conversation in an endeavour to find out something regarding the Milbournes.

"The same as ever, I believe," was his friend's rather sad reply. "When I go there, painful memories always return to me; therefore I have practically ceased visiting them. They quite understand the reason."

"Ah, of course," sighed Hutton sympathetically. "Neither of the other girls engaged yet, I suppose?"

"Sylvia's engagement with young Wingate, of Peterborough, has been broken off. You met him, I believe: a thorough young prig. Ethel has never fallen in love, and never will."

"The blue-stocking of the family!" he laughed, and then for a few moments remained thoughtful. Presently he went on: "I think I ought to call one day. It would only be a compliment. I suppose you wouldn't care to come?"

"No, thanks," was the reply. "You can have the dogcart any time you like, but you must really excuse me, old fellow. I quite agree that you ought at least to leave a card on Mrs. Milbourne. The Squire is away in Scotland, I've heard."

"Very well," Hutton said, pleased at his skill in bringing forward that very delicate subject. "I'll run over the day after to-morrow." And then their conversation drifted to idle subjects.

Although the men were intimate friends, Hutton had never grown sufficiently confidential to mention with distinctness any of his little affairs of the heart. Kenyon had often wondered at this, for an easy-going cosmopolitan of his friend's type was bound to be an admirer of women and perhaps a victim of them. But as he never invited discussion upon his own affairs, Kenyon studiously avoided prying into what, after all, did not concern him.

Their meeting, however, was gratifying to both. Kenyon, with the sun of his life for ever extinguished, had for weeks been longing for congenial company and, now that Hutton had suddenly come upon him, he intended that he should make a long stay, and have, as he termed it, "a good time".

On the second day of his visit, he went over to Ailesworth, as he had arranged, intent on seeing Mrs. Milbourne alone, and obtaining from her some further points concerning her eccentric brother. The mission was certainly a delicate one, and would, he knew, require considerable tact and diplomatic misrepresentation in order to accomplish it successfully.

Mrs. Milbourne and Ethel were out collecting for the village Clothing Club, and the only member of the family at home was Sylvia. As he followed the servant across the big square hall and past the foot of the old-fashioned staircase, recollections of the tragedy came back to him in a flash—how he had watched Kenyon's bride gaily ascend the stairs, and how, a few moments later, she had died in his arms. He had often wondered, as others had done, why the Milbournes had not left the house after the tragedy, but he supposed that the amount of land which the Squire possessed, and perhaps his financial position, rendered it impossible for him to quit the place.

It was certainly with a fluttering in her heart, and with just the faintest suspicion of a blush upon her cheeks, that Sylvia rose from her chair, to do the honours of her home.

"I'm awfully sorry mother is out," she exclaimed, when they had shaken hands and seated themselves, "but she'll be back for tea in half an hour. You'll stay, won't you ?"

He thanked her, and then, surprised to notice how she had improved in those few months, he settled himself to chat to her. When he had attended Kenyon's wedding, she still possessed the taint of the schoolroom, and was shy and awkward. But she had, it seemed to him, suddenly blossomed forth into early womanhood, and possessed an easy charm of manner and a lightness in conversation that, from the first, captivated him.

He allowed her to chatter on, while he sat back in the roomy old-fashioned arm-chair regarding her with critical wonder.

"You know," she was saying, "we've often inquired of Mr. Kenyon where you were. But he always tells us you are such a wanderer that he never knows where you are."

He smiled and admitted that such was the truth. Hitherto his movements had been very erratic. But he now intended to reform his ways, and was even contemplating settling down in England.

"Ah," she laughed, "you men who travel always come home again at last. My poor Uncle Austen did, and he was a great traveller."

"Yes, poor fellow. He was, as you know, a friend of mine, years ago. He died in this house, if I remember aright ?" he asked, quickly interested.

"Yes. His end was quite sudden, and I was with him when he breathed his last. Poor Uncle Austen ! He was so very eccentric that many people believed him to be a trifle mad."

"In what way was he eccentric?"

"Well, in every way," she said. "He used to spend his days in scribbling sheet after sheet of utterly unintelligible writing, and then, when he had finished it, it would not exactly satisfy him and he would burn the lot."

"How did you know that the papers were unintelligible? They might have been in some foreign language."

"Because, after his death, father had some of the papers submitted to experts in London, who could make neither head nor tail of them."

Hubert was silent. So the old Squire had endeavoured to learn his brother-in-law's secrets and had failed.

"About one of the documents he seems to have been very careful," she went on. "It was quite a small piece of old parchment, but it was concealed among his jewellery and other valuables, in his dispatch-box. Father had sent that one to some Professor at Oxford, I believe, but up to the present it has not been deciphered."

"And it is still at Oxford?" he inquired eagerly, for if Leigh himself took such care of it, it was surely dangerous to allow it to be passed openly from hand to hand.

"I heard father remark the other day that the Professor had passed it on to somebody else."

Then, after a brief pause, he said:

"Your mother told me that your uncle's death was peculiarly sudden. Did he retain his senses until the last?"

"Quite," she answered. "Indeed, there was an injunction which he gave me, with his dying breath, that is still a mystery and will, I suppose, ever remain so. When he knew that his strength was failing, he pointed suddenly across to the opposite side of his room. For some time the sounds he articulated were unintelligible, until at last he managed to say: 'See! The Great Ishak! Hide it!—hide it, or death!' Wasn't that a curious injunction?"

"Very curious," responded her visitor thoughtfully.

"The doctor says that his mind probably wandered at those last moments. Yet the curious fact is that, when he pointed, while uttering those warning words, he indicated a quaint old Arab tom-tom in which we afterwards found his will concealed."

"Remarkable!" ejaculated Hutton, well pleased at having been afforded an opportunity of questioning the actual witness of Leigh's death. Indeed, from the charming girl who had so suddenly come into his life since his first visit there he had gained more knowledge than he would probably have done from Mrs. Milbourne. "And have you all failed to discover what he meant by the Great Ishak?"

"Absolutely," was the reply. "Father, aided by his lawyer, has left no stone unturned in his inquiries, but what poor uncle meant is still an absolute enigma. You see, he was so very eccentric, that we have come to regard those words as mere dramatic eccentricity. And yet somehow I often think that a deeper meaning is attached to them than we are aware. What is your opinion?"

"I'm inclined to agree with you," he answered. "It's a mystery—a very remarkable affair indeed."

CHAPTER XXIV

SOME SUSPICIONS

WHEN Mrs. Milbourne returned, she greeted Hutton with pleasant surprise. With a matron's quick perception, she had recognized in him a man of high intelligence and well-balanced character, therefore she welcomed him warmly and expressed regret at her absence.

"But, of course, Sylvia has entertained you," she added laughing. "She has often wondered where you were."

The girl blushed, and Hubert noticed it. That gave him a key to the situation, and he knew that if he were really in love with her, as he somehow felt himself to be, his course was not so very difficult. He, however, was a cautious man where women were concerned. His platonic association with Dolores, and its perilous dénouement, was not the only lesson he had been taught upon the dangers of profound admiration. To himself he was fond of declaring that he had never really loved. He had admired and courted a dozen pretty women of various nationalities in his time, but not for one of them had he ever conceived the grand overwhelming passion, which is the culmination of true love. But Sylvia's open manner, her fresh English type of beauty, her sweet musical voice, her slim figure, and her graceful carriage, all charmed him. He admired her, more perhaps than he had admired any of those artificial foreign women at whose feet he had sat and whose hands he had kissed, but as for falling in love—well, that was entirely another matter.

Tea was brought in—a fine old Georgian silver service—and his charming little entertainer handed him a cup, saying:

"I recollect that, last time you were here, you told us that you had become so much of a foreigner that you never drank tea. This afternoon, however, you will break your rule, won't you? Besides, if you are returning to live in England, you must acquire the tea habit."

"What?" exclaimed Mrs. Milbourne. "Are you really going to settle in England again?"

"I am contemplating doing so," he replied. "At present I am undecided. My friend, Kenyon, is trying to persuade me, and to tell the truth, I've become rather tired of Paris. For a few years it is all very well, but in the end there's nothing like an English country life."

"I'm very glad to hear you say so," she exclaimed, laughing. "You are not quite the expatriated Englishman that I once thought you, for you still believe that, after all, there's no place like England, although everyone may abuse it."

Then the conversation turned upon the Paris plays and the Paris fashions, and Hutton, being a practised gossip, quickly interested them.

Tea was already over when the door opened, and Grace Fairbairn, still in her hat and jacket, entered. She wore a veil, and as she came in, in the gathering darkness, Hubert at first failed to recognize her.

"You know Miss Fairbairn," said Mrs. Milbourne. "An introduction is not necessary, is it?"

"Really," he said, rising and taking her hand. "Pardon me, but in the twilight I couldn't see your face."

Then he seated himself, and while the companion laughed, he became lost in thought.

Grace began to explain how she had driven into Peterborough in the governess car to buy some music and do a little shopping. She had met this person and that, and had, with a woman's keen scent for anything approaching gossip, learnt several tit-bits regarding their neighbours.

Every cathedral town is a centre of scandal, and certainly Peterborough was no exception. The intimate domestic arrangements of everyone were known, from that of the Bishop's wife at the Palace, down to the pompous and buxom spouse of the local butcher-alderman.

Hutton sat listening to Grace Fairbairn's chatter, which was evidently of the greatest interest to the others, and when at length the lamp was brought in, he fixed his gaze upon her countenance and regarded her with rather curious reflections.

On the day of his presence at the wedding feast, he had taken but little notice of her, save to satisfy himself that she was passably good-looking and possessed a neat figure; but to-night, as she sat beneath the high standard lamp, with its big yellow shade, he photographed every feature of her countenance upon his memory.

He crossed the room, and seating himself near Sylvia began to chat with her. Her outspoken frankness amused him, and even though he scouted the idea when he had calmly put it to himself, he was in love with her. Indeed, it was the girl's charming presence that induced him to linger there long after the hour when, according to the conventional etiquette of calling, he should have taken his departure. She had come upon him as a perfect revelation, and, as he talked to her, she, on her part, felt that this man who had been so slyly hinted at by Grace was actually attracted towards her.

This gratified Sylvia's vanity; hence the conversation developed into a mild flirtation on the part of both.

Presently Grace Fairbairn rose and left the room to divest herself of hat and jacket, and when she had gone, he turned to Sylvia, saying in a tone quite uninterested:

"I really didn't recognize Miss Fairbairn when she came in. I suppose it was on account of the veil. Spotted net makes such a difference to feminine features."

"Do you like veils?" she asked.

"Ah!" exclaimed Mrs. Milbourne, who had overheard. "Every man's answer to that question is most interesting to a woman. Come now, Mr. Hutton, tell us your candid opinion."

"Well," he laughed, "there are veils and veils. One must discriminate between the terrible crape which Paris decrees must be worn for mourning, and ordinary veil for hair-fixing purposes."

"Really," laughed Mrs. Milbourne, "you are waxing quite philosophic on the subject. Are you pro-veil or an anti-veil?"

"Oh, pro-veil, certainly," he responded. "I consider that a piece of fine net, without those ugly patches of chenille which so often hideously disfigure a pretty countenance, improves a face, rather than otherwise."

Ethel, who was one of those girls who hated all the foibles of feminine attire, and who wore the same sailor hat, with black ribbon, during the summer, and in winter a felt one of the same shape, took no part in the idle conversation.

She had never worn a veil, she remarked, and knew nothing about them.

"Ethel goes in for purely bucolic beauty," laughed her sister in derision. "Her nailed boots are the admiration of the neighbourhood."

"Sylvia," cried her mother, sharply reproving her, "how can you say such a thing! It's most unladylike to criticize your sister in that manner."

"Well," pouted the young girl, "it's the truth, mother, isn't it?"

Ethel frowned, rose stiffly, and left the room without a word. She was used to Sylvia's ridicule, but seldom attempted any repartee.

Almost immediately after she had gone, there was a tap at the door, and the coachman entered, for, having been sent on a message by his mistress, he had received a verbal reply.

"Well, Clipson, what did Mrs. Prentice say?" asked Mrs. Milbourne, as the man stood in the doorway, hat in hand.

"She said she'd finish the needlework this evening, ma'am, and that she'd bring it home in the morning," was the man's reply.

To Hutton, the man's voice sounded distinctly familiar, and he glanced behind him. The man was standing somewhat in the shadow, but nevertheless his clean-shaven features showed distinctly. It was a rather strongly marked countenance, pitted slightly across the brow with smallpox marks—a peculiar face, with a narrow forehead and heavy jaws. No second look was necessary. Hutton was convinced that the countenance of the keen-featured, middle-aged man was familiar, and sat glaring at him as though he saw an apparition.

"Is that your coachman, Mrs. Milbourne?" he inquired, when the man had closed the door and retired.

"Yes, that's Clipson, a most excellent fellow. Why?"

"Oh, nothing!" he laughed. "I am a student of physiognomy, and his face struck me as that of an unusually intelligent man."

"He is," declared Sylvia. "He's the best servant we have."

"Good servants are hard to find nowadays," he remarked. "How long has he been with you?"

"Oh, about eighteen months, I think," replied Mrs. Milbourne. "He came to us out of Shropshire."

"With good recommendations?"

"Poor Austen, who always acted the good Samaritan to everyone in distress, knew something of him and recommended him."

Hutton had guessed as much.

"And so he came to you after Mr. Leigh's return to England to live with you?"

"Yes," she replied. "But why are you so interested in him?" she inquired.

"Oh, mere curiosity," he laughed airily. "It seems so strange that a man who, from his face and speech, is a man of culture and refinement, should become a coachman."

"Yes," she said, "we've often remarked that. He's a most superior fellow, and was devoted to poor Austen. He was out driving us on the night of my brother's death, and his grief, when he heard the bad news, was unbounded. I have always had an idea that he had been greatly indebted to Austen in years gone by, because he was so attached to him."

Mrs. Milbourne's statement threw an entirely new light upon the situation—one that Hubert Hutton had never dreamed. It was fortunate, indeed, that he had encountered this man known as Clipson, for in combination with the presence of Grace Fairbairn in that household, it placed in his hand a key to that most remarkable and complicated enigma.

CHAPTER XXV

A TRIP TO TOWN

During the several weeks of Hubert's visit to Kenyon, he was frequently over at Ailesworth, for now he admitted to himself that he had actually fallen in love with Sylvia, and, although no word of affection had passed between them, he nevertheless felt that she was not entirely averse to his attentions.

Hutton paid his visits to Ailesworth with a dual purpose—to see the girl who had entirely captivated him, and likewise to keep an eye upon the two persons in that household who had fallen beneath his suspicion. Since his first visit there, in the capacity of Douglas Kenyon's best man, he had learnt many facts that were astounding. One thing he had proved, and that was that Ailesworth Manor, the quiet home of the Milbournes, was a house of mystery.

So he continued to go there on every excuse, and very frequently at Mrs. Milbourne's invitation. Both girls were fond of fishing, so he often accompanied them to the likely spots along the Nene, and spent long spring days in the meadows, at that time of year golden with buttercups.

In the third week of May, Mrs. Milbourne, Sylvia, and Grace Fairbairn, went on a long-arranged visit to some intimate friends near Durham, leaving Ethel, who had excused herself, at home with the Squire. Hutton, just at the same time, accompanied Kenyon to London, and the pair spent a very merry fortnight, for the season was at its height, and both men did not lack friends.

One morning, after Mrs. Milbourne and Sylvia had been absent nearly two weeks, the old Squire, on opening his letters at the breakfast-table, exclaimed to Ethel, who was pouring out tea:

"Ah, my dear, I see I must go to London to-morrow for a couple of days. But you can't be left here alone; you must come with me. A short stay in Town will do you good. We'll go to a theatre—eh?"

"I shall be quite happy here alone," his daughter replied.

But her father said: "You must come with me. I can't have you moping here. It isn't good for you. We'll go to the 'Métropole'; and while I'm busy with my stockbroker, you can go out and do some shopping or something. Your mother, I recollect, was telling you that she intended to buy several things when she went to London. You can get them for her. Then we can dine, and spend the evening at one of the plays. I'll look in the paper presently, and see what appears to be the most popular thing on just now."

"Very well, dad," said the rather plain-looking girl. "If you insist upon it, I'll go. But really I consider it quite an unnecessary expense."

"Expense be hanged!" declared the Squire. "While your mother and Sylvia are away, we'll have a little fling in Town on our own account. Wouldn't Sylvia be delighted to have been in this—the little puss!"

And so the trip was arranged, and before noon the Squire had secured, by telegraph, two stalls at the "Haymarket" for the following night.

"Take your best evening frock with you," was his injunction, when, later, she went to pack her trunk. "You know that to dine at the 'Métropole' you ought to look nice."

"My frocks are never so nice as Sylvia's, so I don't take any interest in them, you know," was her reply.

"Then you ought to, my dear," was the old fellow's answer. "Every woman should be versed in the art of looking her best. Look at your mother. She's a model woman—spends next to nothing on her dresses, and always looks nice. It's a marvel to me how she does it."

"Ah!" the girl laughed. "Mother has such good taste, so has Sylvia, but I have none. Whenever I do my church decoration, or try and invent something that I think artistic, everyone pokes fun at it. It's downright disheartening."

"No, no," exclaimed her father encouragingly, "you shouldn't view matters in that light, my dear. I know quite well that your tastes don't lie in the direction of personal adornment. You prefer study and social work, two very commendable pursuits for a woman. Only—and I'm bound to tell you quite plainly, my girl—only I fear you are growing just a trifle too old-fashioned."

"That's what everyone says," and her father saw that tears were welling in her eyes. "I know the reason. It's because I'm not pretty. It's because I'm awkward and ugly."

And she suddenly burst into tears.

"No, no," declared the old Squire, caressing her, and seeking to console her. "No, Ethel, my dear, it isn't that. You are quite as good-looking as the majority of other girls of your age. It's your manner that is prim and old-maidish, and which causes some of the evilly disposed to ridicule you. Come, dry your eyes, my dear, and to-morrow we'll have a few hours of amusement and change. We'll go up by the luncheon-car, at half-past twelve, and be at King's Cross about two. Then I can drive you to the hotel, and can be in the City in plenty of time to do my business. Come, no more tears. Go up and pack, and recollect—look your best, just to please your old father."

And the hale old fellow laughed, as he patted her cheeks, and brought a smile back to her lips.

When, on the following day, they had arrived at King's Cross by the Leeds corridor express, which is, by the way, one of the most comfortable trains in England, their luggage was placed on a four-wheeler, and the Squire gave the man an order to drive down to the Hotel Métropole, where it was his habit to stay.

They were already proceeding along the Euston Road, when, of a sudden, an idea occurred to him.

"Why, Ethel!" he exclaimed, "Major and Mrs. Langdon are staying at that big new hotel in Bloomsbury Square, the Hotel Blenheim. He wrote to me last week saying that they had quarters there for a month, and were extremely comfortable. Why not take them by surprise and go there?"

"A most excellent idea, father," was his daughter's reply, and then the Squire put his head out of the window and directed the driver to take them to the newly built colossal caravanserai that had, only a few months before, sprung up on the site of one side of Bloomsbury Square.

When they stepped from the cab, father and daughter found the appointments of the hall, with its huge fireplaces and splendid tessellated pavements and its artistic decoration, even more bright than those of the "Métropole" or "Victoria", their favourite stopping-places. They were informed at the reception bureau that Major and Mrs. Langdon were stopping there, but were out at the moment. Therefore they engaged rooms on the fourth floor and went up to take possession of them.

Ethel's was a small but pretty apartment, as far as hotel rooms go, with a balcony overlooking the great green square, and sufficiently high up to be away from the noise and bustle of the traffic. But it was already half-past two, and the Squire had an appointment in Coleman Street at three, so he bade a hasty farewell to her, and, arranging to meet her in the ladies' drawing-room at half-past six for dinner, he gave her four sovereigns in order that she might do some shopping, and left.

She stood leaning over the balcony until his hansom had disappeared, then she returned inside her room, straightened her hair, drew on a fresh pair of gloves, and wrote a couple of lines upon her visiting-card to leave for Mrs. Langdon on her return.

At first she hesitated where to go, but having deposited the card at the bureau, she entered a hansom and drove to Regent Street, where she made some purchases for her mother, and afterwards strolled along to indulge in that particular feminine hobby, the loitering before shop-windows. Even she, who took no interest in the fashions, was, like most others of her sex, always fascinated by the windows of Regent Street, and the host of novelties displayed there. Having walked as far as Oxford Circus, she turned into Oxford Street and continued westward as far as that long row of drapery shops known to Londoners as "Evans's." She halted before the window and, standing among the crowd, inspected some cheap "lines" in lace therein displayed. But while doing so she was startled at hearing a man's voice at her elbow, pronouncing her name.

Turning quickly, she found herself face to face with Hubert Hutton, in silk hat and frock-coat, the regulation Town kit.

"Why, Miss Milbourne!" he cried, as he lifted his hat, "this is indeed a surprise to find you wandering alone in London! I was passing, when I thought I recognized your face among the crowd. At first I ridiculed the idea and went on. But somehow, being quite certain it was you, I turned back. Whatever brings you to Town alone?"

"I'm not alone," laughed the prim plain-faced girl. "Father is with me. He had to come up on business to-day and would bring me. Mother and Sylvia are up in Durham, you know."

"Yes, I had a letter from your sister the other day. She seems to be enjoying herself immensely." Then he added: "But may I walk a little way with you? I have nothing particular to do."

"Oh, with pleasure. I'll be glad of a companion. I'm going over to Bayswater." And they strolled, side by side, in the direction of the Marble Arch.

She explained to him where they were staying and what had induced them to depart from their usual habit of going to the "Métropole", when suddenly he asked:

"Where is Miss Fairbairn?"

"With mother. The Millers invited her."

"And weren't you invited?"

She laughed.

"Oh, yes," she said, "but I hate big house-parties, so I excused myself."

"Perhaps a flying visit to Town, like the one you are making, is, after all, more pleasant."

"I don't care for London much," she said. "I'm essentially a bucolic person, I fear. At least, all the family give me that character."

Then, in the course of their conversation, she told him how the Squire had arranged for them to meet for dinner and go to the "Haymarket" afterwards.

"I've a very good mind to go to the 'Haymarket' to-night," he said. "In that case I may see you both there. I haven't yet seen 'Nell Gwynne.'"

"All right," responded the girl. "I'll look out for you. I shall tell father you are coming, and probably we will all have supper together."

"Oh, that would be a most merry meeting," he said. "I'd be delighted. Kenyon is dining to-night with some people I don't know."

"Poor Mr. Kenyon!" she exclaimed sympathetically; "he doesn't seem the same as he used to be."

"Ah! Miss Ethel," his friend replied, "he's very much altered. I fear he'll never get over the terrible blow. He was absolutely devoted to your poor sister."

Then a silence fell between them, and they walked together along the crowded pavement without exchanging any word.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN WHICH ETHEL IS CONFIDENTIAL

SUDDENLY Ethel turned to her companion and, in a confidential tone, exclaimed:

"Do you know, Mr. Hutton, I have always suspected that you have formed a private theory regarding poor Nella's death. From the very first, you have appeared to have interested yourself in the tragic affair, even when the police gave it up as a mystery beyond solution."

"Yes," he said, "it is true that I've taken a good deal of interest in that strange affair, but as regards my theory, I fear I'm just as wide of the mark as the police have been."

"Well," she went on, "I'm glad to get this opportunity of speaking with you in private. Mother told me long ago of your intense anxiety regarding my Uncle Austen's papers, and I must confess that it aroused my curiosity."

"Why? Your uncle was an intimate friend of mine, and knowing that he had in his possession papers of considerable value, I naturally explained to your mother the necessity of placing them under lock and key. She fortunately took my advice."

"Why fortunately?"

"Well, because if they had not been in a place of safety, there is no doubt that an attempt would have been made, by certain persons whom the papers concern, to get hold of them and destroy them."

"That's very interesting," she said. "Were the papers of such grave importance as all that?"

"They are the very greatest source of anxiety to several people," he responded, with an air of mystery. "Indeed, so desperate are the persons in question that if they were not in the Safe Deposit Company's care at this moment, there is no doubt that an attempt would be made to secure them. And I may add that the persons are not people to stick at trifles."

"Well, in that case," she remarked, "it is fortunate that you gave us warning, or burglary, or something equally dreadful might have happened. But," she went on, "the extraordinary circumstances of poor Nella's death still remain a profound mystery. You were practically there the whole time, yet you saw no one."

"Ah," he said, "that's just the mystery. Your poor sister was struck by some hand practised in the art of assassination, I'm inclined to believe. I went rather more thoroughly into the details, I think, than the police, and I came to the conclusion that whoever struck the blow did so from a motive of sudden revenge."

"But Nella never had an enemy. She was most popular everywhere."

"One never knows who is one's real friend or secret enemy," he said gravely, for a moment lost in deep thought.

"Well," she exclaimed, "I consider that the police have acted absurdly. They bungled from the very beginning, and then coolly admitted that they were incompetent to explain the tragic affair, and were so far 'at sea' that they could not entertain suspicion of anybody."

"The police are sometimes at fault in such cases," he remarked. "You see, they were not in possession of the facts as I was. I had more to work upon."

"And what have you really discovered ?" she asked eagerly. "Do tell me, Mr. Hutton. I feel somehow that you have learnt much more regarding the tragedy than you have ever admitted."

"No," he responded evasively. "It is true, Miss Milbourne, that I have been very busy of late making inquiries ; but although the result has not been altogether unsatisfactory, it has, I regret, only served to increase the mystery rather than to lessen it."

"What, then, you have found features in the affair which are more unaccountable ?"

"Many that are absolutely enigmatical. At present I can distinguish no connection with what, to me, appeared to be the main points."

Then, after they had paused to look into a jeweller's shop, they walked on again, and he said suddenly :

"I wanted to ask you one or two questions about Clipson."

"Clipson ?" she said quickly. "Do you really suspect him ?"

"No, on the contrary," was his reply, "your uncle seems to have had perfect confidence in him, and since he has been in your mother's employ he has proved himself a model servant, has he not?"

"Yes, he is most devoted to us," she said, not, however, without a slight hesitation which he was quick to notice.

"But you don't like him? Now tell me the truth."

"Well, I certainly do not like him as well as Ward, our old coachman, who died; that may be because I had known Ward ever since I was a child, when he used to teach me how to ride my pony."

"But what is your objection to Clipson? Is it his manner, his personal appearance, his action, or what? You are a woman, Miss Milbourne, and your powers of penetration are much more acute than mine. If you will explain your feelings towards him minutely, it will be of the greatest service to me."

"Well, really, I hardly know how to describe them," she said, after a brief pause. "I admit that I don't like the fellow. All the others sing his praises, just as Nella used to do, but to me he was just the opposite. I am sure he doesn't like me, for he knows that I penetrated his character."

"And how do you read him?"

"My opinion is that he is masquerading," she answered; "for a long time past I have watched him narrowly, and have seen that he's far too superior to have always been a coachman. I have overheard him speaking with the other servants sometimes, and have noted his authoritative and superior manner with them."

"What account does he give of himself?" Hutton asked, adding: "I should have asked your mother all this, but I feared to arouse her suspicions or cause her unnecessary worry. You understand?"

"Oh, exactly," Ethel replied. "Well, the fellow says he was coachman to a Mr. George Miles, a merchant who lives somewhere in Kensington, and afterwards in the service of the Marquis of Weldon and of Lady Thorhaugh. I had the curiosity to write to the latter and certainly found that he had not lied. He had been in her service for a few months in 1897, and her ladyship recommended him as a most trustworthy man."

"Then his story will hold water," remarked Hutton, rather surprised.

"Only in that particular," she said quickly. "The Secretary to the Marquis of Weldon replied curtly that no such person had ever been in his lordship's employ. That fixed the exemplary Clipson in lie number one. After very carefully approaching the subject one day, when he was driving me alone in the dogcart, I obtained from him the address of Mr. George Miles, to whom I also wrote. The letter was returned to me by the Post Office, marked 'Unknown'."

"Then in that case Clipson is proved to have been romancing," he remarked. "But, further than that, what circumstances have occurred that you've viewed with suspicion."

