E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

EXIT A DICTATOR

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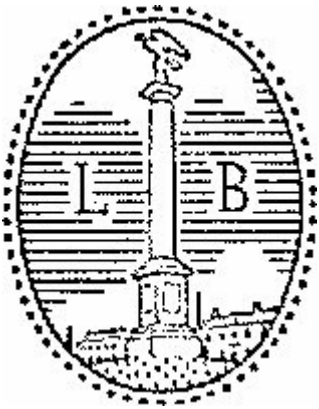
By
E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM



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EXIT A DICTATOR

I

On her first night out, the giant Cunarder *Queen Anne* steamed full into the tail-end of a storm, and there was no doubt about it that she developed a very marked and uncomfortable roll. Neither was there any doubt about the result of this unusual motion upon Nicolas Grodin, occupying Suite de Luxe Number Seven. He became very violently seasick, to his own great discomfort and to the mild annoyance of his fellow-traveller, Joseph Likinski, who acted frequently as his secretary and at all times as his political confidant. Nicolas Grodin, although he may have been a brave man under ordinary circumstances, bore this affliction badly. He lay upon his bed uttering moans of agony interspersed with outpourings of blasphemy in a language which no one but his companion understood.

"He do seem bad, don't he?" the steward, whom the latter had summoned, remarked. "I can't say that I know what he says but it sounds horrible."

Joseph Likinski coughed.

"Amongst other things," he confided, "he is demanding a doctor. I think," he added, opening the cabin door, "I had better go and fetch him." . . .

The doctor had been called away for a moment and Likinski seated himself in the consultant's chair and waited for him. He was a thin, sallow-complexioned man of diminutive stature, who would have been insignificant but for his somewhat

prominent forehead, his keen, ferretlike eyes, his thin lips and calculating mouth. As was his habit, he spent the period of his waiting in taking keen note of his surroundings. The doctor had evidently disappeared in a hurry, for his cupboard door stood open and three rows of drugs of various sorts were displayed. Glancing at them idly at first, Likinski's long, scraggy neck was suddenly extended. His underlip fell. He leaned forward in his chair. He stared at one particular bottle in the corner of the bottom shelf and his little eyes danced with something which was almost excitement.

"God!" he muttered. "It cannot be—"

He raised himself slowly to his feet and then sat down again. The doctor had suddenly made his appearance from the inner room and was looking enquiringly at him. He was a sandy-haired, middle-aged man with a pleasant voice but tired lines around his mouth and eyes.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked briefly.

"It is on behalf of my fellow-passenger—Nicolas Grodin—that I have come," Likinski explained. "He is suffering violently from seasickness. I wonder whether you could make me up a draught of some sort?"

"Certainly," the doctor answered. "I will give you something harmless that will probably stop the vomiting at once."

He moved towards the cupboard. Likinski leaned a little forward in his chair.

“You do not happen, I suppose, doctor,” he enquired nervously, “to have any of this marvellous new drug—*Texacon*—on board?”

The doctor turned suddenly around. He was obviously surprised.

“*Texacon?*” he repeated. “If I had any I shouldn’t part with it. What do you know about *Texacon*?”

“I have taken a medical degree,” Likinski confided. “I spent some years lately in the laboratory of an analytical chemist.”

“Then you must know that you can’t fool about with an undiluted drug like that,” was the doctor’s curt comment.

“I should not dream of using it undiluted,” Likinski replied. “I have a medicine chest of my own on board and I should mix a drop or two of it with some other drugs I possess.”

“I have half a dozen remedies for seasickness here,” the doctor said, “and I will come and see your friend, if you like, but the small quantity of *Texacon* which I do possess does not belong to me and none of it leaves this surgery. I will make you up something that will stop the sickness and I will give you some drops to make him sleep which can be taken at the same time.”

“Very good, doctor, if you will not part with just a phial of the *Texacon*,” Likinski sighed.

“Not on your life, I won’t,” was the emphatic reply. “What country are you from, might I ask, sir, that you know about that particular drug? I should have said that there were only two

laboratories in the world where the real stuff could be found."

"It does not matter," Likinski answered. "Give me the draught, please, and the drops. I will not worry you any more."

The doctor disappeared for a moment and returned with two small bottles. He handed them over to his caller.

"Five drops is the limit, mind," he enjoined. "Repeat in a couple of hours' time, if necessary. The draught you can give him at once. If he goes to sleep after that, I shouldn't give him the drops."

"Number Seven de Luxe is the cabin," Likinski confided as he took his leave. "My name is Joseph Likinski and my friend's is Nicolas Grodin."

The doctor nodded.

"I will come and see him if it is necessary," he promised.