"Why, Mr. Hutton, I never spoke of any circumstances!" she exclaimed in surprise. "You really seem to be a thought-reader."

"I have only made deductions from what you have told me," he said. "You dislike Clipson and have some reason for doing so."

"I certainly do mistrust him, and it annoys me to hear mother and Sylvia sing his praises so incessantly. I think they really do so only because he was so strongly recommended by Uncle Austen."

"Ah, tell me how the man came to enter your mother's service," he urged, interested.

"Well, when Ward died, Uncle Austen at once said he knew a most excellent man, and described him as a paragon of all virtues. He was then in a situation, but, at my uncle's suggestion, he gave notice and came to us. I did not like him from the first, for it was quite apparent to me that he was on much more friendly terms with my uncle than a mere coachman should be. Indeed, he used often to go upstairs at Uncle Austen's invitation, and remain with him, in his room, talking. It was that fact that gave me the idea that he was masquerading, combined with a conversation which one afternoon I overheard. I was passing the door of my uncle's room, which was ajar, when I heard voices raised as in heated discussion, and I distinguished that they were those of Uncle Austen and Clipson. But they were not speaking in English. It was some foreign language, and the coachman was talking just as fluently as my uncle was!"

"That's remarkable," observed Hutton, his brows knit in deep reflection. "You haven't any idea what language it was, I suppose?"

"No, I can't distinguish French from any others. I never learnt a foreign tongue at school, as did Sylvia. I suppose I thought that, for an unimportant person like myself, it was unnecessary."

"Oh, it's a pity you could not have distinguished in what language they were speaking. But has this Clipson ever since given any sign that he could speak a foreign language ?"

"No, I asked him once, in a casual way, if he knew any French, to which he replied, 'No, miss ; I don't know any foreign language.' "

"Which was a distinct lie—eh ?"

"Most certainly," she said. "I waited outside my uncle's door a full couple of minutes and most distinctly heard all that passed. Uncle was apparently insisting that Clipson should do something that he stoutly refused to do. This caused Uncle Austen to give vent to a torrent of words, and to strike his table, to emphasize them."

"Then the two men quarrelled ?" Hutton remarked. "That seems very curious on the face of it. Did the quarrel last long ?"

"No, I saw them talking together quite affably on the following day."

"And how long was this before your uncle's death ?"

"About a week. Not more," she answered, and then added : "Ah ! I never thought of that. Do you anticipate that Uncle Austen did not die by natural means ?"

"I was not present," he answered, "therefore I give no opinion. It is, however, a very peculiar circumstance that your uncle should die suddenly within one week of the quarrel with the man, although the coachman was apparently one of his intimate friends."

"Yes," she said, after a few moments' reflection, "I quite agree with you ; it is."

"Well, if I were you, I would contrive to watch him, Miss Ethel, and if anything suspicious occurs report to me. Will you ?"

"Certainly. It is entirely a matter between ourselves."

"Yes, don't mention your suspicions to a soul. Recollect that I am trying to solve the mystery of your sister's death, just as you are doing."

He glanced at her as he uttered those words, and saw that, being warm with walking, she had unfastened her sable necklet, and there was displayed beneath an antique piece of jewellery, evidently of Byzantine workmanship, which served to clasp the collar of her jacket. Of most delicate formation, it was in the form of a double cross, while in the centre was set a curious piece of uncut grey stone, about half an inch square, which gave it the appearance of some relic of one or other of the saints.

"Excuse me," he said, bending towards her, "what a very uncommon clasp you have there !"

"Yes," she replied, "isn't it peculiar ? It was among Uncle Austen's jewellery he had collected abroad. Mother gave it to me a few months ago."

"Well," he said, examining it as closely as he could in the open street, "if I were you, I wouldn't walk about London with such a very valuable ornament openly displayed. Some thief might be attracted by it and snatch it off in the crowd. Put your fur over it again," he urged quickly.

She did as he suggested, saying :

"Oh, I don't think it is of such very great value. The diamonds in it are, I've been told, of the first water. But what the centre stone is nobody has been able to make out."

He was silent for some minutes. Then he said ambiguously :

"If you took my advice, Miss Ethel, you wouldn't wear it often. It may not appear to you to be of value, but I have no doubt it is worth a very considerable sum, and to wear jewels openly in London streets is always dangerous."

"Oh, very well," replied the girl airily, "I'll take your advice, for I've no desire to lose it," and she readjusted her fur so as to conceal it.

Having walked with her up the Edgware Road, to the corner of Chapel Street, he put her in an omnibus, to go to Miss Hurst's, the family dressmaker, who lived in Talbot Road, Bayswater, and, promising to go to the "Haymarket" that night, bade her adieu.

They parted at a quarter to four, for he glanced at his watch as he turned to retrace his steps to the Marble Arch.

At ten minutes to six, Mrs. Langdon, having returned to the hotel with her husband, found Ethel's card, and noting the number of the room, went along the corridor and tapped loudly at the door.

She felt certain that she heard a distinct sound of movement within, still there was no response.

"Ethel! It's me!" she cried, in her usual cheery voice, for she was one of those merry, middle-aged women who take life very easily. "Open the door."

But the movement had suddenly ceased and all was silent. Four times she rapped, but there was no response.

"Strange!" she said to herself, as she turned reluctantly away. "I'm positive there's someone in there—absolutely positive!"

CHAPTER XXVII

ANOTHER MYSTERY

At half-past six, old Mr. Milbourne, having dressed, descended to the ladies' drawing-room and glanced around. But, finding that Ethel had not arrived, he strolled along to the smoking-room and took a sherry and bitters, to promote an appetite. His business had been a complete success, and the hale old fellow was brimming over with good-fellowship. He was a man whom you would point out as a country squire among a million of his fellows. He could never disguise the fact that he was a countryman, and never wanted to.

As a general rule, he hated London and everything appertaining to it. His hunting was his hobby in life, and to miss a meet always caused him sore chagrin.

Having tossed off his appetizer, he glanced hurriedly through an evening paper, and then strolled back across the hall to the drawing-room, but his daughter had not arrived.

He glanced at his watch impatiently and saw that it wanted twenty minutes to seven. Already the gong had sounded and the guests had filed into the table d'hôte room, where the orchestra had just struck up a popular French waltz.

"The little puss is late!" he grumbled to himself. "Out shopping, and late in returning, I suppose. Well, I'll give her another ten minutes. Women always take such a time to put on their frills and things."

So he flung himself upon a divan in the big empty room, and taking up an illustrated paper, glanced casually at the pictures. At heart he was just a little annoyed at Ethel, for he dearly loved a good dinner, and he had promised himself a treat that night. He had looked at the menu posted up outside the room, and had seen several dishes that were his particular favourites. But, with a gourmet's refined taste, he shuddered at the thought of them warmed up.

He waited, waited, still waited until at last the great clock in the hall chimed seven. Then he decided that it was time he went upstairs to look for his daughter.

Before he did so he inquired at the bureau if No. 736 was in, and was told that she was. Her key had been taken more than an hour ago. Therefore he entered the lift and, a few moments later, knocked at the door

As to Mrs. Langdon, there was no reply. He listened, but could distinguish no movement within.

Several times he repeated his summons, calling his daughter by name, but to no avail. Then at last a passing chambermaid came to his assistance, saying:

"Can I open the door for you, sir?"

"Yes," cried the old man anxiously; "my daughter is in here, and I fear she has been taken unwell or something."

The girl opened the door with the master-key on her chain, but all was dark within, for the venetian blinds had been drawn. She put her hand to the door lintel, and the next instant the electric lamps shed their light over a scene of amazing and hopeless confusion.

Both the Squire and the girl drew back with ejaculations of horror and astonishment, for it was too plain that some violent and terrible scene had been enacted there.

The girl screamed and rushed out into the corridor, calling for assistance, while the Squire stood for a moment absolutely rooted to the spot.

In a moment half a dozen persons, alarmed by the cries, rushed in, and the spectacle which presented itself was indeed a bewildering one.

The room was in great disorder. The travelling trunk stood open and its contents were strewn about, while on the floor, beside the bed, lay Ethel Milbourne.

"My God!" cried the old Squire, as he fell on his knees beside the prostrate girl, and took her head in his hands. "Ethel! Speak! Tell me what's happened!"

But there was no response.

A visitor, a white-bearded elderly man, who had been attracted by the hubbub, was present among the crowd and made his way forward.

"Pardon me, sir. I'm a medical man: perhaps I may be of assistance," he said.

"Yes," cried the Squire, in despair. "Look at her. Tell me—tell me the worst."

The doctor, whose name it afterwards appeared was Jelf, a family practitioner living in Leamington, knelt down and, after examining the girl's face intently, moved her arms and listened to her respiration.

She was only half-dressed, her walking skirt and bodice having been removed and flung upon the bed, prior, it seemed, to assuming her evening gown, which lay spread out, ready to put on.

The little knot of excited onlookers awaited the doctor's verdict as he made a careful examination. Then, at last, came the fatal announcement:

"I regret to say, sir, that the young lady is dead."

"Dead!" Mr. Milbourne wailed. "Dead! She can't be. My poor Ethel can't be dead! Impossible!"

"Is she your daughter?" inquired the doctor.

"Yes," groaned the old Squire.

"I think that this room should be cleared," said the doctor, turning to the crowd of chambermaids and visitors. "Will someone please inform the manager."

"He's already on the way up, sir," replied the head-chambermaid. "I telephoned to the office at once."

Indeed, almost as the words left her mouth, a short, dapper little man, with a bald head and a fussy manner, entered. He was an Italian, but spoke English excellently.

"There's an unfortunate occurrence here," exclaimed the doctor, addressing him. "Will you kindly request everyone to leave the room—all save this gentleman here," indicating the Squire.

"Why, why, why?" began the manager excitedly, as he noticed the prostrate girl. "What has happened?"

"We cannot tell," Dr. Jelf replied. "I wish to be alone to make a further examination."

At a polite word from the hotel manager, the room was cleared and, when the door was closed, the three men stood for a moment in silence.

Then the old Squire buried his face in his hands and sobbed bitterly.

"My daughter! My poor daughter!" he moaned, "and it was I who invited you to come here with me! I shall never forgive myself—never!"

Meanwhile, the hotel manager and the doctor were conversing in undertones, and a few moments later they cleared the bed of the articles of female attire spread there, and together lifted the dead girl upon it.

It was then only, for the first time, that the doctor noticed a peculiar line around the delicate white throat. It was narrow, livid and swollen. But its discovery at once accounted for the distorted condition of the features, which were indeed so altered that at first the Squire had scarcely recognized her.

"The truth is quite plain," he said to the manager, in a low voice, "the young lady has been murdered."

"Murdered!" cried the excitable Italian.

The Squire overheard it, and turned quickly.

"What!" he gasped, "has my poor Ethel been murdered, just as Nella was! Ah, this is too terrible indeed!"

"Did another daughter of yours actually meet with the same tragic fate?" inquired Jelf quickly.

The old man nodded. His heart was too full for mere words.

"You see there are evident traces of strangulation," the doctor pointed out, and, a moment later, glancing on the floor where the dead girl had been lying, he noticed something white, and picked it up.

It was a piece of a woman's silk stay-lace.

"Ah," he said, "this tells us the truth! The young lady was, no doubt, standing, quite unconscious of danger, when this was slipped over her head and drawn so tightly and suddenly around her throat that she was unable to cry out. Only a clever assassin could have used this so successfully. Besides, on finding his victim dead, he removed the lace, evidently intending to carry it away with him. In the hurry of his flight, he apparently dropped it."

"Then we must inform the police, if it is really a case of murder," observed the manager reluctantly. "You see that a case of this sort greatly injures the reputation of any hotel, and more especially that of a new one. I don't know what my directors will say if the affair gets into the papers. It's an advertisement of the very worst sort for us."

"Well, the police must know, and there's bound to be an inquest," the doctor said. "No medical man could give a certificate of natural causes in face of that mark of strangulation."

"Ah, the inquest—another inquest!" cried the Squire, beside himself with grief, and he stood gazing upon the body and wringing his hands. "Who could possibly have gained access to her room to murder her like this, in cold blood? Besides, what could possibly be the motive?"

"Robbery, I should imagine," Jelf responded. "The disordered appearance of everything points most conclusively to that. Had your daughter any large sum of money with her."

"No, four pounds which I gave her this afternoon. Nothing else."

"Well, it is quite apparent that a thorough search has been made of her trunk and dressing-bag. Look ! everything has been turned out of the trunk, as though the assassin suspected that something were concealed in the lining. Depend upon it that robbery was the motive."

"But who could possibly want to murder a girl for the sake of two or three sovereigns," asked the Squire blankly. "It must have been some visitor in the hotel."

"Ah, sir," replied the manager blandly, "I think we ought not yet to form any theory. We must leave it to the discretion of the police."

"Police be hanged !" Mr. Milbourne blurted forth. "They're a set of incompetent busybodies, the whole lot of them. They bungled my poor daughter's case, although she was struck dead within twenty yards of a room wherein were fifteen people. They make a great show of inquiring here and there, in every place but the right one. No, I tell you our detective system is an absolute farce from beginning to end."

"But, according to law, they are bound to take up the matter," Jelf observed.

"Yes, I suppose they are, and I shall be compelled to again go through that futile inquiry, with all its painful publicity, called a 'Coroner's Inquest'."

The manager had crossed the room, and was examining some of the articles thrown from the trunk to the floor, but Jelf suggested that everything should be left until the arrival of the police.

The old Squire was utterly broken down. He paced the room with his face buried in his hands, moaning to himself, and declaring that the judgement of the Almighty had fallen upon his family.

The doctor was eager to learn all the details of the previous tragedy, but refrained from inquiring, as he saw how deep and overwhelming was his grief. He tried to induce him to leave the room and await the arrival of the police, but he flatly refused.

"No," he said brokenly, "I will stay here, with my poor girl. She's lost to me—lost for ever!" and he burst into tears again, for Ethel had been his favourite always.

"I must send a telegram to my wife," he wailed. "But how can I tell her the awful truth? This second blow will kill her."

"Wait," urged the doctor, placing his hand sympathetically upon the Squire's shoulder. "Hear what the police have to say first. Bad news cannot be too long delayed. A telegram to your wife will only give her an unnecessary shock. Far better see her and explain matters personally."

And so, with intervals of abject grief, the three men waited there for the police, who had been warned by telephone by the manager.

They came at last—an inspector and a constable, both in plain clothes.

"There's been murder committed here, in the hotel," was the manager's curt announcement, when they were admitted. "This young lady has been found strangled."

Both men advanced respectfully to the bed and glanced at the dead, half-clad girl.

"I've telephoned to Scotland Yard," the inspector explained. "They will send us assistance at once. Indeed, a couple of officers from the Criminal Investigation Department ought to be here in a minute or two. The message I received from you was that a young lady visitor had been mysteriously murdered, so I thought I would lose no time in communicating with headquarters."

"This gentleman is Doctor Jelf, of Leamington, a guest staying in the hotel," said the manager, "and this is Mr. Milbourne, the unfortunate young lady's father."

The two men began to search the room very minutely, and presently, after perhaps a quarter of an hour, there came another rap at the door, and the two expected officers from Scotland Yard introduced themselves—one of them Inspector Warren, who, as every reader of this narrative will know, held the reputation of being one of the most successful and most painstaking investigators of crime.

He was an elderly, rather insignificant-looking little man, with a drawn and somewhat haggard face, and his personal appearance was such that, in the street, the passer-by would take him for a man who had come down in the world and how bore a heavy load of sorrow within his heart.

His companion was exactly the opposite. Tall, muscular, about forty, his face was round and beaming, and he seemed to pay considerable attention to the training of his long brown moustache, judging from his habit of continually stroking it when in conversation.

The two expert officers, having been given a brief outline of the circumstances, viewed closely the marks upon the dead girl's neck, carefully examined the cord which had been found beside her, and then, assisted by the two police officers who had come first on the scene, set about making a thorough and most minute search.

CHAPTER XX\ III

A REMARKABLE FACT

LATER that evening, the Squire, half demented by grief, saw Major and Mrs. Langdon, and the latter explained, in the presence of the detectives, how she had tapped at the door, and how, although she heard a distinct movement inside, there was no response.

That the murderer was within the room at that moment was plainly apparent, and the two officers from Scotland Yard questioned the Major's wife very closely as to whether the sound appeared to be the rustling of a woman's skirts or the footsteps of a man.

"I really can't tell," was the lady's reply. "That there was someone moving inside I am absolutely certain. When I tapped for the first time, I heard a hurried movement, as though somebody sprang lightly across the room. Then I listened again and heard slow careful footsteps, for the boards creaked as the person inside the room crept along."

"Probably the murderer believed you to be a chambermaid who might open the door, and was preparing to make a dash for freedom," the inspector suggested.

"No, that could hardly be so, because I had already called to Ethel, telling her who I was."

"Ah !" said the officer, "that puts a different complexion on it. Then the murderer knew that at least for the present he was secure. He simply waited until you had gone and the corridor was deserted. Then he slipped out, closed the door and descended the stairs without attracting observation."

As the detective subsequently pointed out, assassination in any of the big London hotels is the easiest thing in the world.

A man, if he be well dressed, is not remarked, either by liftmen, chambermaids or hall-porters, among five or six hundred guests. Indeed, at some hotels, private detectives are kept to idle about the halls and doorway, but to jewel-thieves and the criminal classes the men employed to watch are always well-known and, of course, avoided.

It was, however, from the outset that the police attached considerable importance to Mrs. Langdon's narrative. Several of the purchases the dead girl had made in Regent and Oxford Streets during the afternoon arrived at the hotel that night, and were handed to the police, who announced their intention of seeking information at the shops on the following morning.

One of the boxes was handed, by a messenger-boy, to the Squire in his own room, and the sight of it caused him to burst for the hundredth time into a flood of tears. He had not telegraphed to his wife, but had taken Jelf's advice and delayed acquainting her with the terrible truth until they met. He sat there, in his bedroom, through the evening, staring straight before him and trying to account for the awful calamity of assassination that had fallen upon his house.

The Major, a cheery man of middle age, tried to console him, but in vain.

"It is my fault—my fault!" he kept repeating. "I persuaded her to come up with me, and she has met with her death."

Contrary to Dr. Jelf's theory, Inspector Warren did not believe that robbery had been the motive. The trunk had been turned out, the drawers rummaged, and the place disordered, it was true, but to his critical eye it seemed more likely that the assassin was in search of something which he could not find. There had, he ascertained, been only three departures from the hotel between six and eight o'clock, and all three visitors had left their addresses for letters. That evening the police telegraph was set to work, and before midnight reassuring reports were received that the addresses given were correct ones, and that the persons were of high respectability.

Warren had no suspicion of any guest in the hotel. The assassin, he felt certain, was an intruder.

By midnight he had received from the Squire a pretty correct account of the tragic end of poor Nella, and knowledge of this fact made his deductions the more difficult.

Apparently the family, or the girls comprising it, had an enemy, but when the Squire explained that it was only when they were in the cab, driving along the Euston Road, that they decided not to go to the "Métropole", the detective saw that the theory of an enemy was scarcely a sound one. Nobody could possibly have known that father and daughter were going to the Hotel Blenheim unless they were actually following the cab, and that, to him, appeared very unlikely.

Did the second tragedy have any connection with the first? That was the point which puzzled the detectives as well as the Squire through that long night. Warren, although he expressed no opinion, believed that it did.

Next morning the Coroner was warned, and that same afternoon the inquest was opened in one of the private sitting-rooms of the hotel. The manager had, so far, kept the news of the tragedy from leaking out to the reporters; but, an inquest being a public inquiry, the manager feared that before long the evening papers would be full of it. He was exerting every effort to keep the gentlemen of the Press at bay, but it was known that something had occurred, and half a dozen "liners" had called to make inquiries. To these the wily foreigner merely replied that a lady visitor had been found in a state of unconsciousness, and that it was due to a fainting fit. That was all.

Such stories, however, very soon fall to the ground when the notice of an inquest is posted in the Coroner's office. The newspaper man has his eye upon that notice-board; hence before noon the truth was known that there had, at any rate, been a sudden death at the "Blenheim", if not an actual tragedy.

Therefore, with considerable chagrin, the hotel manager noticed half a dozen reporters enter the room where the twelve jurymen were sworn, and deliberately take their note-books from their pockets.

The jury were sworn in the usual manner, and, after some opening remarks by the Coroner, proceeded, in procession, to the farther end of the corridor, where they entered the room where the tragedy had occurred, and viewed the terribly distorted features of poor Ethel.

Then, on their return, when they had taken their seats, the Coroner proceeded to open the inquiry by taking the evidence of the Squire.

In a broken voice he described how he had come up from Peterborough, accompanied by his daughter; how they had changed their plans while in the cab, and how he had given her four pounds to go shopping, and left her standing out on the balcony of her room.

"And that was the last time you saw her alive ?"

"Yes."

"Did she tell you where she intended going when she went out ?"

"She mentioned two shops, which she evidently visited, as goods have been sent from there addressed to her."

"When did you next see her ?" inquired the Coroner calmly, at the same time writing down the witness's answers on his blue official foolscap.

"When the chambermaid opened the door of her room, about seven o'clock. She was then dead." And the old man, unable to control his emotion longer, covered his face with his hands.

"We all feel great sympathy for you, Mr. Milbourne," said the Coroner, in a more kindly tone, "and the jury will, I know, feel even greater sympathy when they are acquainted with the whole chain of tragic events. According to the bald facts which the police have supplied, I believe I am right in suggesting that there has already been a tragedy in your family of a somewhat similar character ? Will you kindly describe it to us."

The words caused everyone in the room to prick up their ears, the reporters most of all. They are ever on the lookout for good copy—mystery for preference.

In a halting, faltering voice, Mr. Milbourne recounted the whole of the sad story of poor Nella's death, and the narrative was listened to with breathless attention. The reporters, of course, took it all down, but the Coroner only made occasional notes on his minutes of evidence.

Then, turning to the jury, he said :

"Has any gentleman a question to ask Mr. Milbourne ?"

"We would like to know, sir, if the witness has any suspicion of any enemy of the family ? The affair seems very much like an act of private vengeance."

"I know of no enemy," was the Squire's abrupt reply.

Then came the hotel-clerk, who deposed that he had handed the deceased her key when she came in shortly after half-past five. He recollected her because she had asked if her father, No. 708, had had his key, which query had been answered in the negative.

"She was alone ?" asked the Coroner.

"Yes, sir."

"Did anyone, during the afternoon, inquire for Miss Milbourne?"

"Only one lady, sir—a Mrs. Langdon, who is a guest. She asked about half an hour afterwards, and I told her that the young lady was probably in her room, or in some of the public rooms of the hotel."

"And is that all you know?"

"All, sir."

The foreman of the jury asked if the deceased seemed at all flurried, but the reply was that she was not. She had returned in a hansom, and had several parcels, which one of the porters carried for her to the lift.

The chambermaid who had unlocked the door having given evidence, Dr. Jelf was called and deposed to making the first examination of the body. There were, he said, evident signs of strangulation by a cord, of which the police subsequently took possession. In company with Dr. Moore, of Gower Street, the police surgeon, he had made a post-mortem, and the result confirmed entirely his first diagnosis. The cord was evidently slipped over her head while she had been standing at the wash-basin, washing her face, prior to dressing for dinner. It had been swiftly twisted and drawn tight, and that accounted for no screams being heard. Considerable pressure must have been used.

Dr. Moore, police divisional surgeon, corroborated, and after two or three other unimportant witnesses had given their evidence, the Coroner, addressing the jury, pointed out the extraordinary nature of the mystery, especially if considered in conjunction with the tragedy which had occurred in the same family. It was, of course, for the police to trace the young lady's movements on the afternoon in question, and, in order to allow them to do so, he suggested that the inquiry should be adjourned until that day week, a course which was adopted without a dissentient.

A Coroner's jury, in a murder case, never arrives at its verdict on its first sitting. It always adjourns.

The inquiry concluded at four o'clock, and as the Squire on descending crossed the hall to the bureau, he found Hubert Hutton awaiting him.

"Why, Mr. Milbourne!" exclaimed the young man, "what's the matter? Are you unwell? I met Ethel yesterday and she told me you were here, so I thought I would call."

"What !" cried the old man quickly, "you met her yesterday. Where ? Tell me quickly !"

"I met her in Oxford Street, yesterday afternoon, and walked up Edgware Road with her, as far as Chapel Street. But why ?"

"Why ?" wailed the old man brokenly. "Why ? Because she's dead—murdered, just as poor Nella was !"

"Murdered !" the young man cried, amazed.

The Squire nodded his head, and then, as they sat together in a corner upon one of the lounges, he briefly related the extraordinary circumstances.

Hutton sat listening like one in a dream. Then, when he found tongue, he said :

"Tell me, Mr. Milbourne, have the police discovered upon her that curious piece of antique jewellery she was wearing when I met her ?"

"Why, no !" he cried, as the truth suddenly flashed upon him. "Only this morning they told me that no article of jewellery was found in her room."

"Then that jewel has been stolen !"

CHAPTER XXIX

DEEPENING SHADOWS

At the resumed inquest, held in the following week, several fresh witnesses were called, chief among them being Hubert Hutton.

In reply to the Coroner, he described how he had met Ethel quite accidentally, in front of Evans's shop, in Oxford Street, and walked with her to the corner of Chapel Street.

"From the copy of the depositions of an inquest held recently at Castor, Northamptonshire," observed the Coroner, rather severely, "I see you were the principal witness in the inquiry regarding the death of the deceased lady's sister."

"I was," he replied.

"On that occasion you were the last to see the deceased alive?"

"Yes."

"And on this occasion you met the young lady two hours prior to her death?"

"I had no idea whatever that she was in London. Our meeting was entirely accidental."

"Did she make any remark that led you to believe that she was proceeding to keep any appointment?"

"Yes; she told me that she was on her way to her mother's dressmaker in Bayswater, and I put her into an omnibus at the corner of Chapel Street."

"She told you, of course, where she was staying with her father?"

"Of course. I inquired."

At this point Inspector Warren interrupted by addressing the Coroner, saying:

"I would like, with your permission, to ask the witness if anything was said regarding a piece of jewellery that deceased was wearing."

"Yes," was Hutton's prompt reply, although he had no intention of committing himself by saying too much. "I noticed that she was wearing a rather curious antique ornament. It was set with diamonds and appeared to me to be of great value. I made the suggestion to her that an ornament of that character should not be worn in the streets of London, and that while she was looking in a shop-window a dexterous thief might easily snatch it."

"And what was her reply?"

"She appeared to consider my warning superfluous, but promptly covered up the jewel by fastening her fur necklet over it."

"I might mention, sir," observed the detective, "that the jewel in question is missing."

This announcement produced some stir of excitement in the room, and every face was turned towards the witness.

"Had you seen this article of jewellery worn by the deceased before?" inquired the Coroner.

Mr. Hutton replied in the negative.

The next witness was a tall, prim, maiden lady, who gave the name of Henrietta Hurst, and stated that she was a private dressmaker, living in Talbot Road, Bayswater.

"Miss Milbourne called upon me unexpectedly, at about four o'clock, on the afternoon in question. I was engaged in fitting another customer, and she was therefore compelled to wait in my drawing-room for twenty minutes or so, and I suppose occupied herself by looking at the fashion papers. When I was at last disengaged, I found that the object of her call was to ask me to send a dress that I had just finished for her sister to her room at the Hotel Blenheim instead of to Ailesworth Manor. The parcel was in the drawing-room, already packed, therefore I simply wrote another label and stuck it on. At her suggestion, I remeasured her for bodices, for it was two years before when I had last taken her measure, and she complained that a blouse I had made was a trifle tight across the back."

"And what then?" asked the Coroner, looking up from his writing.

"Well, nothing else, except that I gave her a cup of tea, and we gossiped for perhaps half an hour. She told me that Mrs. Milbourne and her sister Sylvia were in Durham, and that she was up in Town for a flying visit with her father. She left me at about a quarter-past five, and I sent Miss Sylvia's dress, next morning, to the hotel. It was not until that afternoon that I was aware that anything had happened."

"Does any member of the jury desire to ask any question?" inquired the Coroner.