Likinski made his way back to the cabin. He poured the draught down his exhausted fellow-passenger's throat and was gratified to note a marked improvement in the patient's condition within a few minutes.

"You feel better, Nicolas?" he asked.

"Yes, I am better," was the surly answer. "It is the worst turn I have ever had, all the same. It is that rich food you make me eat."

Likinski smiled faintly.

“You are a greedy old man,” he said, “and if you were not feeling so badly I would tell you a few things. As it is, I am not sure that your attack was not rather a stroke of luck.”

Nicolas Grodin’s rejoinder, although in an obscure tongue, was obviously blasphemous.

“Steady now,” his companion checked him. “I will tell you why it was not a bad thing that I had to go and see the doctor for you. Do you know what he has got on his shelf there?”

“No—and I do not care.”

“Yes, you do. He possesses a bottle half full of *Texacon*.”

Then, for a moment, Nicolas Grodin forgot all about his seasickness.

“The drug Professor Kopoff discovered in Moscow and which we tried to get in New York?” he asked eagerly.

“The same. It must have come from either that German laboratory or from our own hospital. He has it all right and, from what I could see, it seems to be the real stuff.”

Nicolas Grodin, who had now left off groaning, sat upright.

“Does he work alone—the doctor?”

“He does. The steerage and tourist class have two doctors of their own at the other end of the ship.”

Grodin rose to his feet, poured some brandy into a glass and

drank it.

“I am better,” he declared. “I feel fine, Joseph. A shock like this is good for one sometimes. You know what we were planning to do with that stuff if we could get hold of any in New York?”

“Do I not!”

“Did you ask for some of it?”

“I did, but the doctor was not having any nonsense. He seems to know what he has got hold of and he would not part with a drop.”

“Silly fellow,” Grodin murmured.

“Yes, he is that,” Likinski replied with an evil chuckle, “but of course he did not understand and I was not likely to tell him. He is not parting with any in the ordinary way. If he really knows about it he would be a fool if he did. All the same, it is there in an unprotected cupboard, without even a bolt on the door. And to think that our Moscow friends keep their little stock in a certain place we know of in the innermost of three safes!”

Nicolas Grodin heaved a ponderous sigh.

“Moscow! That seems a long way away,” he added wistfully.

“A city of unforgiving men,” Likinski reflected. “Even now—I wonder, Nicolas. They have secretly confirmed your appointment as Minister to the Court of St. James’s, but tell me —if you were recalled, if you were summoned back for a conference with the great man—could you cross the

frontier and feel light-hearted, have no fear?”

Nicolas Grodin leaned over for the brandy flask, helped himself liberally and drank. He brushed aside Likinski’s question.

“I sleep now,” he announced. “To-morrow we make plans. My stomach is tired. Somehow or other we must get hold of that bottle of *Texacon*. Alexander is on board alone, except for that Cossack manservant of his. We shall never have a chance like this again, Joseph.”

His companion left him, turning into his own inside cabin. Long before he closed the communicating doors, Nicolas Grodin was snoring ponderously. Likinski himself lay with his eyes wide open. He was one of those strange mortals who had learnt to do without sleep.

It was a quarter to five in the morning, still pitch dark outside and with a heavy sea running, when a thin, insignificant-looking figure stole into the passage-way leading to the doctor’s quarters. He was on the lee side of the ship and through an open hatchway he caught a momentary glimpse of the white-topped mass of turbulent waters. A few drops of spray stung his cheeks. He bent his head and staggered on. Suddenly a light flashed into his face. A tall figure emerged from a passage-way. Likinski recognised the uniform at once. It was one of the night-watchmen of the ship.

“Have you lost your way, sir?” the man asked quietly.

“I do not think so,” was the prompt reply. “I am on my way to the doctor. The red light at the bottom is the surgery, is it not?”

“Anybody ill, sir?”

“My travelling companion has had two fainting fits,” Likinski explained. “He started by being violently seasick. I was down here an hour ago. The doctor is going to give me some more drops.”

“I beg your pardon, sir,” the watchman said, stepping respectfully to one side. “I just thought you might have lost your way or been one of those sleepwalkers. The doctor’s room is the end one on the right. What is the number of your room, sir?”

“My friend and I are occupying Number Seven de Luxe,” Likinski told him.

The other made a note.

“Thank you very much,” he said. “Good night, sir.”

Likinski passed on until he reached the door of the surgery. He halted there with his fingers upon the handle and looked behind. The night-watchman had disappeared. There was no one else in sight. He drew a key from the pocket of his dressing-gown. It turned easily in the lock. He pushed the door open. A shaded light was burning from a lamp in the ceiling, otherwise the room was in darkness. The door of the sleeping apartment communicating was open, but secured by a hook. From the dark gulf beyond, Likinski could hear the doctor snoring. He listened for a moment, then he stretched out his arm towards the switch, extinguished the ceiling light and drew from his pocket a small but powerful electric torch. Shielding this with his hand, he stole towards the cupboard, opened it with noiseless fingers and flashed his torch along the line of bottles.