"We should like to be quite clear upon one point, sir," remarked the foreman. "Did the young lady, on leaving the dressmaker's, return on foot to the hotel?"

"She walked towards the Westbourne Park Road," replied Miss Hurst. "There is a cabstand there, and she may have taken a conveyance, but I am not aware that she did."

"Well," remarked the Coroner, "we have it in the evidence of the hall-porter that the young lady returned in a hansom with several parcels."

"She had only one small parcel when she called on me," remarked the dressmaker.

"Then she must have visited other establishments before returning home."

Following Miss Hurst there stepped forward another witness, a tall, pale-faced young man, in a frock-coat, who gave his name as Charles Percival, and his occupation as assistant in the lace department of Messrs. May & Edwards, of Regent Street.

"You have seen a portrait of the deceased, Mr. Percival, and recognize her—eh? Well, will you please tell us under what circumstances you saw her?"

"As far as I can judge, it was about three o'clock when the lady entered our shop and inquired at my counter for some imitation Maltese lace, with which I served her. She was rather difficult to please, but she purchased some, gave her name and address at the Hotel Blenheim, and paid. I took the money to the cashier's desk, and when I returned I found her in a great hurry to leave."

"Did you, when you served the deceased with the lace, notice that she wore any peculiar piece of jewellery?"

"Yes, sir. While in the shop she removed her fur boa, as many ladies are in the habit of doing, and I noticed that at her throat was an ornament of a character such as I have never seen before. It was shaped like two crosses, and in the centre was a piece of ordinary-looking grey stone, round and unpolished."

"Anyone in the shop could, of course, see this?"

"Yes, sir. She did not put on her boa until she left."

No further question was asked, and the witness retired.

Then the Coroner, in summing up, addressed the jury, saying:

"I think, gentlemen, in this case we have taken every particle of available evidence, and we have before us a pretty clear story of how the young lady spent the intervening hours between the time her father left her and the discovery of the tragedy. That a brutal and deliberate murder was committed it is impossible to doubt. There are, however, many features in the case that are at once remarkable and extraordinary. We have it that the deceased's elder sister was mysteriously murdered a couple of hours after her marriage, even before the wedding-breakfast was finished. I expect, gentlemen, you all, like myself, remember reading the case in the papers at the time. It was certainly very mysterious, and the mystery has been rendered tenfold more inscrutable by this second assassination in the same family. Now," he went on after a moment's pause, "as regards motive! To be exact, there appears an utter absence of motive in both cases. Whether, in the case we have under inquiry, the motive was the theft of the curious jewel which the deceased was wearing, is a matter for the police to decide. This point must be left in the hands of the Criminal Investigation Department. We are not here as a police tribunal. Our duty is to decide whether the deceased met with her death by fair means or by foul. The answer to that question is obvious. The young lady was secretly murdered, and by someone who went about the business in an expert manner. No inquiry was made at the hotel bureau as to the number of Miss Milbourne's room, because the murderer had, by some means as yet unknown to us, already satisfied himself of it. Undoubtedly he watched her alight from the cab and ascend in the lift, then, after the lapse of a short time, followed her up and tapped at the door. As you know, there are many messenger boys about this and other hotels who tap at visitors' doors several times a day; it was but natural that the occupant of the room should open it. No doubt she did open it. What then transpired will never be known. All we are aware is that she was strangled with the lace cut from her own corset, which was produced here in court on the last occasion. Well, gentlemen, in such circumstances, I think you can arrive at but one verdict—and that unanimously. If you consider that Miss Milbourne was murdered by some person unknown, then it is your duty to say so, and to leave all further inquiries in the hands of the police."

A dead silence followed this speech.

Then the foreman, after consulting with his colleagues for a few moments in undertones, said:

"We have no need to retire, sir. We are quite unanimous in our verdict that the deceased was murdered by some person unknown. And we desire to express a hope that the police will prosecute every inquiry in order to solve the mystery."

"Very well, gentlemen. That is your verdict, and I will see that the expression of your wishes is forwarded to the proper quarter."

Then the Coroner wrote the verdict for the foreman of the jury to sign, and five minutes later the court of inquiry broke up.

CHAPTER XXX

"YOU DARE NOT TELL THE TRUTH !"

It was summer by the sea.

Three months had elapsed since the tragic death of poor Ethel and the abortive finding of the Coroner's jury. Warren and his assistants had been ubiquitous but no trace of a clue to the identity of the assassin had been found.

Hubert himself was deeply puzzled. The theft of that jewel which the girl had worn made it clear to him that she had met her death at the hand of no ordinary assassin. The police had, of course, formed an elaborate theory regarding the robbery, but Hutton entertained a very different opinion. It was certainly a very remarkable combination of circumstances that he should have been mixed up with the death of both girls, and he himself knew that, in certain quarters, he was regarded with considerable suspicion. Happily, however, this belief was not shared by the Milbournes or by Sylvia ; hence he had now grown to be very intimate with the unfortunate family.

Soon after this second blow had fallen, the old Squire sold the manor to a London stockbroker who wanted a country house, and, storing the furniture, started with his wife and daughter to Eastbourne, where they intended spending the summer amid fresh surroundings.

In order to be near them, Hubert also went to Eastbourne and took apartments in the same row of houses, facing the Esplanade.

Thus, almost constantly in the company of the Squire, his wife and daughter, Hutton passed the summer days and evenings very pleasantly. He had not returned to Paris. Occasionally he received a letter from Dolores, a gossiping screed, telling him of what was doing in Dinard, where she had gone for the hot weather, and once he had received a letter from Pauline Lomonseff. It was hot in Paris, the girl wrote, and terribly so in the high-up atelier where she worked. He was somewhat surprised at receiving news of her from

Paris, for it showed that she and her father had not heeded his warning, and still remained in the French capital.

Dolores, however, had never mentioned her in her letters, which were quite friendly, and always expressed a hope that Hutton would return before long. But he congratulated himself upon his escape from her, and more than ever found himself in love with Sylvia, who was now his almost constant companion, chaperoned, of course, by her prematurely aged mother in deep mourning.

One August evening, however, he found himself walking alone with her along that extension of the Esplanade that runs past the Wish Tower, in the direction of Beachy Head. The evening was warm and balmy, with a faint westerly breeze, but the sea was almost waveless, and broke upon the beach with that low rhythmic soughing which is the sea's peculiar charm. In the fading light they were walking together, their faces set towards the crimson afterglow that shone far over the western sea, beyond the high grey headland, whereon already the warning light was flashing forth its signal to the toilers of the world's great waterway.

Hutton had spoken but little from the time they had left the house, and his pretty companion saw that he was thinking and preoccupied. She looked charming in her white summer gown trimmed, alas, with black, in mourning for her sisters. But black suited her. It does some women.

They had walked nearly a mile when, after some desultory conversation, Hubert turned to her suddenly and said in a low earnest voice:

"Sylvia, to-night I have brought you here where we can be alone because I want to speak to you. I want to tell you something."

She regarded him with some surprise.

"Do you?" she asked. "What is it?"

"I want to tell you something that for months I've longed to tell you—a secret."

"A secret?" she exclaimed, instantly interested.

"Yes, the secret of my heart, Sylvia. I love you."

"Oh, Mr. Hutton!" cried the girl quite taken by surprise. "I—I really think we ought not to discuss that."

"But we must discuss it," he went on with quick impetuosity. "I love you, Sylvia. I love you with all my heart and all my soul."

She said nothing. He had grasped her small gloved hand, and he felt it trembling. There was a manly tenderness in his behaviour towards her, as far removed from the usual lover-like adulation as it was deeper in its springs and dearer perhaps to her heart—manly, for that same tenderness, the very exhalation of true heart love, is an attribute that never does emanate from the vain selfish egotist, or the careless man of the world.

They slackened their pace, but neither spoke. Her heart was full.

To describe, scene by scene, how the firm friendship had sprung up between the pair is superfluous. Amid the gay cosmopolitan world in which Hubert had lived he had been fascinated by many brilliant women. But during the past few months of his life, far removed from the frivolities of his own set in Paris, he had soon become sensible of how much of his leisure was in reality filled up by conversation with Sylvia Milbourne. Some mysterious affinity of feeling and opinion seemed to have drawn them together from the first; and yet there were two or three of the attributes against which he had entertained a positive prejudice. For instance, he had always thought politics quite out of the scope of a woman's reasoning, yet when he found Sylvia's mind familiar with the great truths of humanity—those truths to the exposition of which his ardent yet half-secret ambition lured him—the earnestness of life and the thousand topics which must branch from such conclusions, he could not but acknowledge, though not without surprise, that her sympathy and companionship were none the less delightful because she was a woman.

She had, too, a trick of appealing to him for information, and, throwing herself on his forbearance, in that pretty confiding feminine manner that is by no means without its fascination.

Hubert Hutton knew that he stood between a good and an evil genius. Until that hour, he had always looked upon love as an episode in a man's life, and one that should only be indulged in on a proper occasion.

"Sylvia," he said in a low voice at last, "have you no word in reply?"

Her eyes were downcast, and in them he saw the light of unshed tears. The little hand again trembled, but she did not answer.

"I know I'm unworthy of you, Sylvia," he went on in his abrupt way. "Probably you have no confidence in me because you know the reckless life I've led—the life of a wanderer. And why did I become a wanderer? Because I have never, until now, known a good honest woman who could have made me happy and held influence over me.

"You, Sylvia," he went on, "are different from them all. Perhaps I ought not to speak to you as I am speaking, for my financial position is at present crippled by extravagances. Still, what I say comes from my very heart. I have grown to love and adore you in a manner which surprises even myself. I love you as no other man can, and so intense and deep is my affection, if you tell me you can never reciprocate it, I shall go away, still loving you until my last hour. I am not a man who falls at the feet of every pretty woman he meets. No, I have had a long and varied experience of the world, and it has taught me to shun women rather than to love them. But I love you, Sylvia—I love you!" he cried earnestly, reverently raising her gloved hand to his lips. "Speak to me."

They were entirely alone, far from the town, with no one to observe them.

"Ah," she sighed, pressing her hands to her breast as if to still her heart's wild beating, then covering her face with them.

"The first love of ignorant youth is always faint and flickering," he said in the same low, intense tone. "It is the last love which is *destiny*!"

"Then it is my destiny to love you?" she murmured in faltering tones.

"Yes," he cried, "but do you love me, Sylvia, tell me? Don't keep me longer in suspense. You cannot know how I suffer by this silence."

For a moment she said nothing. They had halted, and he was standing by her with his hand placed tenderly upon her shoulder.

Hubert Hutton gazed at her, but mingling with his admiration, a feeling almost of awe crept over him. She seemed something above himself—even beyond his comprehension; yet when an instant later her eyes met his, a light of faith and trust, almost of gladness, shone from them, which was more divine than that of any earthly hope.

Again he repeated the question:

"Sylvia, can you ever feel a spark of love for me?"

And at last a convulsive sob shook her slight frame and she burst into tears, she faltered:

"Hubert, I—I do love you!"

He drew her to him, and there with the last soft glow of the dying day lighting up her cheeks, he poured forth the story of his affection, and promised that she should ever be his until death parted them.

"I have loved you, darling, ever since I first was introduced to you, on the day of poor Nella's wedding," he went on, when they had together stopped to rest upon a convenient seat at the extreme end of the long paved walk. "But I confess to you that I had another tie, just as you had. Those ties are broken on the part of both of us—and we are free, free to love each other."

"Ah, Hubert," she said in a low voice, looking straight into his eyes, "I am glad indeed that it is so. If I were to make confession, mine would be similar to yours. On that day when you bowed and pressed my hand, and afterwards we sat together in Castor Church, to witness that marriage ceremony, I felt somehow that my destiny had been marked out —that you and not Guy Wingate were my lover. Yes, I confess it, just as freely as you have done. There should be no secrets between us if there is to be perfect love."

"There shall be no secrets, dearest," he responded frankly. "All the story of my life shall be open to you. I will tell it all some day, and you will be very astonished. Few men have had such a strange career, and few men have been so entirely the victims of circumstance as I have been. We love each other, and for the present that is all-sufficient. Let us be happy in each other's love and wrapt in each other's secret. For the present we need not let your parents know, for, poor things, the death of poor Ethel is too recent. Besides," he added, "I have an object in postponing my necessary explanation to your father on account of my crippled finances. Soon, I hope, they will be again in their normal condition, and then I shall be able to ask the Squire's consent to our union."

"Let it be just as you wish, Hubert," she said with all the adulation of her new-found love. He had ever been her hero, this man who knew the world so well, and in that moment was a delirium of ecstasy. They were secretly engaged.

Grace Fairbairn had not been a false prophetess after all.

What need it concern the reader to know all the passionate love speeches that passed between the pair while the twilight darkened into gloom, and the soft sighing of the waves at their feet increased with the night wind to that wide swish that is so regular and so soothing?

Far on the horizon before them, the warning rays of the lightship flashed out with clockwork regularity and became hidden again, and once the distant syren of the Dieppe packet from Newhaven came across to them from far over the darkening waters.

They heeded not time, for they had much to tell each other, though they had been in each other's company every day for the past month. But it is ever so. Love always gives rise to great volubility, and the lightest gossip is of weight to him who loves with his whole heart.

She allowed him to kiss her upon the lips for the first time, and then she, in return, gave him her first hot, passionate caress. He knew he had won the best and truest girl it had ever been his lot to meet.

Sylvia was at last his, and his cup of happiness was filled.

One demand of hers, made after they had sat there together in all the ecstasy of their new-born affection, nonplussed him, and caused him to start visibly, although in the dusk she did not notice it.

"Now that we are engaged, Hubert," she said, not without visible hesitation, "will you permit me to ask you one question? You have said that you will have no further secret from me."

"Neither will I," he responded. "What do you wish to know, little one?"

"I want to ask you a question concerning poor Nella's death. Is it not a fact that you know who killed her, but you dare not tell the truth?"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE LOTTERY OF LOVE

THE question which Sylvia put to her lover was entirely unexpected, and took him utterly aback. But in an instant he regained his self-possession, and replied:

"No, dearest Were I aware of the identity of the assassin I should have spoken at once. Whatever put such a strange idea into your head?"

"I don't know. I have somehow always felt a suspicion that you were aware of who committed the crime."

"I much regret that up to the present I have not been able to solve the mystery," he said, still holding her hand in his. "But I am ever working towards that end. Still, for the present let us forget all those terrible circumstances which have so broken up your family, and remain content in each other's love."

"I am content," she declared. "But the mystery of it all constantly puzzles me, and——"

She did not conclude her sentence.

"And what?" he inquired softly.

"I must confess to you, Hubert, now that you are my lover," she said in a low voice, turning to him earnestly, "I am in deadly fear that I myself may be the next victim."

He started quickly. He had never thought of such a terrible contingency. True, there seemed an evil destiny upon the Milbournes, and she, his love, might be secretly struck down. But he hastened to reassure her, saying:

"Oh, don't anticipate such a thing, dearest. There is no motive for anyone to harm you. Besides, you now have a protector in me."

"But I am always dreading a stab in the dark," she said. "My nerves seem utterly unstrung. I dare not enter a dark room alone, or move about the house at night, for in every corner I suspect a lurking assailant."

"Ah, that's most natural," he sighed. "But you really have no cause for undue alarm. You will not be touched."

"Why are you so positive ?" she asked with quick interest.

"Because if the motive of the two tragedies is what I strongly suspect it to be, there is no motive why you should be attacked. Indeed, by doing so the assassin would run an unnecessary risk which he would never care to face."

"Then what do you suspect the motive to be ?"

"You must forgive me for having one single secret from you, Sylvia," he said, in a deep earnest voice. "But at present I am unable to tell you. It is not because I desire to conceal anything from you, but because to expose the few facts I have as yet been able to establish as evidence would be to ruin for ever my chances of success. I can, however, tell you this. Because I have dared to attempt to penetrate the veil of mystery which has surrounded the death of both your poor sisters, I have brought upon myself the deadly malice and hatred of those who believed themselves safe from detection. Hence, dearest, I have enemies : fiercely bitter ones. They would strike a secret blow against me and kill me this very night, if they dared. But don't be alarmed for my safety," he added, in a more cheerful tone. "They dare not lift a finger against me, as by so doing they must betray themselves."

"Are you sure you are not in danger, Hubert ?" she asked, placing her hand upon his arm and looking anxiously into his face. "Are you quite certain ?"

"Quite, dearest," he answered. "And I'm equally certain that those responsible for poor Nella's death dare not touch you."

"I wish I could feel the same security as you feel," she sighed. "I have somehow a distinct presentiment that I shall share the same tragic fate."

"No, no," he laughed, drawing her to him and kissing her fondly upon the lips. "Don't anticipate anything so dreadful. Let us try to forget it all."

"Ah, if I only could," she exclaimed sorrowfully.

"It is merely useless to recall the past," he urged. "I am leaving no stone unturned to establish the truth and denounce the assassin. I hope to be successful some day ere long. Until then do not let us discuss that which only fills both our minds with tragic memories and dire misgivings."

"Well," she said, after a pause, "perhaps you are right. I will try to forget."

"That's right," he exclaimed, tightening his grasp upon the hand he held. "You know to-night, Sylvia, how fondly I love you, that you are the dearest on earth, and all the world to me. To think that you exist in hourly dread pains me, and more especially so when there is no necessity for alarm.

"As I have told you, I have enemies and they may, and will probably, endeavour to circumvent my efforts to discover the key to the enigma which so puzzles all of us. If they do—if by their cunning they endeavour to cast suspicion upon myself, you will stand my friend, will you not?"

"Your friend!" she cried. "You are mine, Hubert. They shall answer to me!" she added passionately.

"Thank you, darling," he said, kissing her hand. "I want you to understand that it is just possible I may be compromised—seriously compromised by the manner in which I have during the past few months made inquiries. But if I am, I want to feel that I have at least one friend in the woman I so dearly love."

"She is your friend," was her response. "More than that, remember, she is your affianced wife."

"Ah, yes!" he cried. "I know that I have found in you, Sylvia, a woman among ten millions: staunch, honest and true, one of those few whom God has sent into the world to turn erratic men like myself into the path of rectitude. Already, now that you have confessed your love for me, I feel myself rejuvenated and ready to do battle in the world. Before, I had grown careless, nonchalant, indifferent. I had led my life and found that the gorgeous fruits of pleasure were only hollow husks. I was disappointed, broken, utterly world-weary; so much so, indeed, that I had more than once contemplated ending my life by my own hand."

"Oh, Hubert!" she protested.

"I confess to you the truth. When you know all my story, as one day you shall, you will not be surprised. To commit suicide is far better than to besmirch permanently an honourable name. And once, not long ago, I dreaded that the blow I feared must fall. But by some stroke of good fortune it was withheld, and then I found you—and loved you in secret until to-night. And you will save me."

"That I certainly will," she cried enthusiastically. "You will tell me everything, won't you? Perhaps I may sometime be able to give you advice. They say a woman's wit is more ingenious than a man's. Do you think so?"

"I'm certain of it," he laughed. "For deep cunning and clever plotting, commend me to a woman. Of course," he added, "I don't infer anything personal."

"Well, then, if you desire any deep cunning, you'll consult me, won't you?" she asked smiling.

"Most certainly," he said, with an amused laugh. "Between us, Sylvia, we should be able to fathom the mystery."

"I'm only too anxious to assist you," she cried enthusiastically. "If you will let me help you, I will work in any direction that you tell me, for I have in my heart a fierce vengeance against those who killed my two poor sisters. Let me help you, Hubert, and I vow to you to be a painstaking and eager assistant."

"If I require assistance, dearest, you shall help me," he answered. "Very probably I may later on require help," he added.

"Then I am ready at any moment to serve you," she said. "We now thoroughly understand each other, don't we?"

"Yes," he exclaimed. "We are lovers, linked together by an unbreakable bond of pure affection, and united in our determination to solve the great mystery. The task is a difficult one, but, with your help, darling, I hope to succeed, and if I do, I——"

He stopped short.

"And if you do——? Go on," she queried.

He was silent, plunged in deep thought.

"And if I do," he repeated at last, "then I shall extricate myself from a position of peril and show you, my well-beloved, that although I am a man of little character, I am nevertheless worthy of you."

"I already know you are, Hubert. I do not require any further proof than that which I have already witnessed," was the girl's loving response. To her he was so different from Guy. Instead of being an empty-headed fop whose ideas were eternally centred upon the main chance, he was a man of easy-going habit, of sterling quality, and yet, as he admitted to her, a financial wreck with ardent hopes of a return to fortune.

Women generally like a man of the world, and Hutton was essentially one. He regarded life philosophically and took it easy, as do all true cosmopolitans. Hence he appeared in her eyes different to all the other men she had met. Her admission that she loved him came truly from her heart. If ever there was a case of reciprocated affection hers was one, and in that first hour of their ecstasy, ere the twilight darkened into night, the pledges they exchanged were many, and the declarations of love oft reiterated.

It was late before they arrived at the house where the Milbournes had apartments, but fortunately the Squire and his wife had gone to a classical concert at the Devonshire Park, and had not returned. Therefore they remained in ignorance of that protracted walk beside the sea, and the happy pair decided to keep their secret for the present to themselves, and that night parted with a firm mutual handgrip that was more expressive than any words could have ever been.

That night he sat for a long time in his room overlooking the sea. The window was open, and beyond the broad electric-lit promenade lay the wide beach and the rolling waters, dark, murmuring, mysterious. He thought it all over. He was overjoyed at winning the woman who had so charmed him, and on comparing her with Dolores an expression of disgust involuntarily broke from his lips.

He lit a pipe, and lying back in a big chair, puffed vigorously and recalled all that she had said, more especially her fears regarding her own personal safety. Was there any cause for alarm ?

He reflected upon all the features of the situation and came to the conclusion that, notwithstanding his reassurance, a distinct peril surrounded her.

How should he act ? The dilemma that faced him was one that admitted of no solution. If he boldly made an accusation, he knew that certain of his enemies would rise and overwhelm him.

All he could do was to remain ever watchful, and await in patience the further developments of the ingenious plot which had apparently been formed against the Milbournes.

In one particular he decided to enlist Sylvia as his assistant.

There were several of Austen Leigh's papers in the custody of the Safe Deposit Company which he had not photographed because of their great length and the time required. He was desirous of examining them in order to see if they threw any further light on the mystery. He would ask Sylvia to secretly procure the key of the safe, and he, as the person who engaged it, would be admitted to the vaults in Chancery Lane.

He recollected that there were several documents of a distinctly different character, and very voluminous.

They might, he believed, contain a key to the enigma. Sylvia had promised her help, and he could rely on her.

As he sat there by the open window with the lamp burning within the room his figure could be distinctly seen by all the loiterers passing and repassing along the esplanade. It was nearly eleven, and there were still many lingerers by the sea on that hot summer's night.

He smoked on, thinking, thinking of the strange combination of circumstances that had brought him there, of his own insecure position, and of the peril of the woman he now so fondly loved.

He puffed vigorously at his pipe, his eyes fixed away in the darkness where the distant lightship sent forth its warning flashes.

"Yes," he said, speaking to himself, "old Mirski's silence is very strange; I don't half like it. But the crafty old Hebrew knows quite well that the security he holds is that of my own life, so perhaps his impatience has calmed, and he's gone back to his dirty back office in Petersburg and his constant nips of vile vodka. At any rate, I hope so," and he sighed, and took a deep draught of the whisky-and-soda at his elbow.

Just as he did this an ill-dressed lounger, whose shabby clothes and unkempt condition stamped him as a vagabond, strolled idly past the house, and looking up regarded Hubert's silhouette against the lighted room with a murmur of satisfaction. Very slowly he went along the broad asphalt path, his eyes fixed upon the young man in the house opposite, and the sinister smile upon his lips indexing what was passing within his mind.

The ill-dressed loiterer walked a hundred yards or so, then having apparently satisfied himself that the occupant of the lighted room would be unable to distinguish him, he turned and retraced his steps to a seat almost immediately facing the house, upon which he rested calmly, watching every movement of the man in whom he was interested. For fully an hour he remained there, his eyes fixed upon Hutton, until at last the latter closed the french-windows that led out upon the balcony and drew down the blinds.

Then the low-looking loiterer rose, and, with an imprecation upon his lips, shuffled off back in the direction of the Terminus Road.

Hubert retired to rest unconscious of all this. But probably had he seen that man's face in the light he would never have slept in his bed that night.

CHAPTER XXXII

AN UNWELCOME ENCOUNTER

During the following week the lovers spent almost their whole time in each other's company, taking excursions up to Beachy Head, to Pevensey, or to one or other of the many pretty places in the neighbourhood. They existed only for each other, and were perfectly happy in each other's affection.

Although he took the most infinite care to conceal his anxiety, Hubert lived in a constant state of dread. He entertained a distinct presage of evil, but in what direction he could not tell.

Something, he felt, must happen, for the date of the Tsar's visit to London was fast approaching, and the Great Plot would culminate in a serious blow for Russian liberty.

Why the old Professor had revealed the secret to him was a mystery. Although he had been actively associated with the revolutionists he was not a Nihilist, and there was no reason why he should have been informed of the existence of the plot in London. The crafty Lomonseff had evidently told him with some distinct object, but what it was he could not imagine.

Already the papers were full of the arrangements for the State reception of the Russian Emperor in England, and the programme of festivities had been published.

It was the Tsar's first visit to London since his coronation, hence there was considerable public enthusiasm.

Hubert knew well that just then the Metropolis swarmed with the agents of the Russian Secret Police, a squadron of whom had been sent over in order to keep a watchful eye upon known revolutionists.

The Secret Police always assume there is a plot, and are in many instances not very wide of the mark.

His one desire was to give information of the proposed attempt to assassinate the Emperor during his progress through the London streets. But how could he do so? No; he dare not. If he did, he knew that sooner or later he would pay the penalty of all informers, and that would be inevitably death.

As day after day passed he vainly strove to form some plan whereby the existence of the plot might be revealed. Yet he recollected that in all probability he was the only outsider aware of the conspiracy, and therefore suspicion at once would fall upon him if the police were informed.

He longed to say a word to Detective-Inspector Warren, with whom he had grown to be on friendly terms, but alas! his lips were sealed. He was in possession of a great and terrible secret, but was powerless to prevent the awful catastrophe which must result.

Thus on the one hand he was filled with a passionate affection for Sylvia, which was reciprocated with an intense devotion; while on the other he existed in constant dread of the unknown future, the fear lest something should happen to his beloved.

Ten blissful days had gone by since he had told her the secret and they had come to understand each other thoroughly, when one morning Sylvia, having obtained for him the key of the safe in Chancery Lane, he walked up to the station to take the early express to Victoria.

He arrived rather early, purchased a paper, and settled himself to read in the corner of an empty third-class compartment.

On opening the journal the first thing which attracted his attention was a bold headline, "The Coming of the Tsar: Latest Official Arrangements." These he read eagerly from end to end.

The Emperor, accompanied by the Empress, was to arrive at Queenborough in the Imperial yacht *Polar Star* on the ninth of September, and remain the guest of Queen Victoria until the twenty-fourth, when he was to proceed to Copenhagen to visit the Danish Court.

He had just concluded the article, the guard's whistle was blown, and the train was about to move off upon its run without a stop to Croydon, when the door of his compartment was opened and a lady hurried in.

Their eyes met, and Hubert Hutton sank back dumbfounded.

It was Dolores Lubomirska.

"Ah, *mon cher!*" she cried, almost out of breath. "This is indeed a fortunate meeting, is it not?"

"You, Dolores!" he gasped, "I—I had no idea that you were in England."

"No? Ah, well, you know I am very erratic in my movements," she said in French, her handsome face relaxing into a smile. "Everyone says so. The Lubomirskas always were."

"But why are you in England?" he inquired, utterly puzzled at her sudden appearance under such circumstances.

"To see you, *mon cher,*" she replied frankly. "I have been here in your droll England this past week. When you gave your address at Eastbourne I was seized by a longing to take a flying trip to England to see you. And I have done so."

"But are you staying at Eastbourne?"

"Most certainly: at the 'Burlington'." Then, with a victorious smile, she added: "Oh, I have seen you so many, many times. You seem to pass beneath my window twenty times each day."

"Why didn't you let me know you were there? I would have called."

"No," she said in a hard voice. "I don't think you would have called. You are far too deeply engaged."

Then, in an instant, he knew at what she hinted. This capricious woman who had thrown herself at his feet had discovered his love for Sylvia; the situation was, he knew, a perilous one.

But without hesitation he decided upon a policy of conciliation towards her. He could not afford at that moment to provoke her jealousy, for he knew that Dolores Lubomirska was not a woman to stick at trifles.

"Well," he said, with a forced laugh, "I suppose I may be forgiven a mild flirtation. Seaside resorts were created for that most harmless of pastimes."

She shrugged her shoulders, and her eyes peered keenly through her veil. Surely she was a very beautiful woman. The dress she wore, a pale dove-grey, trimmed with silver, was sufficient to cause every woman who saw it to regard her with envy. In style, in fit, in taste and in shade it was perfect; a little gown of Doeillet's that cost only a thousand francs, and, as she had told a smart Englishwoman who had admired it at the hotel, it was "dirt cheap" at the price.

"Hubert," she said, after a moment's pause, "you have many shortcomings, but you never flirt."

"I once flirted desperately with you, I fear," he said.

"No, it was not a flirtation, but something more. You loved me then."

That was untrue, but he was not ungallant enough to tell her so. He had never really loved her. In Paris and in Petersburg he had been fascinated by her beauty, and had danced attendance upon her, but as to love, the thing was entirely out of the question.

"When you wrote to me last it was from Dinard," he said in an endeavour to change the subject. "I thought you were still there."

"No, I went to Trouville for a fortnight, but bah! the place has degenerated sadly these past few years. There is no chic there, only Paris shopkeepers and their wives. So I went with Madame Sohet to Saint-Jacut. Then afterwards I crossed from Dieppe to England."

"You knew that I intended to go to London this morning, eh?"

"Yes. I have no reason for denying it. I wanted to have a talk with you."

Her reply opened his eyes. She had set some spy upon him who revealed to her all his movements, someone most probably in the house wherein he lodged.

"Why could you not have invited me to your hotel? We could have talked there."

"It is far more private in a train than in an hotel, where there are always eavesdroppers."

"What you say is perfectly true of hotels on the Continent, where there are always two thin doors in each apartment giving access to the room on either side. French houses with their lath and plaster walls are never built for privacy. Well, what is it you wish to say to me?"

She looked him straight in the face with those great dark eyes that all Paris admired and declared to be the finest eyes of any woman since Madame du Barry.

"I want to tell you, Hubert, that you are a fool."

He bowed to her as though she had paid him a compliment.

"I want to show you that you are playing a dangerous game. I am here, in England, to save you."

"You are extremely kind," he responded with mock gravity.

"Ah!" she cried impetuously, "you do not take my words seriously. But I tell you that you are making a fool of yourself in loving that English miss of yours. No, do not deny it. I know everything. I have watched you day by day, and moreover I know all the tragedy connected with that accursed family. You tell me that it is a mere flirtation in order to mislead me, but recollect that you can never deceive me, Hubert. Do you recollect what I told you that last night we met in Paris ?"

"I recollect some passionate words of yours, Dolores, which I refused to take seriously."

"*Mon Dieu !*" she cried, "then you actually doubt what I said—what in my desperation I confessed to you ?"

"Ah," he sighed, bending forward towards her. "Our friendship has all been a great mistake, and I thought, by coming to England and remaining here, to end it for ever. I have many pleasant recollections of days long ago in Petersburg, and of sweet idle hours spent with you in Paris. You have an irresistible charm not possessed by other women, Dolores. You charmed me and held me beneath your spell until I became your cavalier, your slave. But I saw that our union was impossible, that I am not the kind of man as husband for you, so I struggled against the meshes until I had freed myself."

"Freed yourself !" she said, with a wild look in her eyes. "You thought so, but I tell you, Hubert, that you can never free yourself from me."

"Dolores !" he cried, "this is surely all madness. You can't mean what you say. We have both been very foolish, but we should end it all. Our little love romance is but a remembrance."

"To you it may be, but to me it is a reality. As I told you in Paris, I have made up my mind and it is impossible to turn me from my purpose. It is seldom that a woman compels a man to become her husband, but I am not an ordinary woman—at least, that's what the world says. I intend that you shall marry me."

"No, I cannot do that," was his grave reply.

"Ah ! because you love your English miss ?"

"Not only because of that, but as I told you quite plainly in Paris, I do not feel sufficient affection for you as apart from admiration, to warrant our union."

"You don't love me !" she cried fiercely. "Your English miss has stolen my love. I know—I know. Last night I saw you walking arm-in-arm upon the pier listening to the music. I was there sitting back in the shadow watching you. Oh, yes, you were quite happy, you two !" she laughed hysterically.

"And you little dreamed that the woman who was watching you was the same whom you called your 'Queen' in Petersburg. Do you not remember that night after the opera when you told me that you loved me, and I laughed you to ridicule. Poor boy, you loved me then, and it's no use denying it, even though you have tired of me and met a woman more youthful and of greater charm."

"Dolores, there is no comparison between you and her," he said quietly. "You are superb, one of the best-looking and best-dressed women in Europe. Your position as a leader of society is secure, and you need no compliments from my lips. But just now you are not yourself. You have formed a mad project of marrying me, well knowing that such a union could not last a month. I cannot understand your object."

"No, because you refuse to understand," and she picked her glove nervously, and her tiny foot beat impatiently upon the unclean floor.

"I understand that it is your object to marry me."

"It is my intention," she said decisively. "You will marry me, or no one else."

"Why?"

"Because if you still refuse, then your refusal will be fatal. I am not jesting now, Hubert. Mark me, Hubert—fatal—fatal."

He was silent for a moment. Presently, in a strained hard voice, he said:

"Then to put it plainly you will compel me to marry you, and give me one alternative—death."

She nodded in the affirmative, and he knew by the expression on her face that if ever she had been in earnest in all her life it was at that moment.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE HOUSE OF DOOM

At last the express drew slowly into Victoria Station, and Hubert and his companion alighted.

The scene between them had been a violent one. She had begged, entreated, threatened, but to all her words he showed a strong courage of which she had not believed him capable. Of course, she was clever enough not to wholly expose her hand.

The letter she had purchased of the Jew usurer was her trump card, to be used only in case of dire necessity.

As she sat there before him, excited, passionate, and speaking with a volubility that was surprising, he tried in vain to fathom her motive. But the secret was inscrutable. He did not believe for a single moment that she loved him with the intense passion that she pretended. She had some ulterior motive, but what that was he could not discern.

Then, just as the train stopped at Grosvenor Road for the collection of tickets, he had given his answer, final and decisive.

"Dolores," he said finally, "you are not yourself, you cannot be, or you would not speak so madly as you have done. Let us, however, forget it all. To act as you suggest would be sheer folly to which I will never be a party. I have been wrong in leading you to suppose that I loved you, and have only myself to blame for this. But I must tell you once and for all that I can never marry you."

"You mean that ?" she cried, rising to her feet with flashing eyes. "You cast my love beneath your feet !"

"You have given me an alternative," he said gravely. "I prefer to accept it."

"You do—do you ?" she cried with set teeth. "You think to escape me and marry that English miss of yours. But you shall never do that. You understand ?"

"Perfectly."

The train was just slowing down at the terminus and already the line of porters had mounted the footboards.

"Then we are to be enemies in future—eh ?" she asked in a hard, ominous tone.

"If you wish," he said. "I shall leave you now, and this parting will on my part be final—for ever."

She laughed, a loud triumphant laugh.

"No, no, Hubert. We shall meet again soon, never fear. I thought you knew me by this time, but it seems that you don't."

"I know you to be a woman who is endeavouring to wreck my happiness," he retorted bitterly.

He had alighted and helped her to descend.

"I have been quite frank with you," she said. "There is nothing more to add. If you prefer death—then let it be so. I wish you adieu."

"Adieu," he responded, and next moment the woman left him and quickly became lost in the crowd of business men hurrying out of the station.

. . . . .

At the Safe Deposit Company, Hubert experienced little difficulty in obtaining access to the safe, for he had engaged it himself and, of course, held the credential which gave him access to it. In the small steel drawer lay the papers of the dead explorer, just as he had placed them months ago. He took them into the room set aside for clients who wish to examine their valuables, and seating himself at the table selected the documents which he had not had photographed. These he spread before him, and with the aid of the key which he drew from his pocket, he spent a couple of hours in transcribing them.

To his disappointment, however, he found that they were merely diaries kept on a journey to Yakutsk in Eastern Siberia, whither the traveller had apparently gone in order to visit certain political prisoners in exile there. The papers were very voluminous, but contained absolutely nothing of importance, therefore with feelings of dissatisfaction he at last rearranged all the papers in a bundle, and again consigned them to the safe keeping of the steel drawer.

Out again in Chancery Lane a sudden fancy took him to stroll along to Fleet Street and look at the spot where the Great Plot was to culminate. Therefore he turned into the busy centre of journalistic London, and, strolling as far as the corner of Bouverie Street, stood upon the kerb, and gazed at the houses opposite. They were small shops, above which were branch offices of various provincial newspapers, but there was certainly nothing about any of them that would arouse suspicion that from one of them a tunnel was being driven beneath the roadway, and had already been completed, by six of the most dangerous of the Terrorists. There were four shops which might harbour the assassins: a tea shop, a cheap watchmaker's, a shop where cycle accessories were sold, and a tobacconist's. Of the four Hubert decided that the cycle accessories were a blind, and he crossed, and having inspected the window, he entered and asked to see a bicycle bell.

A girl came forward, rather good-looking and fair-haired, and in an instant he knew he was not mistaken for although she spoke English well, she was either German or Russian. He lingered over choosing a bell from several varieties which she showed him, and made good use of the time in taking in the shop and its contents. The latter was not very extensive, consisting of two or three cycles of various makes, evidently the show machines as sent out to agents, and a few tyres, bells, lamps, pumps and other cycle paraphernalia. At the back of the shop was a door, and while he was making his purchase that door opened and a man peered out inquisitively, but finding nothing suspicious in Hutton's appearance, quickly closed the door again.

There was a basement to the place, as shown by the small grating in the pavement, and in that basement work was no doubt proceeding apace.

He made his purchase at last, and paying for the bell he took it away, retracing his steps in the direction of the Law Courts. Suddenly it occurred to him that if his entry there had been regarded with suspicion he would undoubtedly be followed, in order to ascertain whether he were a police spy. He stopped abruptly before the big window of Attenborough's, the pawnbrokers, and turned to ascertain if anyone were behind him. Yes, most assuredly there was. The person, however, who was walking behind him was no Nihilist: it was Grace Fairbairn, who since poor Ethel's death had left the Milbournes and gone to live with an aunt up at Hornsey.

"Why, Miss Fairbairn!" he cried. "This is an unexpected meeting. How are you?" and he shook her hand.

"Oh! I'm quite well, thanks," she laughed. "How are they all down at Eastbourne?"

"Very well," he replied. "I'm only up for the day, and return to-night."

"I suppose I have to congratulate you," she exclaimed gaily. "Sylvia has written to me—in strict secrecy, of course—telling me of her engagement. I haven't mentioned it in my letters to her, as I feared lest the Squire or Mrs. Milbourne might get hold of it. I suppose they are to be informed in due course?"

"Yes," he said. "At present the affair is a secret. I have reasons that it should not leak out."

"Well," said the faithful companion of the Milbournes, "I've known Sylvia through a good many years, and I don't think I shall betray her confidence now if I tell you that she fell hopelessly in love with you when you drove over from Stamford to call upon us."

They were walking on past St. Clement's Church as she uttered these words.

"I suppose I ought to be flattered," he said. "And if I told the truth I should admit that I am. We are very happy."

"She tells me so in her letters," Grace said. "I'm sure I wish you every felicity. Sylvia is the only child left to the Milbournes and it will no doubt be a hard wrench when they are compelled to part with her."

"For the present there is no necessity," he remarked. "For that very reason I have asked Sylvia to keep our engagement secret."

Then as they passed up the bustling Strand they chatted upon other topics, until of a sudden an idea occurred to him and he suggested they should lunch together. She accepted his invitation, and they turned into "Gatti's" as the nearest restaurant.

They secured a little table to themselves in a quiet corner, and had quite a merry meal, washed down with a good Barolo, one of the specialities of the establishment. At one o'clock "Gatti's" is always crowded, and on that morning it was no exception. They had been chatting all through their lunch until the dessert was brought, when a rather well-dressed man in silk hat and frock-coat lounged in through the long hall and took a seat at the farther end.

Miss Fairbairn had not been looking in his direction, but

Hubert recognized the man, notwithstanding his disguise, as Clipson, ex-coachman to Squire Milbourne. Why was he masquerading as a gentleman ? And further, why having taken a seat, was he looking round eagerly on every side, as though in search of someone ?"

Hutton watched him keenly until of a sudden Clipson caught sight of them. Then he started slightly, rose from the table without ordering anything, and walked out in the opposite direction into Adelaide Street. It seemed as though the pair had arranged to meet there, and that his presence had upset their plans.

From that evening at Ailesworth when he had first seen Clipson he had wondered if there was any secret understanding between the pair. He suspected it, because he felt certain that the man who had posed as coachman in the Milbourne family was an impostor. The face was an exact counterpart of one he had seen once somewhere, he could not recollect where, and he therefore felt certain that his presence in the Milbourne household was with sinister motives.

Were it not that he was with Grace Fairbairn he would have risen and followed the fellow, but he could not leave her abruptly, and was therefore compelled to remain sipping coffee, for which he had no inclination.

She had received an offer from a French family living in Melum to go there as English governess, she told him, but she had not yet decided. She had no desire to leave England if she could obtain a congenial situation, she declared, and expressed the deepest regret that the Milbournes had sold the Manor.

"Ah," he remarked. "From what I can gather there has been a cloud over the house ever since the arrival of Mrs. Milbourne's brother. He was a queer person, wasn't he ?"

"I saw very little of him," she responded. "He hardly ever spoke except when we met on the stairs or in the garden. Indeed, he seemed to regard me with annoyance, but I suppose that was because he was a woman-hater," and she laughed lightly.

"Both Mrs. Milbourne and Sylvia have told me that you were present when he died. The scene was a very strange one, wasn't it ?"

"Yes," she said. "He tried to give some message to Sylvia, but his tongue refused to articulate, and he died without being able to say what he wanted."

"Have you any idea from his gestures what was the nature of his message?" he inquired interestedly.

"I think he wished to tell her where he had hidden his will. Fortunately, it was afterwards discovered just in the spot where he had indicated."

"Sylvia was, of course, his favourite?"

"Yes. She was the only one who dared to go into his room. He seemed to be always busy writing, and some of the torn papers I took from the waste-paper basket one day showed that what was written was a jumble of letters and figures. Some secret writing, I think."

Her admission that she had investigated the contents of Leigh's waste-paper basket was an involuntary declaration of her interest in him. Yes, a mystery enveloped her which, up to the present, he had not succeeded in penetrating.

He extracted from her a promise that if she went to France she would write to Sylvia giving her new address, and then, after paying the bill, they rose and went forth into the busy Strand, which on that summer's day was dusty and seemed to palpitate with the stifling heat of hurrying London.

She was going to Knightsbridge, therefore he saw her into a bus outside Charing Cross Station, and raising his hat, turned and left her.

"You know more than you'll admit, young lady!" he muttered to himself, as he turned away. "I must discover some means by which your tongue can be loosened."

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE TRUTH

HUBERT HUTTON had formed a hundred different theories, and was as many times compelled to abandon them as improbable, if not impossible. That a great plot was in existence he knew quite well, but in vain did he try to discover whose was the controlling mind. The whole thing had been utterly incomprehensible from the very first. Why Austen Leigh should conceal himself to die in that obscure English village, and why disaster should have fallen so heavily upon the family under whose roof he died, were equally mysteries which admitted of no solution. The deeper he penetrated the strange events and the circumstances surrounding them, the more inscrutable did the mystery become.

After leaving Grace Fairbairn he crossed Trafalgar Square, and, continuing westward, strolled through Piccadilly to his club, the Junior Conservative, in Albemarle Street.

He could not quite make out whether Grace had been present in the cycle shop in Fleet Street and had followed him. That she was behind him was clear, but whether she had slipped out from the shop after him was uncertain. At all events it was more than a strange coincidence that he should have encountered her just at that moment when he had turned back to ascertain whether he was being followed. Again, the sudden appearance of the fellow Clipson, masquerading as a gentleman or a swell mobsman was another element in the curious admixture of tragedy and mystery which baffled any attempt at explanation.

As he entered the club the hall-porter handed him a letter which he said had been left by hand that morning. He tore it open, and to his astonishment found it was from Pauline Lomonseff. Written in French, and dated from an address in Walpole Street, Chelsea, it was brief, as though hurriedly and secretly written. Translated into English, it read:

> We have arrived in London. Call when you can. But take every precaution regarding your personal safety. You are secretly condemned as an informer. We are living here under the name of Dufour—P.L.

He stood motionless with the letter in his hand. Condemned as an informer! He knew too well what that meant. He was well aware that even though he might fly to the other side of the world the vengeance of the Nihilists would find him. Sentence of death, if passed upon him, would be carried out as surely as if it had been pronounced in a Court of Justice.

This was a contingency which he never dreamed he would have to face. He was no informer. Never in his life had he told the police one single fact within his knowledge regarding the revolutionary party in Russia. But as he reflected it seemed to him more than possible that his recent intimacy with Inspector Warren and other police officers regarding the two mysteries concerning the Milbournes might possibly have aroused the suspicions of those ever-watchful secret agents of the Party of the Will of the People.

In the neighbourhood of Leman Street, Whitechapel, under the very shadow of the police-station, are a group of the Russian Terrorist Party, for ever planning, for ever plotting, for ever dreaming of a "Free Russia"—whatever that may mean. Nihilism, with its many wild ideas and ridiculous theories, is not understood in England. The police only know that the lower classes of Russian exiles, tailors, toymakers, woodcarvers and the like, are constantly meeting in secret and discussing the great coup which is to be made some day, and which will change the face of the world. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say of all the thousands of Russian exiles in London, more than two-thirds are Nihilists, hence the Russian Government are compelled to keep a body of secret agents, who live in the East End, work with the conspirators at their trades, and keep the Bureau of Police in Petersburg constantly informed. Within the past three years more than a dozen desperate plots have been hatched beneath the very shadow of Leman Street Police Station, and the English police, owing to the state of our laws, are powerless to interfere. The plots are culminated abroad, and none of the ragged crew who slave so diligently at tailoring for a mere pittance apparently know anything about it, so well are Nihilist secrets kept.

But the letter Hubert had received showed that the Professor, the head-centre, was in London, and no doubt his advent had caused a good deal of agitation in the Russian revolutionary circle east of Aldgate. The Russian colony in the East End was no doubt agog and restless in expectation as to what would occur.

Hutton quickly decided to accept Pauline's invitation to call, and after hastily swallowing a whisky-and-soda, he entered a hansom and was driven to the address given in her letter.

Walpole Street, Chelsea, is an essentially lodging-house street. It is a short thoroughfare branching off King's Road towards the river, a street rendered somewhat dismal by the monotonous exactness of its houses, which were all apparently built by the same speculative builder in the era of areas and front steps. The only distinction between the houses is the degree of dinginess of each. One or two, whose proprietors know that the eye of the prospective lodger is always attracted by drab paint and green doors, exhibit an exterior gaudiness which is not in keeping with the rickety furniture within; while others, smoke-blackened and sombre, are kept by old-fashioned people and are replete with old-world comfort.

It was into one of the latter houses that Hubert Hutton was ushered by a red-haired maid-of-all-work late that afternoon.

"The young lady said that if you called she would see you," was the domestic's gracious remark when he had inquired for Miss Dufour. "Will you please step upstairs. They're on the drawin'-room floor."

Hutton mounted to the "floor" in question which, in a lodging-house, is always synonymous of reckless expenditure and social superiority. The drawing-room lodger is always served first and receives the chief culinary triumphs, and the drawing-room in question was of the usual faded and frowsy type with which those who have lived in "diggings" in London are perhaps too familiar. You know the marble-topped chiffonier, the green rep suite, the hideous carpet and the stuffed birds under a glass shade. That room contained them all, but it moreover contained Pauline, who rose to meet him with a quick exclamation of welcome.

"I had your letter an hour ago," he said speaking in French, after the door had closed. "And I came straight to see you. Is the Professor at home?"

"No," she answered, putting a chair forward for him, "I am alone." Then looking him straight in the face she asked: "Have you destroyed my letter?"

"Yes, I burnt it at the club."

"That's right," she exclaimed, breathing more freely. "Recollect no one must ever know that I have given you warning. Ever since I wrote it, I have been fearing lest it might fall into other hands."

"But tell me, Pauline," he asked seriously, "what does it all mean? Why are you here in London, and why am I condemned?"

"The first question is quite easy to answer. Father has business here—important business," she added meaningly, "so I accompanied him. With regard to the latter, however, I am practically in ignorance. All I know is that you've given offence, and the decree has been issued that you are an informer."

"It's a lie!" he cried angrily, "you know well, and so does the Professor, that I am no informer. I have never given the police one single hint, although I admit that I've been pressed on more than one occasion. Indeed, your father told me when we met in Paris of the attempt to be made on the ninth of September. But no word of it has passed my lips."

"What," she said in surprise, speaking in a low voice as though half-afraid of eavesdroppers; "are you actually aware of the plot?"

"Why, of course I am; I have to-day been in the cycle shop in Fleet Street from where the tunnel is being driven beneath the roadway," he replied.

"Then beware!" she said, "I see the reason now why you are condemned. It is known that you have become acquainted with the truth, and they fear you may betray them."

"But your father told me of the forthcoming attempt," he protested. "Surely he has no hand in my condemnation?"

"No," she responded. "I have discovered it in quite an unexpected manner. The order has come from the Directory in Petersburg that you must die. They evidently have no confidence in you, and knowing that you possess information which it is undesirable that an outsider should possess, have adopted a drastic plan for your removal."

"But it is unfair, inhuman!" he cried. "Through years I have served the Party although not formally one of its members. Only a few months ago I was enabled to render the Cause a secret service which perhaps will be one day made known. They apparently do not recollect that Austen Leigh was my friend, or that through our combined efforts the forty at Nuni escaped."

"I know quite well, Mr. Hubert," the girl said in concern. "Father is also aware of how you have assisted us in the past. Indeed, were it not for the timely warning you gave us in Petersburg we should both of us probably have been in Schusselburg or Siberia to-day. Ah! do not think for a moment that we are ungrateful. We shall try and save you, both of us, if possible. But when the decree has gone forth you know how very difficult it is. Death lurks in the corner least suspected."

"But I can't see why I should be falsely accused of giving information," he protested. "I have never taken the oath to the organization, yet I have ever supported it because I have seen with my own eyes the tyranny of the police and petty officials in Russia. But I have never been an advocate of Tsaricide. Why should he, the head of the State, be sacrificed because of a system which he did not establish and does not tolerate? I am no advocate of murder, and I tell you plainly, as I would tell every Nihilist in London, that if I am falsely condemned, I will go to-night to Scotland Yard and explain the mystery of that cycle shop in Fleet Street."

"Oh! M'sieur Hubert!" gasped the girl white-faced in alarm. "Don't speak like that! You must not utter a syllable of that. It would be fatal to you—to father, to myself—to all of us! No, no! You are not a Nihilist and you have no hand in the plot. For you it does not exist—do you understand?"

"You mean that I should preserve the secret at all hazards?" he said. "Well, if I am condemned as an informer I may as well give some information."

She was silent for a few moments. Then, with her fine eyes turned full upon him, said:

"And sacrifice your friends? That is not like you."

"Then both your father and you are implicated?" he asked.

For answer she slowly nodded her head.

"And the attempt is really to be made as the procession passes along to the Mansion House?"

"Yes," she replied. "So complete are all the arrangements, that nothing can fail. Father says it will be the final coup for which all Russia is waiting."

"Who is that girl in charge of the shop?"

"Marie Bauer, a German student at Geneva, who joined us last year. She is an enthusiast."

"And the man?"

"There are six," she replied, calmly mentioning the names of six of the most dangerous Terrorists out of the Russian prisons. "But," she added, "you will give me your promise of secrecy. Remember what would happen if the conspiracy were discovered."

"I will upon one condition," he answered in a low, earnest voice. "You are aware of the identity of the person who has denounced me as an informer. Tell me his name."

She did not answer. Her eyes were cast to the ground, and her thin fingers toyed nervously with the trimming of her dress.

"You must tell me," he urged. "'To be forewarned is to be forearmed' is one of our English proverbs. What you say shall be in strictest confidence, as all has hitherto been. Who is my enemy?"

"The person who is also mine," she responded in a hard voice.

"And the name?"

"A name you know well," she responded. "The person who has denounced you is one who was once your warmest friend, but now your bitterest enemy—the Countess Lubomirska!"

"Dolores!" he gasped. "Why, I only met her to-day. Is it really her work?"

"Most certainly," was the reply. "The allegation, supported by evidence, was forwarded to my father by the Executive in Petersburg only three days ago."

"Supported by evidence? What do you mean? What was the evidence?"

There was a pause. For some minutes she did not speak.

"There is a letter," she said at last in a low voice. "A letter of confession written by you."

"A letter!" he cried wildly. "Ah, my God! I see it all! I see it all! It is her devil's work. I am lost, Pauline; lost! lost!"

CHAPTER XXXV

HIDDEN MOTIVES

HUBERT knew too well that his situation was one of gravest peril. The scheming woman who had denounced him was vindictive, and would certainly not spare him. She had gone to Eastbourne purposely to watch him, and had undoubtedly seen him in Sylvia's company. Jealousy was therefore the motive of the denunciation. Strange it was, however, that she should have denounced him without awaiting the result of her final appeal.

He could see no way out of the dilemma. Pauline had mentioned a letter in which he had confessed to giving secret information to the Russian police regarding the various plots formed in Petersburg.

Yes; he had written that confession. It was the only security Mirski would take in exchange for his loan, and upon that brief confession, which contained not a word of truth, the old Hebrew had advanced him the money. Yet what better security could he hold? That letter was tantamount to a sentence of death, to be redeemed on repayment of the loan and interest. Strange though it may seem, but compromising documents dealing with the revolutionary movement in Russia are a more valuable security for the repayment of a loan than even landed property, a fact that has been lately revealed in a very striking manner in a Russian Government inquiry.

The letter Hubert had given to Mirski was in terms dictated by the latter, indicating—though, of course, altogether falsely—that he was in communication with the Bureau of Secret Police, and that he had given information which had prevented a certain attempt upon the Tsarevitch from being carried out. The document was "merely a guarantee". It was to be placed in an envelope, to be sealed and deposited in the usurer's safe, there to remain with seal unbroken until the debt, principal and interest, was repaid, when it was to be immediately restored to the writer. On no other terms would Mirski advance the money, and Hubert, to escape imminent disgrace, had accepted. From that moment he had become the slave of his creditor. The pressure put upon him had been, however, most carefully regulated, and even when Mirski had come to Paris to demand payment he had not been too severe.

The usurer's silence, however, was proof of the truth. The letter had passed into the hands of the Countess Lubomirska for a considerable sum, of course. Mirski had covered his risk by selling the guarantee to the woman whom he had suggested he might marry, the woman who was his bitterest enemy.

All was plain. This sudden revelation showed the reason of her wild appeal to him, and her threats when he had refused her marriage. It seemed incomprehensible that any woman could act in such a manner, yet he knew her to be vain, capricious, headstrong, one of those women utterly different to her fellows, a leader among her sex, and a queen over men just as were the Du Barry or the Pompadour. Though fortunately rare, there are nevertheless a few fashionable women of her stamp in London and in Paris to-day, women who, taking a violent fancy to a man, will go to any length in order to satisfy their caprice to become his wife. The criminal courts of Europe have more than once furnished us with striking examples.

Hubert Hutton was condemned to die for a traitorous action of which he was entirely innocent. Too well he knew what was meant by the decree of the Director of the Party of the Will of the People. To escape secret assassination was wellnigh impossible.