It was there—the third from the end. Almost as his fingers touched it he heard a sound from inside the sleeping apartment. The snoring had ceased. There was the creak of a bedstead—a moment's silence. Then the snoring recommenced on a slightly different note. The doctor had turned over on his side. . . .

Likinski extinguished the torch and waited in breathless silence. The snoring became regular again. He felt for the bottle and took it into his hand. His nerves were apparently in excellent order. He drew out the cork with steady fingers, selected a small phial from a row of empty ones and filled it to the brim from the bottle he was holding. He corked up his phial and slipped it into his pocket, replaced the bottle and closed up the cupboard. He permitted himself a breath of relief. He had succeeded. It was almost impossible to detect the inch or so of lower level in the bottle which he had returned to its place. The phial in his pocket contained all that he needed. Cautiously he turned round towards the door. Then like a flash the room seemed ablaze with light. The doctor, with tumbled hair, sleepy eyes, but angry voice, was facing him on the threshold of his room.

"What the hell are you doing there?" he demanded.

Likinski swallowed hard. The fingers of his left hand stole into the pocket of his dressing-gown and grasped the phial. Whatever happened, he had no intention of parting with that. With his right hand he slipped back the torch and in its place gripped the butt of a small revolver. Slowly he drew it from his pocket.

"Doctor," he confessed in a muffled tone, "I have taken a few drops of your precious *Texacon*. I am going to keep it. Sooner

than part with it I shall kill you. Do not come any nearer. Think carefully. I have taken only a small phialful. I will give you five hundred dollars cash for it in the morning, provided you get back into bed and consider this a nightmare. If you do that you are safe. If you move towards a bell or towards me or call out, you are a dead man. What about it?"

Likinski, in everyday life, was a small man of undistinguished appearance. As a semi-tragic figure, in his dressing-gown and pyjama jacket open at the throat, with his feet emerging from worn leather mules, his lips protruding, he was somewhat ridiculous. But the hand that held that gun was as steady as a rock and the words which he had spat across the room reeked of the truth. The doctor's hesitation was only momentary.

"It's a hell of a price to pay for a small phial of an untried drug," he said. "Get back to your room and bring me the five hundred dollars in the morning."

Likinski moved towards the threshold. His eyes never left the doctor; his outstretched gun never once faltered. At the door he looked back. The gun was still firmly held in his hand and directed with hideous precision.

"Were you thinking of ringing the bell as I opened the door?" he asked.

"Not on your life!" the doctor assured him.

"You will return to bed?"

"I surely shall."

Likinski accepted the risk. He opened the door and closed it again quietly. Then with the phial in his hand he put the gun well out of sight and retraced his steps. The watchman was standing just where he had first found him. Likinski held up the phial.

“I got my draught, you see,” he pointed out.

“That’s good, sir,” the man replied. “Hope your friend will be better. Good night, sir.”

II

From the moment of her boarding the *Queen Anne* at New York, Anna Prestnoff, who was best known to fame as a scene painter and dress designer to the Russian ballet, performances of which had been occupying the boards of a prominent New York theatre for the last two months, found herself exposed to the whole gamut of more or less courteous devices adopted by the travelling male of amorous proclivities towards making her acquaintance. Cosmopolitan though she was, she had ideas of her own on this subject and set herself sedulously to the task of proving to as many of the other sex as ventured in her direction how obnoxious a really agreeable girl can make herself when harried into a defensive frame of mind. The task, however, apart from being somewhat exhausting, had its disadvantages. A table alone in the saloon meant an uncomfortable and ill-served locality. Absence from the bar smoke room entailed lukewarm cocktails on deck, and Anna Prestnoff had never developed a taste for lukewarm cocktails. On the second morning of the voyage, she retired to the greater seclusion of the boat deck prepared to renew the contest, but this time the attack upon her solitude assumed a different shape. It was an intrusion, of course, but of a more direct type. She heard the footsteps approaching and had proceeded with her reading unperturbed. No use, however. The footsteps had paused. She found herself addressed by name.

"You have chosen a pleasant corner, Anna Prestnoff. I had some difficulty in finding you."

The voice seemed somehow familiar, but softer and more pleasant than her memory of it. She was taken by surprise and lowering her book she looked up. She drew a quick, startled little breath. It was surely the impossible that had happened. She threw aside her rug and made an attempt to rise to her feet. The newcomer, a tall, slim but powerfully built man of early middle-age, pushed her gently back in her place.