That night, in accordance with a promise, he had to dine with the Milbournes, therefore he was compelled to take hasty leave of Pauline, not, however, before she had promised to stand his friend, and to send him an early intimation of danger. As all the transactions of the central council in Petersburg were communicated to the Professor as head-centre of the organization, she was enabled to inform herself of all that was in progress, and she promised to communicate with him if anything unusual transpired. In a few brief sentences he had told her the truth about the compromising letter upon which he had been condemned, and, further, he told her how he had grown to love Sylvia Milbourne, and of their secret engagement. There had never been any affection between Hubert and the Nihilist's daughter, only a firm platonic friendship, and it was owing to the latter that he had exerted himself when in Petersburg a few months ago and succeeded in giving them warning by which they were enabled to escape over the frontier. His friend Mendelseef, chief of the police in Petersburg, had dropped a word while they were dining together of the impending arrest of the Professor and his daughter as "dangerous", hence he had even while at table succeeded by an ingenious device in dispatching a message of warning to father and daughter. Indeed were it not for that timely message the pair would have no doubt been either confined in a fortress or on their way to the new penal settlement in the Pacific, the island of Sakhalin.

He shook her hand, and leaving kind messages for the Professor and promising to call again very soon, he drove down to Victoria, and arrived in Eastbourne just in time to dress, and hurried along to the Milbournes.

Sylvia was, of course, anxious to hear all that he had done, and when at table he related how he had accidentally run up against Grace Fairbairn all were at once interested, for the ex-companion had been a particular favourite with all the household, as well as the confidante of his well-beloved.

The Squire, ruddy and overflowing with good-humour just as he was wont to be in the old days at Ailesworth, sat at the head of the table, and when Sylvia and her mother had gone into the drawing-room he passed over the port to his guest and afterwards filled his glass.

"Well," he said, in his usual brusque manner, "and what's doing in Town—eh ? Preparing for the Tsar's visit, I suppose."

"Yes," was his guest's mechanical reply.

"I see from the papers to-day that there is some suspicion that those blackguards they call Nihilists are over here, and in order to keep an eye on them the Russian Government have sent over a swarm of detectives. I certainly consider it a most scandalous thing that these murderers should attempt to harm their Emperor when he's the guest of the English Court." The fiery old man went on : "If I had my way, I'd string up every Nihilist, whether they be man or woman. The *Morning Post* to-day is very strong upon the point."

Hubert was silent. Little did the Squire dream how near his own home was the inexorable hand of the Terrorists, or that the man who was his guest was condemned to secret assassination. The old man as a thorough-going Englishman of the old type, was furious that we should harbour dangerous foreigners, often paupers, who were expelled from their own country, and who sought London as the only asylum open to them in all the world.

And surely he was not alone in this ! Why should London be the sink of Europe, and the overtaxed Londoner support the penniless foreigner while he plots against his king, or against Government as a system ? It is one of the problems which Londoners have yet to face.

When the two men had drained their glasses they rose and went into the drawing-room, a pleasant apartment with a balcony overlooking the sea, and after coffee Sylvia seated herself at the piano and sang several songs in her sweet contralto, which trilled away in the calm night out into the esplanade below.

Mrs. Milbourne was sitting with Hubert out on the balcony enjoying the starlit night, and while Sylvia sang they chattered. Suddenly the Squire's wife said :

"Oh ! there was one thing I quite forgot. You are fond of puzzles, aren't you ?"

"What kind of puzzles ?" he inquired.

"Mysterious documents," she answered. "Don't you recollect that some time ago I mentioned to you that on my brother's death we found, secreted among some antique jewellery he had collected in the East, a small piece of parchment with some cabalistic writing upon it ?"

"Certainly," he exclaimed eagerly. "You had sent it to some expert, believing it to be in an Eastern language."

"Yes. After all these months it has come back with its purport still a mystery. The professor thinks it an imitation or probably a hoax," she said. "Would you care to see it ?"

"I should be delighted," he responded. "Although where Oxford professors have failed I fear I cannot hope for success."

"Very well, I'll get it for you," she said. "I recollect the interest you took regarding poor Austen's papers that are now in the Safe Deposit Company's vaults. I have often been puzzled to know the reason of your great anxiety regarding them. Why was it ?"

"At present, Mrs. Milbourne, I must refuse to tell you," he answered bravely. "There are reasons—very strong ones—which prevent me from telling the truth, therefore I trust you will forgive my refusal, which is really imperative. As you know, I have taken a deep interest in the fortunes of your family since the death of your brother, and in order to prosecute my inquiries I have been forced to seek information of you. Up to the present, unfortunately, I have been able to learn little ; nevertheless, I somehow feel confident that with your assistance I shall obtain a clue to certain facts that will prove startling and give us an insight into the truth. You mentioned once that Miss Fairbairn was the daughter of a friend of yours. Who was she ?"

"Her father was British Consul at Riga."

"In Riga—Russia," he ejaculated in some surprise. "And have you any idea that she was acquainted with your brother before his advent at the Manor ?"

"At the time I had no suspicion, but from words she afterwards let drop it seemed quite plain that they had long been friends. She admitted that he had visited her father on several occasions."

"She told you that after your brother's death ?"

"Yes."

"And now regarding the coachman, Clipson. Did he never strike you as being a mysterious person ?"

"He was an excellent and most devoted servant."

"And secretly an admirer of Miss Fairbairn—eh ?"

"Do you really think so ?" Mrs. Milbourne asked quickly. "That is quite new to me."

"As far as my observations went such appeared to be the case," he replied, adding : "Depend upon it, the pair were associated in some scheme or other."

"Oh, impossible, Mr. Hutton. You talk of Grace almost as though she were a conspirator or even the assassin of poor Nella."

"I make no allegations," was his calm observation: "I only believe that Grace Fairbairn is aware of the identity of Miss Nella's murderer."

"Do you really think so ?" asked the Squire's wife, bending forward eagerly in her chair. "Surely she would have told us if she had entertained the least suspicion."

"Confession might have meant self-condemnation."

"What ?" she cried, "you suspect her of being implicated in the murder ?"

"I suspect nothing until I obtain direct evidence," he said calmly. "At present, however, direct evidence is wanting."

"But there is such an utter absence of motive in both cases," declared the bereaved lady. "That fact seems to have been the stumbling-block of the police in their inquiries. In cases of murder there is always a motive—jealousy, robbery, avarice, or vengeance. Yet in the case of my two poor girls it seems as if they had not an enemy in the world, and certainly not one who would have dared to enter the house and strike in broad daylight as in the case of Nella."

"I quite admit all that. I discussed the matter at length with Inspector Warren at Scotland Yard. The absence of motive does not admit of any base for a theory. I am seeking an obscure motive."

"It really seems as if an evil destiny has fallen upon our house," said his hostess. "Sylvia confessed to me only a couple of days ago that she has been seized by a constant, ever-haunting dread that she may share the same fate as her sisters. I tried to laugh the foreboding to scorn, but at least I must confess that I have a similar terror of the future. I feel a distinct presage of evil, and am daily in dread lest something should happen to Sylvia."

"I think you need entertain no gloomy thought of that kind," he said reassuringly. "Sylvia herself told me of her fears, but I pointed out to her the unlikelihood of such a thing and made light of her dark apprehensions. No, Mrs. Milbourne, from what I have observed I feel confident that no attempt will be made to harm your daughter."

"Why?"

"I have arrived at that conclusion by logical deduction," he answered, ambiguously.

"You are so mysterious, Mr. Hutton," she protested. "You make me feel quite frightened of you."

He laughed. "I'm not intentionally mysterious," he said. "You asked me a question, and I replied to it to the best of my knowledge."

"Well," she said, rising, "I'll go and get you the piece of parchment which has puzzled them all so much." And she entered the room, and taking an envelope from a drawer, returned and handed it to him.

He drew it from its covering, but in the darkness on the balcony could not distinguish what was written there, hence he placed it in his pocket with a promise to return it to her on the morrow.

And, unknown to him, there idled upon a seat on the sea-front opposite that same vagabond who had watched him at his own window. The fellow smoked his pipe contentedly, keeping his eye upon Mrs. Milbourne and her guest.

His attitude was that of a man of leisure—as one who, confident of success, was in no hurry.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE SECRET OF THE CYCLE SHOP

Hubert strolled along the esplanade to his own quarters, the silent idler still smoking and watching until he had let himself in with his latchkey, then the man knocked the ashes from his pipe, rose, and slunk back to the town, muttering to himself as he went.

The lamp was burning in Hutton's sitting-room, and tossing his golf cap aside he threw himself into a chair at the table, and examined the scrap of parchment which had so puzzled all who had attempted to decipher it. Its appearance was that of an antique document, but he found it to be a marvellously clever imitation well calculated to deceive.

Penned in a small neat hand, in ink that had once been gold, were some lines of what he recognized at once as the secret code of the Nihilist Executive, and with the aid of the decipher which had enabled him to read the other papers left by Austen Leigh, he slowly transcribed the parchment as follows:

> To all men be it known that the Great Ishak is the Emblem of Terror and the Bringer of Death. Let him who reads these lines after my decease take possession of it, and hide it from mortal gaze. Its open exhibition to the light must cause vengeance and death, therefore let it for ever be carefully concealed and seen by no eye save that of him into whose possession it may chance to fall. And having concealed it, let him wrap and seal it carefully, and then communicate with Professor Lomonseff, whose address in Petersburg every member of the Party of the Will of the People will know. To him it must be sent under seal, for the person in whose possession the Emblem of Terror remains is for the time being doomed to a violent end. On no account may other eyes than its possessor's gaze upon it, and on no account may the secret of its possession be told to any other person than the one above-named. To the one who acts upon the

> law therein written the Bringer of Death will be the Giver of Life; but upon the betrayer or the heedless one who allows it to be exhibited in the light of day shall fall a violent and terrible end. Written by my hand at the Manor of Ailesworth this twelfth day of January, 1896.—AUSTEN LEIGH.

The young man sat staring at the parchment lost in wonder. The mistake made by the dead man in leaving all his belongings in the hands of strangers had been fatal.

He had at the moment of his death warned Sylvia and Grace Fairbairn of the Emblem of Terror, but his words had only mystified them. His action had been fatal—fatal! No matter in what direction he looked the veil of mystery seemed impenetrable. One fact alone was too plain, namely, that Dolores had purchased his compromising letter from Mirski, and with it had succeeded in obtaining the passing of the death sentence upon him as a spy and a traitor.

He recollected how that very morning she had laughed triumphantly and disappeared in the hurrying crowd at Victoria Station. She knew that his days were numbered, and it had been her caprice to come to Eastbourne and have one last interview with him.

He longed to confide in Sylvia and tell her of it all, but somehow he hesitated. To explain to her would be to increase the alarm she felt for her own safety. The secret assassin seemed upon them, and she could not rid herself of the ominous apprehension.

That night he slept but little, and in the morning accompanied Sylvia to Strange's and other establishments to do some shopping, after which they went for a stroll upon the lower parade, that long red-brick walk down near the water's edge, which in the morning is the favourite idling place for visitors to the pleasant Sussex town.

He chattered gaily, trying to dispel the dark foreboding which ever arose within him; but he was unable to preserve an outward air of gaiety, and at last his well-beloved turned to him in surprise, saying:

"Hubert, you're not quite yourself to-day, what has happened?"

"Why nothing, dearest," he laughed. "What could have happened?"

"You've been serious ever since you went to Town yesterday," she answered; "did not your business turn out quite satisfactory?"

She turned to look him full in the face, a lithe and charming figure in her white summer gown girdled with neat black, which gave her the appearance of being even younger than she really was.

"Well," he said, "I was not able to conclude what I had intended, and shall be compelled to go up again before long, perhaps to-morrow—or the next day."

And with that the conversation drifted into the usual light chatter of lovers, and her eyelids trembled when he spoke with a fervency that came direct from his honest, upright heart.

The chief point which caused Hubert apprehension was the identity of the person to whose lot it had fallen to strike the blow of vengeance. In England there are several thousand Russian inhabitants of dangerous type, and he knew that peril must lurk in a quarter which he would least suspect. That morning he had purchased a serviceable-looking revolver at a gunsmith's in Terminus Road, and now carried it loaded in his pocket, determined to sell his life as dearly as possible.

Three hot anxious days passed. Each evening at sundown he walked with Sylvia by the sea, mostly over that long-paved promenade towards Beachy Head which they trod on the night when first he told her of his love. In those happy blissful hours of sweet contentment he strove to forget all the dark shadows which overhung them. He lived for her words, and for her sweet passionate caresses when in surreptitious moments he held her slim fragile form in his strong arms. He knew, alas! that their childlike happiness could be only too brief. Nothing that is perfect ever lasts. There is no true love without tears, just as there is no pleasure without pain; and when we declare a thing to be perfect, be it love, or anything else, it is merely synonymous of having reached the point of degeneration and decline.

But Hubert Hutton loved, well knowing the uncertainty of his life, whether when he left her at night he should meet her again on the morrow. The morrow of which they always spoke and found plans would, one day, not dawn for him. He would be stretched cold and dead, the victim of a jealous woman's hatred.

He had seen a line in the fashionable intelligence of the

Morning Post which said: "The Countess Lubomirska, who has been staying at the Langham Hotel for several days, returned to Paris yesterday."

He always recollected her laugh of triumph when they parted at Victoria Station. She had let loose the bloodhounds of the Nihilists upon him, and had returned to Paris fully satisfied with her relentless vengeance. It was true, as they used to say in Petersburg, La Lubomirska had Tartar blood in her, and her race through centuries had been conspicuous for cruelty to their serfs and cunning to their peers. She certainly did not belie the popular opinion.

One morning, four days afterwards, Hubert went again to London. He wanted to seek Kenyon's advice, but the latter had unfortunately gone to Scotland to stay with some people. He spent an hour at the Junior Conservative, which is one of those clubs which seem mostly frequented by country members, and then his curiosity led him down to Fleet Street to again investigate the aspect of the cycle shop. Its exterior presented no fresh feature to what it had done on his previous visit. It was one of those shops which had no customers, and as he passed he saw the girl Bauer who presided over it leaning against the wall talking and laughing with a tall youth with a flower in his buttonhole, who wore the cut of clerk to the knees of his trousers. The luncheon hour had just sounded, and the youth probably spent it in swallowing a sandwich at the nearest ham and beef shop, and afterwards in chatting to the interesting girl who spoke English with an accent. A foreign girl, no matter of what nationality, is always attractive to the embryo City man.

Hutton idled in the busy, bustling crowd opposite the shop for some considerable time, wondering if the mine were yet completed, and hoping to see someone emerge. The Professor had never told him the names of those engaged in the attempt. He had only said that all were trusted, and that there would be no failure.

Suddenly, while he was idling there, it occurred to him that he was exposing himself to unnecessary suspicion, because so carefully do the Nihilists work, they would most certainly have established a watch upon the exterior in order to ascertain whether the English police entertain any suspicion. He knew their methods of precaution in Petersburg, and no doubt they would follow them in London now that this terrible and desperate attempt was to be made. So he lit a cigarette and moved away quite unconcernedly, presently turning into a small Italian restaurant, where he lunched off an excellent *risolle* and a well-cooked *filetto*, washed down with a small flask of Chianti. He smoked, idled over the papers, and it was nearly an hour and a half before he emerged again into the busy thoroughfare and repassed the shop. The door was closed as though the occupants had gone to lunch heedless of any prospective customers. In any other city but London a shop of that character would have attracted the attention of the police, but in our metropolis are so many thousand shops which never appear to transact any business that the police pass them by in utter unconcern. They are known as dead businesses, and unfortunately there are thousands of them in every direction in London to-day.

He had turned and was repassing the shop for the last time prior to taking a cab westward, when to his surprise and satisfaction he came face to face with a clean-shaven, rather spruce white-haired old gentleman in overcoat and tall hat, whose sharp-cut features seemed familiar. In an instant the truth was plain. Notwithstanding the sacrifice of the white moustache and long unkempt beard, and the smart English clothes, he recognized the Professor himself.

The latter gave him a silent look of recognition, and whispering in Russian, "Come, follow me in here," he turned the handle of the shop door and entered.

Hubert followed him straight through the shop and into a small room beyond, wherein the girl was seated with two low-looking foreigners, whom the Professor introduced in the following words:

"This is a friend, Mr. Hubert Hutton, an Englishman, to whom I and Pauline owe our freedom. He is to be trusted." Then turning to Hutton, he said: "These are our companions, Peter Stefanovich and Alexis Trepoff."

The young men bowed, uttering some compliments in Russian, whereupon both men rose and expressed their satisfaction at meeting an Englishman who was a friend.

"So the attempt is to be made here—eh?" asked Hutton of the Professor. "I've passed this place once or twice of late. It is certainly a well-chosen spot, for it is the narrowest piece of roadway in the whole of the itinerary."

"Yes," said the old man, beaming with satisfaction.

"Thanks to our faithful brothers Trepoff and Stefanovich, with their four companions, Bogotseff, Kressar, Vassoravich and Sovinski, the arrangements are complete."

"Sovinski!" exclaimed Hutton quickly. "It is my friend Vladimir Sovinski who was once cashier in the Imperial Bank at Moscow!"

"The same. You know him?" cried Trepoff, a rather sullen, dark-bearded fellow.

"He is one of my best friends. When you see him tell him that Hubert, the Englishman, has inquired after him. I think he will recollect."

"I expect him here every moment," the Russian said, glad that they had met an English friend. "You will probably meet him before you go." Then turning to the Professor, he said: "I suppose you have come to see that all is in readiness?"

"Yes. Is all complete?" asked the head-centre of the Russian revolutionary organization.

"Absolutely."

"Then show me your work," the Professor said. "Mr. Hutton may accompany us if he likes. He is practically one of us."

"The explosives are not yet in place, but the batteries are," Stefanovich remarked. "Trepoff will take you below, and I will remain and work the electrical current."

Then Hubert rose, and accompanying the two Terrorists for whom the Russian Secret Police had been of late searching the whole of Europe, descended into the mouldy smelling basement of the place, where Trepoff lit three bits of candle, one for each of them.

Then crossing to a cellar, he unlocked the door with a key from his pocket, and they entered a cavernous blackness, while to their nostrils there arose the damp smell of newly-dug earth.

They were in the mine over which the Emperor was to pass.

CHAPTER XXXVII

WHAT HUBERT WAS SHOWN

"We encountered many more difficulties than we anticipated," Trepoff explained when they had entered the narrow way tunnelled through the sandy earth. The burrow was so low that they were compelled to bend and grope their way in single file, warned now and then by the conspirator, who pointed out rusty gas and telegraph tubes which crossed above and below them in confusion. "All these pipes formed serious obstacles. If we had injured one, we should have had a gang of men opening the roadway from above to repair it. Therefore we had to exercise the utmost care. We, however, tapped a gas-pipe to give us light," and almost as he said this he lit a small gas-burner, and they found themselves at the end of the tunnel. The weird glance of the hissing jet showed them to be surrounded by pipes of every description. Hubert recognized what patience and hard work had been necessary to drive a tunnel through such a mass of obstacles.

"We are now under the pavement on the opposite side of the road," Trepoff explained, speaking in Russian. "A foot farther on is somebody's cellar into which we have no intention of intruding. Its owner will receive a bad shock to his nerves all in due time," he smiled grimly. "And just imagine what will be the chaos of all these pipes!"

"Yes," laughed the Professor. "Fleet Street will have a rude awakening, I fear."

Hutton gazed around him and saw in the lurid light thrown by the gas-jet how carefully each pipe had been treated so as to avoid injury. A single injudicious blow upon one of them from a pick would have resulted in discovery, for down Fleet Street, the very centre of the great traffic from east to west, there run hundreds of telegraph and telephone wires, with electric light and gas mains, the pneumatic tube of the Post Office, and a dozen or so private telegraph lines, while below is the main sewer with its myriad junctions. To tunnel such a place could only have been done by experts, and certainly the work had been carried out in a manner that would have done credit to any first-class engineer.

"And where is the machine?" the Professor asked of his fellow-conspirator, blinking through his glasses.

"It arrived from our friend Schenk in Hamburg the day before yesterday. Last night we charged it. But we shall not place it in position before the morning of the attempt. The damp down here may affect it."

"Where is it to be placed?" Hubert inquired.

"Back there," replied the Nihilist, pointing with his finger into the dark burrow through which they had come. "We have driven the tunnel to this point in case of necessity. The procession will, of course, pass down the centre of the roadway, and it is there the machine must be fixed. The electric wires are already in position. Perhaps you would like to see them."

The Professor expressed himself intensely interested. Indeed, he regarded it all with the utmost satisfaction. He was an enthusiast in the revolutionary cause, and saw nothing criminal in the removal of the young man who had openly expressed his intention of preserving all the autocratic principles of his late father. The Nihilists had, the Professor often said, given the Tsar Nicholas his chance of life. On his accession they had gone to him in a friendly spirit and prayed for the freedom of Russia, freedom of the Press, and a Representative Government. But His Majesty had refused, and had defied them. In Russia the Nihilists are stronger than the Tsar, notwithstanding that the official classes ridicule such an idea. But they have for the past fifteen years proved themselves to be so, and to-day, although the voice of the Revolutionary is hushed, official Russia is still in the grip of the Terror.

The trio made their way back along the tunnel for a short distance, compelled now and then to squeeze their ribs between the pipes, at some points so numerous as to almost form an impassable barrier, until they came to a spot where a strong deal shelf was fixed upon two telephonic conduits. The shelf was about two feet wide by two feet along, and upon it was screwed a small piece of wood with an electric binding screw at each side, each holding a wire.

"Stefanovich will make the circuit in a few moments," Trepoff remarked. "I asked him to do so. Let us wait a minute."

For a few moments they watched, until of a sudden a long blue flash appeared between the two naked points of wire. A dozen times it was repeated, shooting forth and disappearing as Stefanovich pressed the button concealed in the shop. The Professor, something of an expert in electrical contrivances, expressed his utmost satisfaction.

"A splendid current, to be sure," he remarked. "There is no fear of failure with such a spark."

"It is not to ignite," Trepoff explained, "but to release the hammer for the breaking of the glass containing the acid. All these pipes will be blown to the tops of the houses. We are using such a quantity of the stuff that the explosion will be terrific."

"But you yourselves ?" suggested Hutton. "Are you not afraid of your own safety ? The front of the shop must be blown in."

"Of course. Half the shops in Fleet Street will be wrecked," was the reply. "But we are carrying the wire up to the roof of the house, from which we can see better when to make the circuit, and where we shall be comparatively out of danger. Again, we have examined the roofs closely, and find that from our own roof we can slip across the other houses to a set of offices in a court behind. There is a trap-door in the roof there, and through this we shall escape down to the court, and then slip through East Harding Street into Fetter Lane. Before the true extent of the damage is known, we shall be safely away from the neighbourhood."

"You have prepared for every contingency—eh ?" remarked the Professor.

"We have satisfied ourselves on every point," was Trepoff's reply. "Our greatest peril lay in the possibility of doing damage to these pipes. Had we broken one, we should most certainly have been discovered. Now that we have completed our arrangements, there is but little to fear."

"Save a traitor."

"There are no traitors among us, except that man of whom Sovinski was speaking the other night."

"What man ?" inquired the Professor quickly.

"He did not mention the name. He only said that there was a traitor here, in England, who had been condemned by the Council in Petersburg."

Hutton's eyes met those of the Professor, and each read the other's thoughts. To the young Englishman, the air in that deep burrow was foul and stifling. He was anxious to get back to the light of day, and eager to leave the companionship of these political enthusiasts who had brought murder to a fine art. The attempt that was to be made was certainly a desperate one, and if the mine were exploded beneath that thoroughfare crowded by Londoners eager to see the royal procession, the loss of life must, he knew, be terrible. But these men cared nothing for the sacrifice of the innocent as long as the monarch they hated as head of the autocracy were removed.

In Petersburg similar attempts had been made, but they had all been discovered in time by the lynx-eyed police. In free London, however, it was different. They were, with the exercise of a little ordinary caution, able to do exactly as they pleased.

The three men groped their way back to the cellar whence they had entered the tunnel, and Trepoff, leading the way along a short passage in the basement, passed into a small chamber where the light of day entered through the grating above in the footway of Fleet Street. Every moment the fleeting shadows of the thousands of passers-by were cast across the place, which looked strange and bizarre with the single bar of sunlight striking across it. In the days when Dr. Johnson lived behind in Gough Square and took his ease at evening beneath the trees there, the place had evidently been the kitchen of the house, but for the past fifty years no one had resided there, hence the place was full of lumber and rubbish.

"You would perhaps be interested to see the machine ?" asked Trepoff of the Professor.

"Certainly I should," was the other's reply. "Schenk wrote to me describing it."

"The invention is a marvel of ingenuity," declared the conspirator. "Only a German could construct such a delicate piece of mechanism. With it, failure is impossible."

And approaching a high cupboard, he unlocked it with his key, and lifted out a wooden box about a foot and a half square and twelve inches in depth, which appeared of considerable weight. It was strongly bound at the corners with iron, and as he placed it upon a kind of dresser that ran the whole length of one side of the dilapidated place, he exercised every care so that it should be given no unnecessary jar.

He unlocked it with a small key which he took from his vest pocket, and lifting the lid disclosed a quantity of delicate machinery, in the centre of which ran a long glass tube filled with some liquid, and over it was a small hammer uplifted, ready to descend and shatter the glass.

"Is it not beautiful?" asked Trepoff in admiration. "Does it not do our companion Schenk the greatest credit?"

"He is indeed a marvellous mechanic," declared the Professor, bending to examine the terrible engine of death more closely. "I can recognize how he has improved upon the original plan."

"He has contrived so that the hammer may be released at any instant by the electric current. The clockwork movement that we first adopted would have been quite useless. At touch of the button the spring is released, the hammer swings over, shatters the glass, and in an instant there is an explosion that will wreck half Fleet Street. Dynamite is always dangerous, but acid, properly used, never fails."

"The acid was made here, in London, was it not?" asked the Professor.

"Levitski made it in Whitechapel. Some of the same has been sent to Moscow for the Samara attempt. It is of the highest strength possible."

"There was danger in charging it, was there not?" Hutton inquired.

"Yes, a little," the Russian replied. "But personal danger counts for little in an attempt of the magnitude of the present."

Hutton held his candle aloft, and peering into the fatal box saw what a marvellous finish was upon the complicated piece of bright brass mechanism. Beneath the hammer was a thick wedge of wood to prevent it jarring down upon the glass and producing a catastrophe. Only that small piece of wood stood between the conspirators and death.

The glass tube containing the acid was hermetically sealed at either end, and just fitted into brass slots that had been carefully adjusted for its reception. The release of that liquid upon what was contained in the body of the box would produce a shock that would shake Europe to its very foundations.

Slowly, with tender solicitude, Trepoff closed the lid, relocked it, and carried it with infinite care back to the cupboard.

"You see," he said, "we are in readiness. At any moment we can fix the machine and blow the roadway into the air."

"But you are keeping a careful watch outside ?" suggested the old Professor. "The police must not suspect."

"Kressar and Bogotseff are without. The former sells newspapers at the corner of Chancery Lane, and the latter has taken up his stand at the corner of Bouverie Street opposite and sells wax-matches and shoelaces."

The Professor was thoughtful for a moment.

"They would not be recognized by any of the agents of the Secret Police from Petersburg ? Zoubaroff has imported a hundred or so of them, recollect."

"Bah !" the other responded. "We do not fear them. Our companions are too well disguised. They are quiet, inoffensive street-hawkers who ply their trade from one end of Fleet Street to the other and have their eyes open on every side, and especially upon this house. Any person who chances to enter the shop as a customer is followed, and his movements noted."

Hubert recollected how he had been followed, and by whom.

"Sometimes, I suppose, you employ other persons to follow the customers besides the two men who are under the guise of street-vendors ?"

"Sometimes," replied Trepoff evasively.

"On some occasions it is a lady—eh ? An English lady ?" he remarked quietly.

The Russian started quickly, and glared suspiciously at him.

"And," Hubert went on, amused at the man's confusion, "if I am not mistaken, the lady's name is Fairbairn, and she once lived in Russia—in Riga to be exact."

"You are exceedingly well informed," the other was compelled to admit at last. "Are you acquainted with the lady ?"

"She made my acquaintance the other day, when she followed me," he said with affected unconcern. "Is she an associate ?"

"She is ; I suppose there need be no secret of it from you. She has been an active member for some time."

Hutton smiled grimly. At last he had learnt one fact that was quite startling and unexpected. The quiet and trustworthy Grace Fairbairn, the woman who was present at Austen Leigh's death, was an active member of the Terrorist organization.

Knowledge of that truth gave him the clue of several matters which had hitherto been completely enshrouded in mystery.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A REVELATION

When the three men ascended and re-entered the little parlour behind the shop, Hutton saw that Peter Stefanovich had a visitor, a tall, thin, sandy-haired, ill-dressed man, whose back was turned towards him.

As they entered, however, the stranger turned quickly and faced them. Then, in an instant, Hubert recognized in the new-comer his friend of Petersburg days, Vladimir Sovinski, who had, until he joined the active band of Terrorists, occupied a responsible position as second cashier in the Imperial Bank at Moscow.

"You !" gasped the Russian, his blue eyes glaring from his head in abject surprise. "Is it really you—Hubert Hutton ?"

"It is," laughed the other, amused at the effect his sudden appearance had produced. "Is there anything very extraordinary in this meeting, having regard to the fact that our ideas upon certain subjects are identical."

"Yes," responded the other with a sudden change of voice ; "it is more than remarkable that we should meet here."

The Professor pricked up his ears in an instant and scented the opening of a quarrel. Vladimir was a quick-tempered fellow he knew, therefore he was ready in a moment to act as arbitrator.

"I don't quite follow you, Vladimir," remarked the young Englishman quickly. "When we last parted it was as friends —good friends—and yet to-day you have apparently forgotten how firm was our friendship in those days of wild excitement and hiding from the police."

"I will speak with you in private," answered the Russian meaningly. "Then you will follow me."

"What you desire to say may be said before my friend, Professor Lomonseff," exclaimed Hutton hotly. "I have nothing to conceal, and nothing to regret."

The Russian was silent, looking straight into the Englishman's face.

"Nothing ?" he asked.

"Nothing," was the reply.

"Trepoff has taken you below, I presume ?"

"He has."

"And you have seen everything ?"

"Everything."

The sandy-haired man's lips compressed and a hardness showed in the corners of his mouth. His three fellow-conspirators regarded him with some interest, unable to ascertain the reason of his strangeness of manner towards the man who had always stood his friend.

"Then we must speak together in private," he said. "You must not refuse me this."

"Certainly. I have no reason to refuse, if you so wish," the other responded, smiling.

Sovinski led the way across to a small kind of boxroom on the opposite side of the shop, a bare apartment only a few feet square and lit by a pane of ground glass a few inches in length.

"Hubert Hutton," exclaimed the Russian in a determined voice when he had closed the door and placed his back against it, "you are an informer, and you have dared to enter here in order to spy upon us and give information to the police !"

The Englishman drew himself up, quite calm and unmoved.

"I am no informer !" he answered. "And I have not come here for the purpose of spying. I was invited here by my friend, Professor Lomonseff."

"But you are condemned as a traitor to the Cause. You learnt our secrets in Petersburg and gave them to a high official of police who was hospitable to you, and whose wife very charming," he sneered.

"You lie, Vladimir," Hutton responded, without however betraying the fierce indignation he felt. "I have never in all my life uttered one single word regarding the Party of the Will of the People to any outsider whatsoever."

"You knew Austen Leigh ?"

"True, I knew him."

"And you knew that into his possession passed the Emblem of the Terror, the Great Ishak ?"

"I have, since his death, discovered that what you say is correct."

"And where is it at this moment ?"

"I have, unfortunately, no idea," was the young Englishman's reply.

Sovinski grunted dubiously.

"But you have seen it ?"

"Yes, I saw it on two occasions."

"And yet you gave no notice to the Executive in Petersburg that it was in undesirable hands ?"

"It was no affair of mine," was Hutton's reply.

"But you surely knew the fatality that must attend it ?" the Russian remarked, his cold blue eyes fixed upon his whilom friend.

"I was not sufficiently versed in the laws and actions of the Executive to be fully aware of the grave risks attending its exhibition, until——"

"Until what ?"

"Until it was too late."

Sovinski smiled grimly, as though he pitied his friend's simplicity. Hutton saw that he was suspicious of him, believing that he had come there to spy and to give information afterwards to the police. Truth to tell, the young Englishman was entirely antagonistic towards the great plot which had been so cunningly arranged, yet by his intimate association with that strange society of moralists and murderers, and his personal friendship with the Professor, he was held to silence. At that moment his friend Lomonseff entered, and stood without uttering a word.

"You have recently arrived from Petersburg ?" Hutton went on. "You were told there that I had been condemned ?"

"I was present at the meeting of the Executive when your case was tried and decided," said the other coldly.

"I can only say that I am falsely accused by a woman who seeks my ruin and death," declared Hutton angrily.

"Oh !" exclaimed the other, a little surprised. "No woman's name was mentioned in connection with it. A letter of yours had been obtained from the office of a Jew money-lender named Mirski. Do you know him ?"

"He has lent me money, and I gave him a letter as security. It was written at his dictation—a compromising document stating that I was a Nihilist, and at the same time an informer. He would only grant me the loan on that security, well knowing that upon its secrecy depended my life."

Sovinski grunted again in a tone of disbelief.

"I know it," remarked the Professor. "What our friend Hubert says is the truth. He is the victim of that vile woman, La Lubomirska."

"But the woman's name was never mentioned in the council," Sovinski remarked. "The letter had, by some means, been extracted from among Mirski's securities."

"Of course it was stated to have been stolen in order not to connect the woman with the terrible and ingenious vengeance which she had planned," declared the Professor. "I am in possession of the whole of the facts. I have known long ago how our friend here borrowed money of Mirski, one of the most unscrupulous Jews in Petersburg, and how he had given as security a sealed letter. La Lubomirska's maid is one of us, and through her it was known to me that the Countess bought it of the Jew, paying him the principal and interest of the loan. I believe that she intended to use the letter with him privately, in order to induce him to marry her. I never dreamed that she would bring it before the Executive as evidence of alleged traitorous dealings, otherwise I should have at once denounced the woman as attempting to use the Cause for purposes of her own private vengeance. It is easy to see why the woman held aloof from the allegation. Mirski is her tool in most of her dealings. That has been proved a dozen times before."

"One charge brought against Mr. Hutton was that while knowing the whereabouts of the Great Ishak he did not rescue it and return it to the Executive," Sovinski remarked.

"I saw it twice only," replied the Englishman, "and on those occasions under the circumstances which made it impossible for me to obtain possession of it. Probably, however, the Executive are unaware that I succeeded in collecting the whole of the documents that were in Austen Leigh's possession and placing them in a safe to which it is impossible for any person to gain access."

"What?" cried the Professor excitedly. "You have actually traced and rescued those lists and other documents which I placed in the dead man's charge?"

"I have," was the calm reply. "When you come to go through them, I believe you will find them complete, and in addition are several of his own statements, written in cipher, which are of utmost interest."

"Where did you discover them ?"

"In the hands of his sister. She had them lying about openly, and was asking everyone she met if they could decipher them. I saw them, and at once recognizing their importance, induced her to allow me to put them away in one of the vaults of the Safe Deposit Company, quite close to this spot. They have been there ever since."

"Has no one seen them ?"

"No one, except myself. With the aid of a key which I discovered concealed in the body of one of the documents, I've been enabled to decipher most of them, and ascertain several very startling truths. Leigh's confession is written there, and forms remarkable reading."

"His confession—of what ?" asked Lomonseff.

"Of how he became a member of the Party of the Will of the People. It is recorded, together with a number of interesting facts which have hitherto remained a mystery."

"Are the documents accessible ?"

"Yes, without very much difficulty. The dead man's sister has the key in her possession."

"You mean Mrs. Milbourne ? That is the name, is it not ?"

"Yes," Hutton replied.

"Milbourne—Milbourne ?" exclaimed Sovinski, as though attracted by the name. "Who is Mrs. Milbourne ?"

"Sister of Austen Leigh. When he left Russia he went to her house in an obscure English village and, after some months of concealment, died there, leaving his papers at the mercy of everybody. Among the members of the household was a woman named Grace Fairbairn, whom you know, and a mysterious man named Clipson. He was an intimate associate of hers. Is he known ?"

Both men shook their heads.

"His name sounds English," the Professor remarked.

"He is undoubtedly English."

"Ah, then he is not one of us. He may be a friend of Miss Fairbairn's, but we do not know him."

"Leigh was his friend, and induced his sister to take him into her service as coachman," Hutton remarked.

"He is not one of us," Sovinski declared decisively.

"Has the woman Fairbairn been a member of the organization for long ?"

"A few years, and she has done some work," the Russian answered. "She has been especially vigilant during the progress of the work here."

"I had no idea that she was implicated in the plot until the other day, when she followed me, and was, in her turn, followed by the man of whom I've just spoken—Clipson."

"Oh, she was followed by him—eh ?" remarked Sovinski, in quick suspicion. "For what reason, I wonder."

"He may be her lover, and seeing me with her his jealousy became aroused," Hutton said. "That was the idea that occurred to me."

"Or, what seems more likely, he may be a police spy," remarked Vladimir in a slow, deliberate tone. "Have you any suspicion of him being in connection with the police ?"

"None whatever," the Englishman responded. "When in the Milbournes' service he was a model of what the steady, careful coachman should be. His references were excellent, and they got rid of him only because they were compelled to reduce their establishment."

"You had no suspicion of him ?"

"Not at the time. I have now," was Hubert's answer. "He dresses fashionably, and none who see him in London to-day would ever dream that he is only a coachman. He is, for some unknown reason, disguised as a gentleman."

"Which points conclusively to my theory that he is a spy," observed Sovinski.

"But he has never been here ?" Hubert asked.

"No. It would not be good for his health if he dared to put his nose inside this place," he laughed. "We know well how to deal with persons of his stamp. If he entered here, he would not leave again."

"But what is to be done regarding the decree which the Executive have issued against Mr. Hutton ?" the Professor asked ; for although he was head-centre of the Terrorists and director of their many ingenious plots, yet the condemnation of spies was the affair of the Central Council in Petersburg, that small assembly that ruled the destinies of nearly a million persons of both sexes and all ages banded together in the vain and hopeless cause of Russian freedom. He was informed of each death decree, so that he should be warned of the identity of the spy, but to interfere with the decision of the all-powerful Executive was a difficult and thankless task.

They ruled one side of that most remarkable of all the secret societies in the world, and he alone ruled the other, aided by a band of a dozen or so of the chosen fearless ones.

The Great Plot now about to be consummated in London had been in progress for over a year—ever since it first became known that the Emperor was coming to England. Indeed, the information regarding the Tsar's arrangements came from His Majesty's private cabinet. The Nihilists have their emissaries in the very household of the Emperor, who, alas ! knows it, and is ever fearful lest an attempt should be made upon him by one or other of his trusted officials or servants. As is well known, a tragedy occurred at Peterhof not long ago. A servant passing along one of the corridors made a swift movement to draw back at the approach of His Majesty, when the latter's companion, the well-known governor of one of the southern provinces, believing that the servant was about to draw a revolver, whipped out his own weapon and in an instant shot the poor fellow dead. It was found that the man had no weapon, and that his movement had been quite a natural one.

Ah ! the tragedy of a Tsar's life is truly pitiable. And, strangely enough, all the reforms recently made—the better treatment of prisoners, the lightening of taxation, and the free emigration to Siberia, the land of promise—do not cause the carping voice of the Nihilist to be one whit the less distinct, or induce the Terrorist to cease exercising his cunning in devising plots.

But, alas ! while the secret organization wrongly called Nihilism continues to be ruled by the six desperate but anonymous enthusiasts in Petersburg, as it is, it will always remain essentially a society whose chief motif is Tsaricide.

The Professor had been speaking with Sovinski in an undertone, and had walked a little apart from Hutton, as though they were trying to devise a plan.

"No," said Sovinski at last, in a tone of distinct regret ; "I cannot see how we can get the order rescinded—unless the Countess Lubomirska acknowledges the truth, which she is not likely to do. You see the decree is signed, and the person who is to remove the alleged traitor is already designated. To-day or to-morrow the order will no doubt reach the hand which is to strike the blow."

"Who is ordered to kill me ?" demanded the condemned man quickly. "I am a friend. Surely you will tell me?"

Sovinski met him face to face, but no reply came from his lips. He had no right to forewarn the man who was to fall victim.

"You may speak, Vladimir," the Professor said very calmly. "Remember, our friend is condemned unjustly."

Again he hesitated, but at last said in a low, strained voice:

"The person ordered to assassinate you secretly is a woman."

"A woman!" Hubert cried. "Who?"

"A lady whom I believe is known to you. Her name was given to the Executive in Petersburg as Miss Sylvia Milbourne."

"Sylvia!" he cried, reeling back as though he had been struck a blow. "Sylvia—to kill me! My God—my God!"

CHAPTER XXXIX

DEATH TO THE SPY

THE effect of the startling announcement was electrical. Hubert Hutton stood glaring at the speaker open-mouthed.

"Do you solemnly allege that Sylvia Milbourne is a Nihilist ?" he demanded, when at last he found tongue. "Why, it's impossible ! She knows nothing of Russia, or of the revolutionary movement."

"I have spoken the truth," declared Sovinski, in a calm voice. "I have no knowledge of the lady, save her name. You apparently know her."

"Know her ?" he echoed. "Yes, I do know her. I'm engaged to marry her !"

"To marry her !" gasped the Professor. "And she is ordered to kill you ?"

Sovinski replied, saying :

"The Executive decided that the execution of the decree should be placed in the lady's hands. In telling you this I am betraying the confidence of the Secret Council," he added.

"No," responded Lomonseff. "In explaining this, you are delivering an innocent man from death. My friend Hutton has ever been loyal to the Cause. It is scandalous that he should be thus falsely accused."

"He is accused on his own handwriting," the ex-bank cashier remarked coldly, for he was undoubtedly suspicious of the Englishman, even though the Professor vouched for his honesty of purpose.

"Upon a letter dictated by a usurer," the old man pointed out. "Strict inquiry should have been made into such a case before the death sentence was passed. Hitherto the glorious principles of Nihilism have been synonymous with justice. But it is not so in this case. The Executive has been tricked by an ingenious woman. She desires to kill our friend Hutton, and uses the power of the organization for that purpose in order not to stain her hands with crime. It has all been most cleverly arranged—indeed so cleverly that you, shrewd as you usually are, have been misled. You see in the victim here a spy and a traitor, while I, who know him, see a firm and devoted friend to the Cause, and a staunch and true supporter of the great movement to which we have devoted our lives—and our liberty if needs be."

"It certainly seems a cruel irony of Fate that the woman he loves should be compelled to encompass his death," Sovinski said.

"No, not Fate," Hutton remarked. "The woman Lubomirska has arranged it, in order that her revenge shall be overwhelming and complete !"

"Curse La Lubomirska !" cried the Professor violently. "She killed my poor Ivan, and she will, if she can arrange it, kill you."

"I look to the organization for assistance," Hutton remarked, his face pale and showing some excitement. "I have done my best, as the Professor knows, and I am not ashamed to face the fair and open judgement of the Executive. But the secret blow aimed at me by this unscrupulous woman should be combated, and I appeal to those whom I have assisted to help me in this hour of my danger."

"I can't see how we can," remarked Sovinski. "You are condemned as a spy, and by the strict rules we should hold no communication with you, for to all intents and purposes you are an enemy."

"The only way by which the order of the Executive could be rescinded is the acknowledgment on the part of the Countess that she denounced you from motives of private vengeance," remarked the Professor thoughtfully.

"Ah !" cried Hutton. "She will never do that. You know her well enough."

"I agree," said the old man. "She will never withdraw because she knows her success is assured. Nevertheless I cannot at present see how we can assist you. The decree has been issued, and, as you are well aware, there is no appeal from it."

Both Sovinski and Lomonseff were hopeless. The first-named was now convinced that the young Englishman had fallen a victim to La Lubomirska, and he was anxious to render him a service. But how ? Even the Professor, the ingenious head-centre of the Terrorists, could devise no plan.

At last, promising to return to them soon, Hubert shook hands with both men, and, bidding adieu to Trepoff, went out, walking westward along the Strand.

Sylvia—his Sylvia was actually a member of that band of conspirators who terrorized Russia and were dreaded throughout all Europe! He could not believe it. The fact was absolutely staggering. And, moreover, that she of all women should be compelled to kill him!

When he had strolled with her in the Devonshire Park, on the previous evening, she had been her old self, gay, light-hearted, frank-faced, and full of a keen sense of humour. He recalled her demeanour, and was convinced that it was not of a woman compelled to commit murder. Perhaps, however, it was as Sovinski had said, the fatal order had not then reached her.

Should he return to Eastbourne and see her? He must see her again, sooner or later, for he loved her, even though her hand should strike him down.

No! He would himself commit suicide rather than she should be branded as a murderess.

Where should he see her? It would be more private at his own rooms, if he could induce her to call there. He calculated that if he caught the train at two o'clock, he could be at home by half-past four; therefore he sent her a telegram asking her to call at his lodgings at five, as he wished to see her on a very important matter. Then he took a cab to Victoria and travelled south again, his mind full of ominous thoughts.

At five o'clock he was sitting in his room gazing idly across the broad channel, bright and sparkling in the golden rays of the setting sun. Through the open window came the sound of many voices mingling with the strains of a band and the merry laughter of children, the conglomeration of mirth which is inseparable from a seaside resort in summer. He sharply closed the window to shut it out. Usually he was fond of it, but that afternoon it jarred upon his nerves.

As he turned back to his chair, the maid-of-all-work entered announcing that a lady had called.

He gave orders that she was to be shown in, and a moment later Sylvia, dressed in her white summer gown and black "picture" hat, entered his presence. In an instant he saw how changed she was. Her face was blanched, almost as white as the gown she wore, her eyes were dark and sunken, and the hand that she offered him trembled as he took it in his grasp.

"Sylvia," he said, in a deep voice when the servant had gone, "I trust you will forgive me for asking you here, but I wish to speak with you alone."

She tried to look her lover in the face, but hung her head without uttering any response. He saw quite plainly that the stern, inexorable decree had reached her hand.

"You are not well, dear," he said in a more kindly tone. "Has the heat upset you, or what ?"

"I—I'm not very well," she faltered. "I think perhaps I ought not to have come out, only your telegram was so urgent."

"What I wish to speak to you about, dearest, admits of no delay," he said, taking both her trembling hands in his as they stood together in the centre of the room. In his action his arm accidentally brushed against the crimson rose she wore in her corsage, crushing it and causing the leaves to flutter to the ground, the emblem of a shattered love.

He was silent for a few minutes, and she, with her eyes fixed upon the carpet and her chest heaving and falling quickly, stood immovable, dreading what words he was about to utter.

"Sylvia," he said at last, in a voice scarcely above a whisper, "we both have secrets from each other. Is it not time that we should both be frank and open ?"

"Secrets !" she echoed in a voice quite unusual to her. "I love no one except you, Hubert." And with a sudden movement she flung both her arms about his neck, and, burying her face upon his shoulder, burst into wild tears.

"I know, dearest," he said, drawing her closer to him. "I know that you love me just as fervently and just as passionately as I love you. But our love has only brought us unhappiness—or, to be plain, tragedy."

She drew a long breath and a shudder ran through her as he held her in his arms.

"Ah, Hubert !" she cried with wild despair, disengaging herself and throwing herself upon her knees before him. "Forgive me ! I have deceived you, and am myself only fit to die. Forgive me !" and she grasped his hand and pressed it to her lips.

"You have not yet told me your secret," he said in a low voice, bending over her.

"I cannot. My tongue refuses to explain my true position!" she cried.

"Then shall I tell you?" he asked. "Is it not a fact that you are a Nihilist?"

"Alas! it is too true," she faltered. "When I took the oath I never dreamt that it would lead to this."

"Tell me how, and under what circumstances, you became a revolutionist," he urged, assisting her to rise to her feet.

"It was owing to Grace Fairbairn," she said, quickly, in a strange, half-frightened voice. "I was in ignorance, and was led into it without dreaming that I was joining a band of murderers and dynamitards. It appears that when Uncle Austen came to live with us he very quickly discovered that Grace, while living with her father in Riga, had joined the revolutionists. Hence he and Grace quickly became friends, for, like him, she knew Russia, and was an enthusiast in the cause of Russian freedom. For some months I remained in ignorance of all this, until one day I overheard a remarkable conversation between them. My curiosity was aroused, and on speaking to my uncle, he admitted that both he and Grace were Nihilists, and he suggested that I should become enrolled and learn the secrets of the greatest organization in the world. The secrecy of the thing attracted me, and next day, in the presence of Grace, my uncle read over the oath of secrecy. I took it solemnly, and my name was forwarded to St. Petersburg as that of a new member. After a week or so, however, I ceased to take any interest in it. Nihilism, in the novels I had read, seemed surrounded by a glamour of romance, but I found it a very matter-of-fact affair, and before long I let the subject drop. At length, however, my uncle died under circumstances of which you are aware, and before the return of my mother and the others I managed, with Grace's connivance, to secure several letters and papers which I found in a drawer in his writing-table. I know little about them, but in securing them believed that I should perhaps discover the secret of my uncle's life. Two of the papers are letters, and I have them with me."

She unbuttoned the corsage of her white gown, and withdrew two of three folded papers, which she handed to him.

"Well?" he said. "Go on. I am all attention."

"There is little more to tell," she answered in an ominous voice. "Grace, as a Nihilist, preserved my uncle's secret that he was so actively associated with the revolutionary movement in Russia. And I, a member, dare not utter a word. All those documents in cipher which were afterwards found, we suspected were connected with the movement for the freedom of Russia. But both Grace and I held our own counsel. We dare not express any opinion."

"And afterwards?" he said earnestly."

"Afterwards—nothing," she answered. "The death of Uncle Austen cooled any enthusiasm for the oppressed in Russia that we had ever held, and the tragedies that fell upon our house caused us both to forget the curious and rather romantic incidents of the past." And after a pause she added: "Then you, Hubert, came into my life, and I forgot everything. I lived only for love of you, and when you asked me to become your wife, it was the culmination of the ecstasy of an ardent passion."

Again she paused, and he saw that her fine clear eyes were filled with tears.

"Yes," he said, taking her hand and imprinting a fervent kiss upon her white brow. "Continue!"

"No!" she cried, covering her face with her hands. "I can't tell you the rest. It is terrible—too terrible!"

"But I must know," he said slowly. "You must tell me sooner or later."

"Ah, yes. But not now," she implored. "I can't. I really can't."

A silence fell between them. He had his arm about her waist, and felt her trembling.

"Sylvia," he said at last, recognizing how painful was the situation to her as well as to himself. "Sylvia, shall I tell you the truth that I have already learnt?"

She sighed deeply, but no word passed her lips.

"Is it not a fact," he asked, "that you are ordered by the Executive in Petersburg to kill me as a spy and a traitor?"

She burst into a torrent of tears, utterly unable to control herself further. Loving him with all her heart and soul, she saw in her present position the direct tragedy. She, who loved him so dearly, was ordered to strike him dead in secret—to stain her hands with the life-blood of her love. Ah! the tragedy of it all. Was ever a death-sentence more cruel or more inhuman?

"It is the truth," she gasped hoarsely. "This morning an unknown man, whom I have seen many times of late loitering on the promenade, called upon me and handed me the order, signed by three members of the Nihilist Executive. It is here." And again she placed her hand in her breast and produced a folded sheet of paper written in Russian, and bearing on the back a translation in English.

The document was a remarkable one. The order read: "That you shall remove in secret, by any means that may appear best for your own security against detection, your acquaintance, the Englishman named Hubert Hutton, who is condemned as a spy and informer. His death must be formally reported to Monsieur Paul Bigatti, 64, Rue Blanche, Paris, on or before September the ninth next. Failure will mean death to yourself. Recollect that every secret is strictly preserved, and that the whole power of the organization throughout Europe is at the disposal of those who successfully remove spies."

"And you are to kill me?" he remarked in the hard, strained voice of a man who was utterly hopeless of the future.

"Kill you!" she cried wildly. "Kill you, Hubert? Never, I would rather die by my own hand than harm you."

"But such a decree cannot be disobeyed," he pointed out. "If you refuse, then both of us will die swiftly and secretly. The Nihilist Executive will brook no refusal. No death-warrant issued by them has ever been rescinded, and no spy has ever escaped the death he deserves."

"You are not a spy, Hubert!" the girl cried. "I can't belive it."

"No, dearest," he said. "I am not a spy. I am merely the victim of a strange combination of circumstances. I've been falsely denounced by a person who is my enemy."

"And is there no escape?" she asked. "Are not the Executive aware of your innocence?"

"I am adjudged guilty until my innocence is established," he said with a grim smile. "I fear, however, that I shall never be able to convince them of their error. My enemy is too ingenious, and has already taken all precaution against my defence. No, dearest, you must accept the decree."

"And kill you?"

"No," he answered firmly. "Rather than you shall become a murderess, I will commit suicide. And perhaps, after all, the sooner I end my life the better."

"Ah! don't talk like that!" she cried, in an endeavour to soothe him. "Have both courage and patience. Perhaps we may discover some way to evade this cruel order which means death to one or both of us."

He shook his head.

"You, unfortunately, do not realize the seriousness of that decree," he said very gravely. "It means death to me inevitably. My days are numbered just as much as though I were in a condemned cell awaiting execution. But I will never allow you to stain your hands with my blood. I will go away, ere long, and my body will be found, and an inquest held upon it. Then, Sylvia," he added brokenly, "you will have remained innocent of crime, and will be free to love some other man more worthy of you."

"But I love you, Hubert," she burst forth full of adulation. "I can never love another man—never."

"Ah! you must," he said in a low, distinct tone. "You, Sylvia, have life and love before you. I, alas! am doomed to die."

And in the golden sunlight that streamed into that room, the woman whose hand was forced to strike the fatal blow against her lover stood locked in the strong arms of the man who was to be victim, and in the fierce passionate caresses they exchanged were the final culmination of a sweet, idyllic, and rapturous affection.

Alas! how quickly had their happiness been dispelled and their enthusiastic love transformed into tragedy.

Yet in life it is ever so. The sunshine of to-day is followed by the storm of to-morrow, and we see far more of the gathering clouds than of their silver linings.

CHAPTER XL

A LAST APPEAL

THE open-air cafés of the Champs Elysées, the Ambassadeurs, the Alcazar, the Folies Marigny, and all the rest, were bright with illuminations and in full swing as Hubert Hutton walked quickly beneath the trees towards the Rond Point. He was back again in the City of Light.

From the gaily-lit gardens with their open-air stages came bursts of music, vocal and instrumental, and now and then loud rounds of applause. At night the fine wide thoroughfare with its leafy promenades is quiet, almost dismal, yet here and there along it are dotted the gayest of the variety theatres, where Parisians delight to sip their free *consommation* and pass the *soirée* listening to the drolleries of Polin, the latest ditties of Paulus, or the new songs of Yvette Guilbert, Liane de Vries, Polaire or Lise Fleuron.

But the Englishman strode on heedless, unconscious of everything save the one object upon which he was bent. The Paris cab is always a terror to the unwary foreigner, for the driver, like the gentlemen of his profession in Petersburg, slackens his pace for nobody. At last, however, Hutton succeeded in running the gauntlet, and passing up the Avenue Bois de Boulogne, halted before a large "hotel" and rang the bell.

He had only arrived in Paris at five o'clock, and, having dressed and dined, had lost no time in making his intended call.

The door was thrown open by Ivan, Dolores's well-trained Russian servant, who, recognizing the visitor as a favoured person, informed him that the Countess was at home and alone. She had just finished dinner, and was in her boudoir. Therefore Hubert tossed down his hat and followed the man into the small reception room, where he waited while his visit was announced.

In a few moments the man returned, full of regrets, saying :

"The Countess regrets that she has a severe headache, and is unable to receive m'sieur this evening."

"But I must see her, Ivan," he declared, determinedly; and slipping half a louis into the man's ready palm, he walked past him, ran up the stairs, and entered the boudoir unannounced.

The Countess sprang to her feet as he entered, asking haughtily:

"And by what right, sir, do you thus intrude upon me when I have already ordered my servant to send you away? Did not our friendship end in London?"

"It did; and I am not here to attempt to resume it," he said, closing the door behind him resolutely, and locking it. "I have come here to-night to speak with you."

She laughed, a strange dry laugh, inclining her head as though she were all eagerness for him to begin.

"You might really have saved yourself any such inconvenience," she said, still standing and purposely not inviting him to be seated.

"Yes," he said, "perhaps I might. But owing to your action in purchasing Mirski's security for his loan to me, and by its means denouncing me to your friends in Petersburg as a spy, we have a small account to settle."

"What do you mean?" she asked, looking at him with an undisguised expression of alarm. Her face changed as he spoke those words. She had been haughtily defiant when he entered, and her cream silk gown, with its trimming of red roses, had swept the ground with queenly air, but now, with her quick, womanly perception, she saw that he was in possession of the truth, and she was for the moment cowed.

"I mean what I have said," was his quick reply. "You have, with cowardly ingenuity, plotted to kill me, just as you drove poor Ivan Lomonseff to his death."

Her lips compressed. Mention of that young Russian's name cut her to the heart. Although utterly unscrupulous, she somehow had never forgotten that she had been directly responsible for the tragic end of that man who had adored her. And yet was it not his own fault? she often asked herself. She had encouraged him, it was true, just as she had encouraged others, to become her cavalier. The others had not committed suicide; why should he? Then she would try to console herself with the belief that it was not wholly her fault.

But with the man now before her it was different.

Because of his refusal to become her husband she had gone deliberately to work to wreak her vengeance, not only upon him, but upon the English girl he loved. And he had discovered the depth of her perfidy.

"It is hardly like you to insult a woman," she said, frowning, for want of some better reply.

"You have shown yourself my bitterest enemy," he answered. "Were it not for the fact that I have friends among the revolutionists whom you have made your catspaw in this affair, I should have gone to my death in ignorance that it was you—the woman who, only a few months ago, declared her love for me—who was directly responsible for the dastardly plot. Fortunately, however, I know the truth—the whole truth. You bought the lease of my life from Mirski, well knowing it to be a document written at the Jew's dictation. But it was sufficient for you, and you gladly repaid the principal and interest of the loan in order to hold in your hands a weapon by which, if you chose, you could encompass my death. And, moreover, your unrelenting hatred did not end there. You actually contrived with your friends in Petersburg that Sylvia Milbourne, my affianced wife, should strike the fatal blow against me."

The woman smiled grimly. She saw herself cornered, and she was racking her brains to discover some means of escape.

"*Bien !*" she exclaimed. "All this is highly interesting."

"To you, perhaps, but not to me !" he cried fiercely. "You would kill me if you could, and I have now to protect myself."

"You are quite at liberty to do so," she sneered. "We are enemies. Surely that is sufficient ?"

"Quite," he said. "Only I make one demand of you."

"And what is that, pray ?"

"That you shall return to Petersburg and get the order issued against me rescinded," he answered with an air of determination. "A word from you acknowledging that I wrote that letter at the dictation of Mirski for the purpose of security for the loan, and the Executive will at once withdraw their decree. They are always just."

"I shall do no such thing," was her defiant answer. "I return to Petersburg the day after to-morrow upon my own private affairs, but I shall not stir further in this matter. As far as I am concerned, it is ended."

Hutton was silent, his face pale with anger.

"Do you actually refuse to do this, Dolores," he asked presently in a firm voice. "Do you coldly refrain from rescuing me from assassination as a spy when you know quite well that I am innocent?"

"I have given you my answer."

"Then you intend that I shall bear the consequences of your false denunciation; you intend to drive me to suicide, knowing that I will take my own life rather than fall beneath the hand of the woman I love?"

"To me the future is quite immaterial," she answered flippantly.

"Have you no pity, no compassion?" he asked earnestly. "Surely you are a woman—with a woman's heart."

"No," she responded, looking straight at him. "I have no heart like other women. I am callous to everything. The world has made me so."

"Well," he said, sighing, "I regret that it should be so. And I regret this refusal of yours, for your own sake."

"For my own sake! What do you mean?" And she looked at him with some surprise, holding her skirts tightly about her as she stood beside the grand piano, facing him.

"No," he answered. "We are enemies, therefore I make no explanation. This is a time for actions, not words."

She glanced at him quickly, and he saw that she had turned a trifle paler.

"As you wish," she remarked, as though it were utterly immaterial to her.

Then, after a brief silence, he turned to her again, and in a deep, hard voice, said:

"I ask you for the last time, Dolores, whether you will withdraw this death sentence you have placed upon me."

"I have already given you my answer. I shall not interfere further," was her firm, unrelenting reply.

"Then you absolutely and flatly refuse?"

She nodded, but no word passed her thin lips.

"Very well," he said, his eyes fixed straight upon her. "That refusal of yours is to be regretted. I myself regret it—and you will, when too late. By your low cunning and clever ingenuity you have condemned me to die. You, the pretty woman whom all Paris admires and with whom a hundred men are in love, are at heart scheming, unscrupulous, brutal. Once I, like all the others, believed in you. I believed that even bewildered by your success as the smartest woman in Paris, you nevertheless had a heart, and could really love. Indeed, once I believed that you loved me, but, knowing my own wrecked fortunes, I never allowed myself to reciprocate the tender passion. Alas! I now know the bitter truth. With you love is mere caprice, and because I refused to render your life and my own unhappy, you seek a vengeance the most terrible that ever woman desired. I confess I cannot understand you," he declared. "To me you are an enigma, and your action in this affair is utterly incomprehensible."

She heard him with a grim smile upon her lips.

"I really cannot see any necessity for prolonging this interview," she exclaimed impatiently, her hand upon the bell.

"I will leave if you wish," he said, bowing stiffly. Then he added with a touch of earnest pleading in his voice: "Do you absolutely refuse to give me back my life?"

For answer she rang the bell, and then turned her back upon him.

"Very well," he said, in a voice quite unusual to him. "You are still defiant. Therefore I must defend myself."

She laughed lightly, as though the idea were a capital joke.

"Adieu! Dolores," he said, in a voice low and distinct. "You have to-night proved yourself unworthy of the name of woman. Laugh! Oh, yes, laugh to-night. To you it is very amusing. You have secured the death-warrant of a man who is innocent, but who has refused to worship at your shrine. Well, I regret that you refuse to withdraw, and my last words to you are that I pity you. As there is a Judge in Heaven, so will you be judged. Adieu!"

And bowing low with the old-world courtliness of manner that was one of his characteristics, he unlocked the door and left the woman's presence.

He walked as far as the Rond Point, and stood at the kerb for several minutes in hesitation.

"No," he murmured to himself, "no time must be lost. My life is at stake. I must act."

Then, with sudden resolution, he hailed a passing fiacre, and told the man to drive to the Russian Embassy, Rue de Grenelle.

Big, gloomy and ill-lit, the ponderous mansion stands back in its wide courtyard behind a high, white-painted wall.

Brilliant and gay only on evenings when his Excellency gives his grand entertainments, it is usually quiet and apparently deserted, inasmuch as the passer-by, not knowing what it was, would never dream that it was the centre of a very considerable amount of important business.

At the concierge's office, Hutton inquired for General Metzeneff, but the tall janitor in the fawn uniform with scarlet waistcoat informed him that the General was seldom there, and never after three o'clock in the afternoon. When the Englishman, however, said he wished to see him on an extremely urgent matter, the concierge rather reluctantly gave his address : Avenue Kleber, 22.

To the house indicated Hutton drove without delay, and, in a sumptuously furnished flat on the third floor, he was ushered into the presence of a tall, thin-faced, military-looking man with pointed white beard, General Metzeneff. He was seated beneath a shaded lamp at a big, littered writing-table.

At first, when they were closeted together, the old officer was inclined to be frigid, but when in confidence the Englishman told him the object of his visit and produced certain papers from his pocket, he became keenly interested.

What passed between the pair took place with closed doors, but after an hour the General rose to let out his visitor.

"And madame leaves for Petersburg the day after to-morrow ?" he inquired, speaking in French.

"Yes," Hutton responded.

"Very well," the other said with great satisfaction. "The papers will be quite safe in my hands. Leave the rest to us," he added with a smile. "We shall know how to act in the matter."

And the affable old General shook the young man's hand, thanked him warmly for calling, expressed a hope that they would meet again shortly, and bade him a hearty *bon soir*.

CHAPTER XLI

THE POLICE ARE INQUISITIVE

THREE days had passed since Hubert Hutton had bidden adieu to Dolores Lubomirska.

The date was the eighth of September. The Tsar had arrived at Queenborough on board the Imperial yacht *Polar Star*, and was now the guest at Windsor. The papers were full of the visit, the Press without exception expressing a hope that the cordial relations existing between England and Russia would result in that political amalgamation of which Monsieur de Staal and the Marquess of Salisbury had for so many years dreamed—an Anglo-Russian alliance. If such were formed, *The Times* pointed out, neither England nor Russia need fear any enemy. The Powers would be at once cowed, for the two greatest nations on earth would in combination rule the world. Russia would be free to extend and develop her gigantic Asiatic dominions, while England would be heedless of her neighbours and find strength in the security of peace. The Foreign Secretary had already been down to Windsor, and with the Russian Ambassador, one of the most respected and esteemed foreign diplomats in London, had paid his obeisance to the Muscovite ruler. It was many years since a Tsar visited our shores. The Emperor, when Tsarevitch, paid a brief visit to London after his tour round the world, but it was unofficial and quite unimportant. The visit as Tsar opened up an entirely different vista in the misty void of foreign politics. Hence the papers with one accord expressed a hope that a Russian alliance would be formed to combat the ingenious machinations of the French.

About twelve o'clock on the day above-named, Hubert stepped out upon the platform at Eastbourne and drove direct to the house where the Milbournes lodged. The servant informed him that both the old people were out, but that Miss Sylvia was at home with "her friend".

This friend proved, to Hubert's surprise, to be Grace Fairbairn, who, paler and with face rather more aquiline, was seated at the open window, and had apparently been engaged in deep conversation with his fiancée.

The meeting was scarcely a very cordial one. The hearts of all three were too oppressed for any words of gaiety, each knowing each other's secret and dreading the worst.

He briefly explained that he had only just returned to Paris, where he had been "on important business", while his love on her part told him how she had persuaded her mother to invite Grace to bear her company. Apparently Sylvia had been sitting out on the balcony trying to occupy her time in knitting a cravat, but it had been laid aside.

"Grace knows everything," she exclaimed, after a painful silence. "We may talk before her."

"Yes," said her companion gravely, with a sigh. "Sylvia has confided all to me. I am at an utter loss what to advise. Your enemies have done this. The Executive in Petersburg are always just, and if the truth were known that you are no spy, the order would be at once rescinded and the false witness promptly punished."

"I think," he said in a calm voice, "there is no necessity for the latter."

"But are you not aware that, by order of the Executive, you must die before midnight to-day?"

"So that I may not live to be present at the coup to be made in London to-morrow," he remarked. "Ah! it is all most ingeniously arranged. My lease of life terminates at midnight. If I am still living then it is at risk of Sylvia's life. She will be swiftly struck down for disobedience to the decree. It is terrible, Miss Fairbairn—terrible!"

"Yes," Grace sighed. "But you must escape. You should not remain here. I had hoped that you would not return."

"And if I escape, I leave Sylvia unprotected and at the vengeance of the Executive," he pointed out. "No, I'll never do that. I love her far too well."

Sylvia sprang towards him with a sudden impulse, kissing him passionately for the first time since his entry there. Her young heart was bursting with anxiety for the man she loved.

At that moment, however, a tap sounded on the door and the parlour-maid announced that two gentlemen had called upon Miss Milbourne. The name of one was Mr. Warren.

"Warren ? Warren ?" repeated Sylvia. "I don't remember the name."

"Nor do I," chimed in Grace.

"Why," cried Hubert, "it may be Warren, of Scotland Yard."

And such it proved to be. Tall, well-set-up and smiling, he advanced into the room, greeting Hutton warmly, and being followed by his companion, who, to the intense amazement of all, proved to be the ex-coachman, Clipson.

The latter, noticing the surprise his presence caused, turned to Sylvia, saying :

"I think, perhaps, I may as well now introduce myself in my real character, miss. My name is not Clipson, but Cooper—Inspector Cooper, of the Criminal Investigation Department."

"You, Clipson ! A detective !" Sylvia cried in surprise.

"Yes, miss," he laughed. "I suppose I ought to take it as a compliment to my ingenuity that while I was in your mother's employ you never found me out. But the fact is I was compelled to enter the service of your family for a very particular reason."

Hubert began to see light through the veil of mystery, but remained silent.

"I've come down to-day with Inspector Warren in order to ask a question or two."

"But explain the reason you entered my mother's service," Sylvia urged. "At present, it is all an enigma."

"Well, miss," he said, "there can be no harm now in telling you the truth. The fact is that I am chief of the department at the Yard which has the watching of foreign anarchists in London. When your uncle, Mr. Austen Leigh, who is well-known to the Russian police, returned to England, I received due notice from St. Petersburg of his arrival. In the guise of servant, I contrived to get on good terms with him, and when he went to live at Ailesworth I induced him to recommend me to your mother as coachman. I obtained the place all right, but Leigh was such a close, astute old fellow that it took me all my time to get at the bottom of his game. He wrote quantities of manuscript, always in a cipher of which I never obtained a key ; but as far as I could make out he was not a revolutionist of the dangerous type. If he were a Nihilist he never exhibited it to anyone around him. But there were a good many mysteries connected with him, and even though he took a liking to me and I was often in his room, I was never able to satisfactorily account for his eccentricities."

"He was just a little mad?" suggested Hubert with a smile.

"Perhaps so," responded the detective. "But there was method in it, as you will presently see. He died rather suddenly but I was unfortunately out, driving Mr. and Mrs. Milbourne, with poor Miss Nella, to Stamford. On our return we found Leigh dead, Miss Sylvia and Miss Fairbairn having been present at the end. Well, as you know, months passed, and then came Miss Nella's wedding and the tragedy immediately following it."

"Tell us," cried Sylvia quickly, "what have you discovered regarding it. Do you know who killed her?"

"I will tell you all I know," answered Cooper, alias Clipson. "I have been many months secretly engaged in the inquiries, and only recently did I discover any facts to lead me to the truth. The story is a very strange one indeed, but before I relate it I wish to ask you, Miss Fairbairn, whether you recollect one day, about a month after Leigh's decease, walking across the lawn with Miss Nella. At the edge of the lawn she made a discovery. Do you recollect what it was?"

"Why, yes," she replied, recalling the incident. "I remember now that we were walking together one afternoon when, under a laurel bush, she found a piece of paper blown by the wind. It was a letter, and almost without glancing at it she placed it in her pocket and laughingly said she would read it when she went indoors, and that it looked like a love-letter of somebody's. We went out together to pay a call in Castor, and I forgot all about the letter until this moment."

"Well," the detective explained, "that letter proved of the greatest consequence. She examined it in private and found that it had somehow been separated from her uncle's papers—probably when some drawer was turned out. It had no doubt been thrown upon the dust-heap, and had been carried into the garden by the wind. The communication was written in French, and was from the Nihilist Executive suggesting the Great Plot against the Tsar on the occasion of his forthcoming visit to London. Certain details were given as to how it was to be carried out, and certain persons were indicated as those chosen to make the attempt. This letter opened Miss Nella's eyes to the truth regarding her dead uncle. He was a Nihilist in hiding, and that accounted for his eccentricity and his refusal to take outdoor exercise. Her first impulse was to show it to her mother, but on mature consideration she showed it to another lady—" and he paused, looking Grace Fairbairn full in the face.

"Yes," the latter admitted, pale and agitated, "I confess. She showed it to me in strict confidence, and I, bound by my oath to the organization, was compelled to communicate with the Executive, explaining how the secret of the plot was out. In reply I received a letter from the Committee in London asking me to obtain possession of the letter and forward it to them. This I did, and, as far as I was concerned, the matter dropped."

"But its sequel?" remarked Inspector Warren.

"Ah! its sequel! I know too well!" cried the unhappy woman. "Or, at least, I guessed it long ago. On the day of her marriage Nella wore among her other jewels, presents from her husband and her father, one of those strange antique jewels which had been bequeathed to her by her uncle."

"I recollect quite well," remarked Hubert. "It was that fact which caused me apprehension while sitting at the wedding breakfast. When I saw it upon her, worn openly, I could not believe my eyes. I was in entire ignorance then of Austen Leigh's connection with the family, or of his death. My eyes fell upon that jewel and were fascinated. I had a strange premonition that evil must befall the woman who was so perfectly happy at the moment of her triumph. That is why I excused myself and went to take a turn outside the house. The mystery of that jewel, combined with the fact I learnt that Leigh was uncle of the young lady, absolutely bewildered me."

"And while you were in the garden the tragedy occurred," the detective Cooper remarked. "At the moment I was serving in the dining-room, and never dreamed of any tragedy. The murder was committed by one who had brought assassination to a fine art. He was no blunderer, and by certain features I quickly recognized that poor Miss Nella's death was the work of the Nihilists, who intended to silence her, fearing lest she might tell her husband of the startling discovery she had made regarding the Great Plot against the Tsar."

"I, too, suspected the truth," exclaimed Grace Fairbairn hoarsely. "I had no suspicion hitherto that my statement which I was bound to render to the Executive would bring death to her."

"But have you no suspicion of the identity of the assassin?" inquired Hubert anxiously.

"Well, yes," responded the detective. "At present my inquiries, which have been long and very difficult, seem on the point of completion. It appears that the caterers for the wedding breakfast, Messrs. Parsons of Peterborough, engaged for the day a German waiter who had on several occasions applied to them for odd work. This man waited with me in the dining-room throughout the luncheon, but, laden with plates, he followed Miss Nella out. His movements, either before or after the tragedy, were, however, in no way suspicious, yet on the following morning, when his description was circulated, he could not be found, and has not been discovered till this day—a fact which condemns him as the emissary of the Nihilists, whose mission it was to seal the lips of the unfortunate young lady for ever."

"Have you no photograph of him?" Hubert asked.

"Yes. One was fortunately found in his portmanteau at his lodgings in Peterborough." And the detective took a faded picture from his pocket.

The three looked upon it. Two of them, Grace Fairbairn and Hutton, recognized the face instantly, but neither Grace, as a member of the Terrorist party, nor Hubert, as an associate, dared to divulge the man's name or his whereabouts.

"Are you certain he was present that day as a waiter?" inquired Hutton, in order to cover the surprise the discovery of the truth had caused him.

"Quite. We've been in active search of him for many months," was Cooper's reply, "and we have not yet given up all hope of finding him. That he is a Nihilist is without doubt. But," he added, "you have mentioned a jewel worn by Miss Nella. I recollect the ornament quite distinctly. It was in the form of a cross, and of very curious workmanship. What connection had that with the tragedy?"

Hutton hesitated. He had no right to expose any secret of the Nihilists to the police, but condemned already as an informer as he was, he reflected that there could be no real harm in telling the detective what he knew. It seemed quite plain that they had not yet discovered the existence of that mine beneath the roadway in Fleet Street, and although he longed to tell them of it, yet to betray that secret would probably bring death upon them all.

"The jewel," he said, "is one of very great value, and is the property of the Nihilist Executive. It has been one of their most treasured possessions ever since the commencement of the Terrorist movement. It was given by the Head-centre, the Director of the Organization, to Austen Leigh for safe keeping in Petersburg at a moment when a raid by the Russian police was feared. Leigh disappeared, came to England and went into hiding, probably because he anticipated discovery by the agents of the Russian Secret Police in London. The jewel, known as the Great Ishak, has for many years been used for a very curious purpose. If a woman who had joined the revolutionists were suspected of being a police spy, this jewel was presented to her as a mark of honour, and at the same time she was informed that she must wear it whenever she desired to be recognized by her fellow-conspirators. In order to deceive the Executive, she would, of course, wear it conspicuously in the street, when the man to whose lot it had fallen to remove her—without being informed of her name or station—would discover her by means of the jewel. Then would follow secret assassination, theft of the jewel, and its ultimate return to the Executive. A dozen women who were police spies posing as Nihilists have been presented with that jewel, and all, without a single exception, have died violent deaths."

CHAPTER XLII

DENUNCIATION

"THE jewel was stolen from Miss Milbourne's sister, I remember," remarked Warren, who had been standing listening attentively to the story. "You mentioned it in your evidence at the inquest, Mr. Hutton."

"Yes," remarked Sylvia. "It was given her by my mother after Nella's death. She was, of course, in entire ignorance, just as we all were, of its terrible significance. That is no doubt why my Uncle Austen made that mysterious request just before his death: 'The Great Ishak! Hide it—or death!'"

"No doubt," remarked her lover. "I have known that all along, but not knowing that you were a Nihilist dared not tell you the truth."

"But the assassination of poor Ethel," Sylvia asked of the man she had known as Clipson, the coachman, "what has been discovered regarding it?"

He shook his head.

"Practically nothing," he answered. "With Inspector Warren here, I have been making inquiries during the whole time from the date of the tragedy, but with little or no success."

"Could it have been the outcome of Nihilist retaliation, like the death of poor Nella, do you think?"

"It may have been, but at present it is impossible to say. We have no ground for believing it to be so, save the fact that the jewel was stolen."

"A thief might have taken it," remarked Hutton. "At a glance one could distinguish that it was an object of considerable value."

"Ah!" remarked Warren. "That is the very point we have been trying in vain to clear up. The fact that Miss Ethel was murdered so soon after her sister, and that there was apparently an utter absence of motive in both cases, rather points to the Nihilist theory. In any case, however, the manner in which the deed was accomplished showed the greatest cunning and ingenuity."

For a full half-hour they discussed the affair, but were as far off a solution of the problem as ever. Neither Sylvia nor Hubert gave the police any information regarding the death order issued by the Nihilist Executive. Both considered it judicious to keep the terrible secret to themselves.

The detectives had called to learn certain facts of Sylvia and Grace, and both women had been perfectly open and frank. Hutton was indeed surprised to find that active inquiries were still in progress when he had for months believed that Scotland Yard had relegated both affairs to the limbo of unsolved mysteries.

In conversation with the man known as Clipson he learnt that he worked in unison with the agents of the Russian Secret Police in London, and then in order to ascertain how far a plot was suspected he said:

"I suppose you have considerable anxiety just now owing to the Tsar's visit to London?"

"Well," he laughed, "not very much. The Russians have sent over a large force of secret agents, and they tell me that they are aware of every dangerous Nihilist in London and are closely watching them."

"I hope there's no plot," Hutton remarked. "It would be most unfortunate for England if anything occurred here."

"Oh, we needn't fear that," the detective said with a confident air. "There's no plot, otherwise the Russian police would know of it, and we should assist them in watching. The Russian system is marvellous. They've recently given me a list of over three hundred persons living in London who are revolutionists. To each name is appended some facts, the address, and whether active members of the association or not."

"And does this list include us?" asked Grace Fairbairn anxiously.

"Yes. Both your names appear there."

"And the report against us?" Sylvia inquired.

"It does not condemn you, but merely states that you are members. No doubt that at one time or another you have been watched by an agent of the Secret Police."

"Just as you have watched us," remarked the girl.

"Well," the detective laughed, "I merely did my duty. Your uncle was a suspect, and I was bound to ascertain what I could regarding his movements and intentions. I trust you will forgive me, miss."

"Of course," she answered quickly. "I quite understand the situation, and all I hope is that the murderers of my poor sisters may be brought to justice."

Both Hutton and Grace Fairbairn experienced some satisfaction in the knowledge that the police were in ignorance. Notwithstanding the elaborate system of espionage carried on by the Russian police in London, they had utterly failed to detect the presence of the Professor or the others who occupied the innocent-looking cycle shop in Fleet Street. Had they been aware of the conspiracy, suspicion would have undoubtedly fallen upon Hubert, for his intimate acquaintance with Lomonseff was well known to them. The assurance of Cooper that no plot existed showed how utterly ignorant were the police regarding the conspiracies of foreign revolutionaries. Half the Anarchist plots that are carried out in France, Italy, or Germany are hatched in the eastern and west-central districts of the Metropolis under the very noses of the police. Yet they do not interfere. If foreign Anarchists meet and plot, it is no concern of Scotland Yard. It is only when a plot is formed for execution in England that Cooper and his assistants rise to activity, and when once aroused they are untiring in their efforts, as the annals of the Old Bailey have already shown.

Indeed, of all the clever detectives engaged in criminal investigation in London, no man is more acute or astute than Charles Cooper. In a hundred different disguises he has run dangerous Anarchists, Socialists and Nihilists to earth, and, speaking several languages, he is often able to obtain information first hand. Yet so cleverly had the Great Plot been arranged and so well did the conspirators conceal themselves in that busy quarter of London where their presence would be least suspected, that even Cooper had been misled into the belief that the Tsar was absolutely secure.

The two officers took their departure at last. Indeed, they made their exit rather hurriedly, for, from the balcony, Grace saw Mr. and Mrs. Milbourne returning, and Cooper had no desire to meet them and enter into long explanations. There would be time enough for that when he came to them with the full knowledge of how and why the two unfortunate girls had been assassinated.

"I'm glad they're gone," Sylvia gasped with a sigh of relief. "Only fancy, that Clipson was a detective and we never suspected it! How minutely he must have watched all of us!"

"I think it shameful!" Grace declared angrily.

"Well," remarked Hubert, "he has at least been able to clear up the motive for poor Nella's murder, and to fix the crime upon the criminal."

"The criminal!" asked Grace in a low whisper, looking straight into Hutton's face. "Did you recognize that portrait?"

"Of course," was his prompt reply. "And you?"

She nodded in the affirmative, but Sylvia, who had stepped out upon the balcony to watch the receding figures of the two men as they walked back along the Esplanade, did not hear those words they exchanged. She, too, had looked upon the faded photograph, but she had not recognized it, for she had never to her knowledge met the original. And, truth to tell, her mind was more occupied with thoughts of her lover's doom than with the assassination of her sister, an event which had now become a matter of ancient history.

The Squire and his wife returned a few minutes later, the first-named puffing with the effort of mounting the stairs, and mopping his brow as he removed his hat. It was a blazing, breathless day, for sometimes on the south coast the greatest heat is experienced in early September, and that year the temperature was quite exceptional, Cockney visitors declaring that Eastbourne was hotter than their own stifling city.

Hubert, at the Squire's invitation, remained to luncheon, then after a private chat with Sylvia out on the balcony, he wished them good afternoon and returned to his own rooms. His lease of life ended at midnight, and on the morrow when London was all excitement over the Tsar's official visit to the City, there must occur a catastrophe that would startle Europe. He had seen sufficient of the mine and its arrangements to know that failure was impossible. The coup was in the hands of men who were desperate; enthusiasts who were prepared, if necessary, to sacrifice their lives to secure the freedom of Russia.

He thought it all over. The revelations consequent on the visit of the men from Scotland Yard were bewildering. He had recognized the Great Ishak worn by Nella on her wedding-day, and that had first given him a clue to the motive of the crime. But she had worn it innocently—the gift of Austen Leigh—just as later her sister Ethel had worn it with fatal result.

He felt that, under the circumstances, it was unwise to remain in Eastbourne. Grace had expressed surprise that he had returned to be near his love, knowing that upon her rested the terrible decree that she should commit murder. No; it were best if he were absent. She would then have an excuse if any excuse were needed. Therefore he scribbled her a note saying that he was returning to London, and at nine o'clock that night he again stepped out upon the platform at Victoria, and drove straight to the house of the Professor, in the clean, respectable street off King's Road, Chelsea.

Pauline was out, but the Professor was seated at supper with Trepoff, Sovinski, Stefanovitch and two other of the conspirators. He was giving an entertainment to his friends on this, the night before the great coup, and the unsuspecting landlady was busy with the meal. She was a quiet, elderly person, of that genus who superintend the cooking, rob their lodgers, and spend half their time in racking their brains to discover some means of charging "extras". Her present "drawing-room" people were foreigners, and as she found she could charge them almost what she liked, she put them down as perfectly respectable. The Professor had represented himself to be a German dealer in furs, who had come to London, the great fur market of the world, for the purpose of buying. Therefore the landlady had imparted the information to half the other landladies in the row, and curiosity was satisfied. Lodging-house keepers are very easily imposed upon if only the lodger pays his way with a slight lavishness, and drinks wine at his meals instead of that beverage so peculiar to lodgings, bottled ale.

When the tousled-haired maid took up Hubert's name, the men assembled around the supper-table exchanged apprehensive glances, but the Professor at once gave orders that he was to be shown up, and when he entered he was received most cordially.

A chair was placed for him, and old Lomonseff, at the head of the table, announced that they had only just commenced to eat, and carved him a wing from the pair of fowls before him.

"This is quite an unexpected pleasure," he said as he passed down the plate. "We thought you were in Paris."

"I only returned this morning," Hutton explained. And then the meal proceeded amid a merry chatter, mostly in Russian.

When at last it was over, the wine brought in, and the sniggering servant informed that nothing more would be required, the Professor rose quietly, turned the key in the door, and pulled across it the piece of faded old green rep that served as portière. Then returning to his seat he filled his glass, and, still standing, requested his guests to do the same.

Lifting his port to them, he gave the toast:

"To the health of the noble men who will risk their life or liberty to-morrow to strike a blow for the freedom of our beloved country. Here's to the death of the Autocracy!"

And those around the table answered in the mode usual at Nihilist gatherings.

"To the death of the Tsar!"

Then they drank—all save Hubert, who put down his wine untouched.

Sovinski noticed it and demanded why he did not join in the toast, to which he replied in a hard voice:

"You forget that I am a condemned traitor."

"No," cried the old Professor, "you are no traitor, Mr. Hutton. You are our friend. To you I owe my liberty, as I've told you a dozen times already."

"None but the woman Lubomirska dare accuse me of such a thing," he said facing them. "Indeed, my presence here to-night is sufficient proof that I am no traitor. I am here because I have news."

"News?" they echoed, almost with one voice. "Of what?"

"I have had a visit to-day from Inspector Cooper, chief of the police department which watches foreign conspirators in London."

"From the police!" gasped Sovinski. "What have they discovered?"

"A good many things."

"Regarding the plot?" asked the Professor, starting from his chair.

"No. I am here to-night to bring you the good news that the presence of none of you assembled here is even suspected by the agents of police from Petersburg. Cooper has told me that there is no plot, and that His Majesty has been assured that every Nihilist in London is under surveillance."

Trepoff and Sovinski burst out laughing.

"That's excellent!" declared the first-named, draining his glass. "I had serious doubts yesterday afternoon, because a low-looking workman idled for over an hour in front of the shop. But this news of yours is doubly reassuring. We are safe enough, as I said all along we should be. London is the safest place in the whole world. I've lived here seven years, and during that time have studied it closely."

"Is everything in working order?" asked the Professor in a lower tone.

"Everything is perfect," was Trepoff's reply. "We cannot fail. His Majesty is due to pass at twelve o'clock. If you leave your windows open even here, in Chelsea, you will be able to hear the sound of the explosion."

"I shall do so," laughed Lomonseff. "You will, of course, get away as quickly as possible."

"Yes, but not from London. We have all arranged where we shall hide, in the houses of our friends in Whitechapel. It is safest down there, for we can then each work at our trades as respectable aliens."

"Inspector Cooper has given me some other very interesting information," Hutton went on. "He has discovered who killed Miss Nella Milbourne, the niece of Austen Leigh, who, having obtained details of the Great Plot, was removed by the London Council."

"What?" cried the Professor in alarm. "Is all that known to the police?"

"It is," was Hutton's response. "And, moreover, I have been shown a portrait of the murderer. *He sits at this table!*"

CHAPTER XLIII

WHO KILLED THE SISTERS?

THE conspirators assembled around the table exchanged quick suspicious glances.

The bold allegation made by Hubert Hutton that one of them was a murderer whose photograph was in the hands of the police was startling, for it seemed to them probable that if such were actually the case, then the plot would probably be exposed before the great coup could be effected.

The Professor, his glass half raised to his lips, cast his keen, dark eyes around, but for some moments the silence remained unbroken. At last one man spoke. It was Trepoff.

"I confess," he said in a low, hoarse voice, his face a trifle paler, "it is useless to conceal the truth. By order of the Executive the young Englishwoman was removed. She had accidentally learnt of the attempt which we are to make to-morrow, and it was feared that she might expose us. Indeed, she did show to one person the letter addressed to Austen Leigh containing the proposals, but that person chanced to be one of us. It was a woman named Fairbairn, and she, in accordance with her oath, gave information to our London Centre. The matter was at once placed before the Executive, who condemned her to die. Lots were drawn here in London, and the execution of the decree fell to me."

"It was very neatly done," remarked Sovinski, as though there were something to be admired in such a deed. "The police never suspected."

"They hold a photograph," remarked Hutton.

"But they have no idea of my whereabouts?" asked Trepoff.

"No."

"Good. After to-morrow I shall go into hiding, and a month from now will be back in Russia. London will, in future, be too dangerous for me."

Hutton held the man in abhorrence. He spoke of the crime of murder with a flippancy that showed how utterly callous was his heart, and with what indifference he regarded the sacrifice of human life. His sole thought seemed to be of the frightful havoc that he and his associates were to work on the morrow in the crowded City street.

He felt impelled to go straight to Scotland Yard and give information, yet such an action would bring arrest and imprisonment upon his friends, the Professor, Pauline, Grace Fairbairn, and, in all probability his well-beloved herself. It was this which prevented him. Alas! that his mouth was closed.

"The woman Nella Milbourne was wearing the Great Ishak when you, in the guise of a hired waiter, struck her down. Did you not secure the jewel?" Hubert inquired.

"I had no time," was the Russian's response. "You yourself entered the front hall from the garden, and I had to slip along the corridor and down the back-stairs to the kitchen. The whole thing was only the work of twenty seconds or so."

"What?" inquired the Professor, at once interested. "Was this Englishwoman actually wearing the jewel? How came she in possession of it?"

Hutton then briefly explained the circumstances of Leigh's death, how the jewel, among others, had passed into the hands of the unfortunate girl. The story was listened to with great attention.

"And where is the Ishak at the present moment?" asked Lomonseff.

"In my possession," replied Trepoff. "I shall take it back to Russia with me and hand it to the Executive. They always have use for it," and he smiled grimly.

"How did you come by it? Tell us," urged Sovinski.

"It was secured from the Milbourne family on our behalf," the dark-bearded man answered vaguely.

"By the murder of Miss Nella's sister, Ethel?" suggested Hutton, anxious to elucidate the mystery which had so utterly baffled the police.

Trepoff nodded as he slowly sipped his wine.

"Let our friend Hutton be told the truth," commanded the Professor. "He has suffered, therefore it is but just that he should know."

The others demurred, almost without exception.

"It is a secret, and should not be told," one protested.

"And yet our friend here, who has ever remained loyal to us, is falsely condemned as a spy!" Lomonseff pointed out. "Why, if he had chosen, he might to-day have given Trepoff into the hands of the police and exposed the whole plot."

This argument seemed to convince them that Hutton wa to be trusted, and Trepoff, feeling that his liberty was in the hands of the young Englishman, at length obeyed the order of the head-centre to explain the circumstances of the mysterious assassination of Ethel Milbourne.

Speaking across to Hutton he said: "The affair was accomplished in such a manner that not even ourselves knew the truth until some time afterwards. The young lady named Ethel had no connection with us whatsoever, neither had she any idea that her uncle was a Nihilist. As far as I've been able to gather, she was of a slightly religious turn of mind, and busied herself in doing church work in the village where she lived."

"Quite true," Hubert remarked. "She was entirely innocent."

"Well," continued Trepoff, calmly contemplating his cigar, "on a certain morning she travelled up to London with her father and, contrary to their first intentions, they put up at the Blenheim Hotel in Bloomsbury. An hour afterwards you met her in Oxford Street, I believe?"

"I did. And we walked along Edgware Road as far as Chapel Street, where she took an omnibus to Bayswater in order to go and see her dressmaker. But she was wearing the Ishak at her throat, and openly exposed it while passing along Edgware Road. I warned her that it was unwise to show such a valuable ornament in the London Streets, and she at once covered it up with her boa."

"You met no one during that walk with her?"

"I saw no one that I recognized."

"Ah! I suppose not," he said. "But you were closely watched. You were very solicitous for the unfortunate young lady's welfare, it seemed, and the very attention you paid her proved her doom."

"I don't understand."

"You were believed to be her lover."

"By whom?"

"By a woman. Cannot you guess whom?"

"No. Tell me."

"By the Countess Lubomirska."

"The Countess," he gasped, amazed. "Did she meet us?"

"She watched you. She knew that Milbourne and his daughter had come to London, but had no idea where they were staying. But she had a fixed idea that you were her lover, and that you would spend the afternoon in Regent Street or the vicinity. She met you in Oxford Street, and then, keeping observation upon you, she saw that you treated her with all the consideration and ardour of a lover. She saw, too, in Oxford Street, that the young lady was wearing the Ishak, the Nihilist emblem of treason. You parted from her at the corner of Chapel Street, and the Countess no doubt heard you arrange to meet later at the theatre. Then she took a cab, followed the omnibus, and saw Miss Milbourne enter the dressmaker's house in Talbot Road, Bayswater. The young girl was totally unacquainted with the Countess, therefore there was nothing strange in the latter also entering the dressmaker's an hour later, after she had gone. Although she wished to discover where the girl was staying, she had no intention of further following her, lest such an action might be noticed. She sat in the waiting-room for some few minutes and, during that time, discovered, lying on the couch, a parcel readdressed to Miss Milbourne at the hotel, also giving the number of the room.

"That was all the woman wanted. She excused herself from the dressmaker, saying that she had an urgent engagement, and, giving a card that was not her own, made an appointment for the morrow. She then drove to the hotel, walked straight up to the girl's room, and tapped at the door. Ethel, who was dressing for dinner, hearing a female voice answer her query as to who was there, believed it to be a friend whom she knew was stopping in the hotel, therefore she opened the door.

"The conversation commenced with some excuse on the part of the Countess, who had seen that she wore the Ishak and who, for the past couple of hours, had made up her mind to rid herself of the woman she believed to be her rival in your affections. What actually took place within that room will probably never be known. All that is clear is that at a moment when Miss Milbourne, entirely unsuspecting, was washing her face and conversing with her visitor at the same time, the Countess snipped one of the silk laces from the corsets lying upon the bed, and, slipping it over the girl's neck from behind drew it tight and strangled her. She secured the Ishak turned over the contents of the trunk in order to make the motive of the crime appear to be robbery, and then awaited an opportunity to slip out. At the moment she was about to steal forth there came a tap at the door. It was a Mrs. Langdon, the dead girl's friend. Three times the knocking was repeated, then the murderess listened to the receding footsteps along the corridor, and afterwards stole out and escaped."

"And how can all this be proved?" inquired Hutton, sitting amazed at the story.

'By me," interposed a short, sandy-bearded man, Peter Behrensoff by name, one of the London Committee, who followed the trade of tailor in Whitechapel. He had taken an active part in the preparation of the mine in Fleet Street, and hence had been invited to the reunion prior to the scattering of the conspirators, each of whom had his asylum and mode of escape from England elaborately prepared.

"Were you actually a witness?" Hubert asked eagerly.

"I was a witness inasmuch as on the afternoon in question I was keeping observation upon the Countess. She had suddenly arrived in London, and, suspecting her of being in communication with the Secret Police—a suspicion since proved to be correct—it was ordered that I should watch her movements. What our friend Trepoff has told you is a statement of the facts. I watched her enter Miss Milbourne's room, and I saw her leave. It was only on the following day that I knew of the tragedy, when I read of it in the paper, but it appears that on that very same evening she sent the Ishak, packed in a small box, to Trepoff, and afterwards left by the night mail for Paris."

"Then the motive for Miss Milbourne's assassination was that she was believed to be my fiancée?" Hubert remarked, dumbfounded at this extraordinary revelation.

"That was one motive," answered Behrensoff, "but there were others. The Countess also desired to place herself on good terms with the Executive in Petersburg by removing a woman who was wearing the Ishak, and was therefore presumably condemned as a traitor to the Cause. And, further, she executed her plan so artfully that she evidently intended you should be suspected of the crime."

"And she sacrificed the life of an innocent girl?"

"Yes," was the man's response. "But within the past week the Executive in Petersburg has been placed in possession of certain facts which show La Lubomirska to be a spy as well as a murderess, and they, having received a report of this unjust deed of hers, it remains to be seen what action they will take. The Executive, though firm, is always just."

"Well," declared Hubert frankly, "I never dreamed that Ethel Milbourne had fallen beneath that woman's hand. She is indeed a fiend!"

"She is!" declared the old Professor fervently, recollections of his ill-fated son Ivan still fresh within his memory. "I give you a toast, friends," he added, raising his glass. "To the death of the Countess Dolores Lubomirska, enchantress of men and murderess of women!"

"To her death!" they exclaimed with one accord.

"She is a spy!" declared Behrensoff angrily. "To her information was due the discovery by the police of the Kazan affair, and the eighty-six arrests that followed. Let her die a dog's death—as she deserves."

"Yes," they cried. "Let her die! The traitress shall die!"

And as Hubert glanced around the table he saw by their countenances that it was no idle threat, but that every man there meant what he said.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE PLOT AND THE PLOTTERS

THROUGH the warm feverish night Hubert Hutton walked the London streets, aimlessly wandering hither and thither.

Towards early morning he found himself on the Thames Embankment, near the bottom of Northumberland Avenue, and, resting there, leaned over the parapet, gazing across at the dark line of wharves that loomed up against the grey on the opposite side of the river.

All was still save once when an early train, starting on its way southward from Charing Cross, thundered and snorted across the bridge, and its red tail-light was quickly lost in the darkness. Now and then a cab-bell tinkled and died away, and ever and anon the chimes of Westminster sounded over the still, sleeping city, solemn yet sweet, hourly ringing forth that musical prayer so familiar to every Londoner.

How strange it all was. As he gazed fixedly across into the brightening grey, his mind was still filled, as it had been all the night, with the strange revelations that had been made by that little band of desperate men. The woman who had worked his ruin and by whose evil machinations he was now under sentence of death, was actually the murderess of poor Ethel.

He had never dreamed such a thing. He had suspected others. Yet it had been made entirely plain that the cruel hand which had killed the innocent girl was that of Dolores. The man had said that she had been seized by an uncontrollable fit of jealousy, but he could not believe that. A woman may be jealous, but she seldom commits murder on account of it. Men do such things often ; women very seldom.

No. To him it seemed far more likely that the fact of Ethel wearing the fatal jewel had induced her to commit the deed in an endeavour to show her zeal and place herself in good accord with the Nihilist Executive. It had been made quite plain that the Executive had long suspected her of double dealing. If such were the case it was quite feasible that she should endeavour to exhibit activity in the revolutionary cause, first by the recovery of the lost Ishak, and, secondly, by denouncing him as a spy and producing his own letter to support her allegation.

The woman had sacrificed both Ethel and himself in order to save her own life.

Then he recollected the coming catastrophe of the morrow and held his breath.

He turned his head wistfully towards the high tower of Big Ben, wherein a light still shone in the huge clock-face. Beneath it, in the deep shadow and scarcely more than a stone's throw from him, was the handsome pile of buildings where the telegraph is for ever at work and the inmates never sleep—New Scotland Yard. He longed to enter there, to climb that stone staircase he knew so well, and enter that bare, almost prison-like, waiting room of the Criminal Investigation Department.

Yet he dare not. No. Even though he alone knew of the dastardly plot to kill the Russian Emperor, he dare not enter there. If he told the truth it would result in wholesale arrests and heavy terms of imprisonment. In vain he tried to devise some means of diverting the Royal procession from the Strand and Fleet Street to the Embankment and Queen Victoria Street; but now that the official programme was arranged, and the route of the procession decorated with bunting, triumphal arches, and long streamers bearing words of welcome, how could he, an unknown individual, interfere without making a statement which must, in the end, expose the plot? No, he could discern no way. A national calamity, one of the most terrible that had ever befallen England, was imminent, yet he could raise no voice to prevent it, nor could he warn the Russian Emperor not to pass over the spot.

He thought of an anonymous letter to the police, but even that would be betrayal. The Professor, Pauline, Grace Fairbairn, and his own well-beloved—the liberty of all of them was at stake. His hands were tied; his lips sealed!

The pale dawn was spreading. The grey, soft as the colours of a pigeon's throat, crept slowly up from the east, showing St. Paul's distant dome and Waterloo Bridge dark and massive. Very soon the giant city would awake and the thousands of sightseers would flock to the various points on the route, there to wait until the procession passed. He pictured to himself the triumph of the pageant until that fatal point, when the end would come and the carriage containing the Emperor and a member of his suite would be blown into the air.

The mere thought of such a disaster was too terrible to contemplate. And yet, had he not himself been in that subterranean mine? Had he not seen the long electric spark that was to release the spring and allow the glass tube of acid to be broken? Had he not actually seen and handled the delicate mechanism of the infernal machine itself?

His secret paralysed him.

A constable, who had been watching him from a distance for some time, strolled past and wished him good morning. Then, seeing that he was well-dressed and was not apparently contemplating suicide, he added, glancing at the sky:

"Looks as if it's going to be a fine day for the procession, don't it?"

"Yes," responded Hutton mechanically. The procession was upon everyone's lips, but in a few short hours the awful tragedy would be the one topic of conversation.

They chatted for a few minutes, then the constable went forward on his beat in the direction of Westminster Bridge, while Hubert walked slowly along the Embankment citywards.

Heedless of where his footsteps led him, he walked as far as Blackfriars Bridge, where he halted, undecided in which direction to proceed. But there arose in his mind a sudden desire to once again pass the house of doom; therefore he turned along Bridge Street to Ludgate Circus, and thence up Fleet Street.

It was quite light, and a few men were already on their way to work, those early toilers of whom the great world of London knows so little. A single wagon laden with vegetables from Covent Garden came lumbering down the hill, passing beneath the strings of multi-coloured bunting, which slowly waved in the soft morning breeze. As he passed along, he saw red baize hanging from nearly every window and seats erected behind the glass. Shop-fronts were boarded to resist the pressure of the crowd, and already the scavengers were flinging gravel upon the wood-paved roadway.

On approaching the corner of Bouverie Street, he saw, stretched high across the roadway, a bright yellow strip of bunting bearing in black letters the words: "Welcome to Russia's Emperor."

What mockery! Only a dozen yards away stood the cycle shop, its front boarded like the rest, apparently silent and deserted. Yet he knew that concealed within was a small band of the most desperate men in Europe. He strolled slowly past on the opposite side of the way, and when exactly level with the shop he glanced down at the roadway, beneath which was concealed that terrible mine. It held him in a kind of fascination, and for a moment he paused, gazing at it. Then, recollecting that his unwise action might be noticed by some policeman lurking in one or other of the doorways, he moved forward, absorbed in his own conflicting thoughts.

At the street refuge which marks the spot occupied by old Temple Bar, he crossed the road, and continued up the Strand. He was passing the long façade of the Law Courts, which in that pale light was more imposing than in the sunshine of noon, when of a sudden there was a brilliant flash behind him, a deafening roar, and he seemed lifted clean from his feet and had great difficulty in re-establishing his equilibrium.

For a moment he stood gasping for breath, for he could hear the rumbling sound of falling masonry, and the shock had been as though an earthquake had occurred.

Next instant he guessed the truth, and, turning, ran back to the house of doom.

There were not more than half a dozen people within sight—a couple of policemen and four or five workmen—but as they ran towards the spot, Hubert recognized what had occurred.

The mine had, by some unaccountable means, blown up prematurely !

In the centre of the roadway was an enormous hole, and such was the terrific force of the explosion that the gas-main had been fractured and, becoming ignited, a great flame, some six feet in height, shot up from the ground, while, the water-main also being dislocated, tons of water were running down the street towards Ludgate Circus. The havoc caused was appalling. The front of every shop in the vicinity had been blown in, while there was scarcely a whole pane of glass in any of the upper windows—the cycle shop and those adjoining being completely wrecked.

Fortunately, as far as could be ascertained, there had been no loss of life in the street, for at the moment of the explosion no one had been passing. Hubert shuddered to think what a providential escape he had had, but fell to wondering how many of the conspirators had fallen victims, At least one had escaped, for among the small knot of excited spectators he recognized the tailor Behrensoff, who had evidently escaped from the house unnoticed.

The confusion was terrible. Constables ran hither and thither. One broke the glass in the electric fire-alarm and pulled the knob, another ran down to the police-station, and a third stood blowing his whistle violently, being answered by a dozen others who had been patrolling the various courts that lie on either side of the street.

Hutton stood amid the quickly increasing crowd, watching it all. He never lost sight of Behrensoff, for when he left he intended to speak to him and learn the truth.

So boldly did the Russian act that for fully half an hour he remained there, gazing at the great hole in the roadway, and watching the investigations of firemen and police. Then, having apparently satisfied himself that the impact of the explosion had destroyed all trace of the tunnel, he reluctantly turned away and walked down the hill towards the City, Hubert following at a respectable distance.

Detectives were no doubt about by that time, therefore it was not until the Russian was passing around St. Paul's Churchyard with no one else in sight that he approached him, calling him by name.

"Ah!" gasped the man when he recognized who had accosted him. "Is it not terrible! You know what has occurred?"

"Yes. But what caused it?" he inquired eagerly.

"Trepoff and Sovinski entered the tunnel together, carrying with them the machine in order to fix the wires and have everything in readiness to carry them to the roof. I had gone to the roof to fix the finger-key, and had been there ten minutes or so when the disaster occurred. Then I rushed down and into the street, fortunately without being observed."

"And Trepoff and Sovinski?"

"Blown to atoms. They cannot possibly have escaped," Behrensoff replied. "All the others have, I believe, got clear away through the courts at the back, for the rear of the shop where they were was scarcely injured."

"But how did it occur?"

"Impossible to say. My conjecture is that there was an accidental contact in the wires, probably from an electric light main, and that as soon as they affixed them the disaster occurred. Certain it is that both men must have been killed instantly and that their remains are buried within the tunnel, which has been closed by the explosion. But we must not remain here talking. I must get away safely. Adieu !"

And the man hurried along to Cheapside and, turning the corner, was lost to view.

The disaster, as many readers of this strange story will remember, did not deter the royal party from proceeding to the Mansion House at noon, by way of the Strand, Savoy Street, the Embankment and Queen Victoria Street. The report presented by the police was to the effect that it had been due to a faulty electric light main which had exploded a large quantity of escaped gas, a theory which is held till this day. That gas is not sufficiently powerful to cause such damage was pointed out by one or two experts, but the electric fault was found, and there was plain evidence of the escape from the gas-main. Nothing was discovered, either of the existence of the tunnel, of the bodies of the two conspirators, or of the remnants of the machine ; and so well and boldly was the existence of the plot covered, that a new front was put into the cycle shop, and it was kept open by Stefanovich for three months afterwards.

Therefore Warren and Cooper are still in ignorance, and no one has ever dreamed that the explosion in Fleet Street, which readers of this narrative will well recollect, was due to the premature culminations of one of the most desperate and ingenious plots ever conceived by the Nihilists.

CONCLUSION

The short day of the Russian midwinter had already drawn to a close, and the large, bare room was lit by oil lamps in addition to the few gas jets.

Around a long table were assembled a number of military officers in various uniforms, brilliant with ribbons and stars. Now and then a clanking sword or the ring of a spur broke the silence, otherwise one might have heard the dropping of the proverbial pin.

A lieutenant of the Guards entered, shaking the snow from his cloak, and swinging it off, displayed his braided uniform, and then gave the order to the men outside, who marched in and, ranging themselves around the wall with drawn bayonets, stood at attention.

It was that most dreaded of all tribunals in Russia—a court-martial with closed doors; and the members composing it had been deliberating ever since noon.

When all was still again the old General in a white uniform, who acted as president, cleared his throat and said in Russian, in a hard authoritative voice:

"Let the accused be brought in."

There was shouting outside followed by the measured tramp of soldiers, and there entered six men with fixed bayonets guarding a haggard, white-faced woman dressed in shabby black.

It was Dolores Lubomirska. But how changed! Even the officers seated there could scarcely believe that she was actually the brilliant, wealthy woman they had known so well in Petersburg society.

She stood at the end of the long table facing her accusers, calm, white, almost statuesque.

Then, after a moment's painful pause, the President, addressing her, said:

"Dolores Lubomirska. This court-martial has carefully investigated the allegation against you, that you—and you alone, even though you were in the police service as spy—were responsible for the lamented death of our late Emperor

Alexander III at Livadia. They find that the charge is entirely proved, and that you are guilty without any extenuating circumstances. We have here in our hands," he said, holding up a paper, "the original letter written by you to a certain Englishman named Austen Leigh, who was known to the Secret Police as an associate of the organization to which you belong, namely, the Nihilists. This letter, according to the police reports before us, has had a curious history. It was discovered among the man Leigh's papers after his death by his niece Sylvia Milbourne—or some such name—English names are difficult. And by her it was given to one Hubert Hutton, who duly handed it to the Chief of the Secret Police in Paris. Hence this piece of unexpected evidence proves most conclusively the suspicion which the police have held ever since the year 1894, and——"

"It was, I understand, Hubert Hutton who gave the letter to the police?" she interrogated, her dark brows contracting.

"It was," answered the President, "and I have no wish to address you further than to tell you the sentence which this court passes upon you. It is the only sentence that can be given for the murder of the Sovereign—imprisonment for life in the Fortress of Schusselburg."

"In Schusselburg!" wailed the unhappy woman. "Ah! send me to Sakhalim, to Siberia—anywhere, but not to that awful place!" she implored, clasping her hands.

"Sentence is passed," said the President in his most authoritative tone. "Remove the prisoner."

The soldiers advanced to her, but she fell forward into their arms, insensible, and they were compelled to carry her out.

None who pass the iron doors of that dreaded Bastille of Russia, that rises sheer and silent from the black waters of Lake Ladoga, ever come forth again.

That night they closed behind La Lubomirska, and she left the world for ever.

. . . . .

The remainder of this strange drama of modern life is briefly told.

Nearly two years have passed since that mysterious explosion, the cause of which the police attribute to accident. His Majesty the Tsar, who has remained in ignorance of his narrow escape, is still secure, even though Professor Lomonseff, Pauline and their associates are back in Petersburg, ever dreaming of what they term a "free Russia".

By the efforts of the Professor and of Behrensoff the unjust decree of the Executive against Hubert was withdrawn, and both he and Sylvia, having taken oaths of secrecy, were allowed to disassociate themselves from the revolutionary movement.

Through the good offices of the Squire's brother, Sir Martin Milbourne, a high official in the Foreign Office, Hubert, owing to his linguistic attainments, succeeded in obtaining the post of British Vice-Consul at Venice, and six months ago was married to Sylvia. Grace Fairbairn, who has also renounced Nihilism, continues to reside with the Milbournes, who are now acquainted with the whole of the facts, and are settled in a small and comfortable country house at Tenterden, in Kent.

Hubert and Sylvia, in all the unalloyed joy of their wedded life, live in that high old palazzo with the green sun-shutters standing on the Grand Canal in Venice, the house where over the big doorway is hung the yellow-and-black shield bearing the arms of Great Britain. The Vice-Consulate of Venice is an easy and agreeable post, its only drawback being the clouds of mosquitoes in summer; but as the Vice-Consul and his pretty young wife sit out upon their balcony at evening, watching the gliding gondolas and listening to the sweet twanging of the mandolines that floats up to them, they clasp each other's hands in silence, perfectly happy in their mutual love, for they have now put behind them for ever all the bewildering mystery and terrible tragedy of the Great Plot.