"But surely—" she began, the astonishment lingering in her eyes.

"You are quite right," he interrupted, "but will you please do as I ask? Will you remember that I am a fellow-traveller upon the boat by chance and that my name is Mr. Alexander? You will allow me, perhaps, as a compatriot," he went on, dragging a chair to her side and sitting down, "to have the great pleasure of cultivating your further acquaintance."

"It will give me much happiness," she acknowledged. "There are several things I should like to know which only you can tell me."

"Well?"

"I read in the papers that you were in New York for the purpose of launching an American edition of the *European Review*. Were you successful?"

"Quite. I have arranged for a simultaneous publication in New York and in London."

"It was from you, then," she went on, "that I received those mystifying instructions only a week ago."

“It is the truth, but please forget it,” he begged. “I trust that your recall to London has not seriously interfered with your plans.”

The slight agitation of her manner had passed but something of the surprise still lingered in her beautiful eyes.

“I am glad to go back to London,” she confided. “My work in New York was unsatisfactory.”

“The ballet is an acquired taste for Anglo-Saxons,” he remarked.

“New York is scarcely an Anglo-Saxon city,” she reminded him, “but it certainly showed little appreciation of my work. Even Nikoli was a comparative failure there.”

“The success or failure of the season of ballet,” he observed calmly, “is a matter of slight importance. Its establishment there was not wholly for artistic reasons, as you know. Will you permit me?”

He drew a thin gold cigarette case from his pocket and offered it to her. She took out a cigarette, which she lit with his lighter.

“You will be happier in London,” he went on, after a brief pause. “You will find yourself amidst more sympathetic surroundings.”

She smoked for a moment, obviously enjoying the fine quality of the tobacco. Then she turned towards him.

“It is not, of course, to place me in more sympathetic surroundings or for my happiness alone that I am being sent back

to London," she said.

"There are other considerations, beyond a doubt," he admitted gravely. "They will develop in time."

The girl was silent for several minutes, then she turned slightly in her chair, facing him more directly.

"So you are really Alexander?"

He drew a small morocco-leather case from his inside pocket, shook out a visiting-card and slipped it into the oblong space at the back of the chair. She leaned over and looked at it.

"Mr. Alexander," she repeated. "Rather a curt sort of card, is it not? Not even an address."

"Does that surprise you?" he asked. "For the last few years I have been a vagrant. That will not last forever."

She sighed.

"It is bad for all of us," she said. "I, too, would like a settled home. People are getting so tired of us. Outside the ballet we seem—our menkind especially—to have embraced all the dishonourable professions in the world. I do not mean you, of course," she went on hastily. "Your establishment of the *European Review* has been a great triumph. Some of your articles, too, have been a joy to us."

"I am not a writer by profession," he observed. "It is hard sometimes to express oneself."

“You succeed in doing it,” she assured him. “A famous American statesman came to one of our evening parties at the studio only a week or so ago. We were talking about the Russian censorship—”

“We will not discuss these things in public, Anna Prestnoff,” he interrupted. “I have written only the truth.”

“Yes, but you have written it as no one else has done,” she persisted eagerly. “You have written it with moderation. If any of those who have had the opportunity—Kerensky, Leon Trotsky and many others—had exercised the same gift, our country would not be in the condition it is now.”

“Nevertheless,” he said, “the pen is not my weapon. I could serve my country more easily with my sword.”

“For a man with brains,” she declared, “that seems to me so senseless. All fighting is brutal and uncivilised. It is worse—it is illogical.”

“Illogical, I grant you,” he admitted. “But man will have become a bloodless creature when the time comes that he no longer wants to fight.”

“Will you explain this to me, then?” she begged. “The world has gradually come to recognise the fact that women are equal to men so far as regards intelligence. Supposing this were to happen—that the political governments of the world fell into the hands of women—do you think then that there would be any more war? Do you think that women would find no other way to express themselves except by machine guns and bombing aeroplanes?”

“I am afraid that my imagination is not sufficiently elastic,” he admitted gravely enough, but with a twinkle in his eyes. “I cannot conceive such a situation as you suggest. In any case, we are working,” he went on, after a moment’s hesitation, “for the future of our own times. We are working to right the balance of the world without bloodshed.”

“Are you satisfied with your progress?” she asked calmly.

“We have so few means of knowing,” he pointed out, “how far our progress has gone. Would you like to make an expedition to Moscow and try to find out?”

She shuddered.

“I should like to but I should be afraid,” she confessed frankly.

The deck steward made a sudden appearance. He was breathless and his manner was urgent.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said, “but would you be so kind as to go down to your cabin? You are wanted there at once.”

Alexander rose to his feet.

“Who is it that wants me?” he asked.

The man hesitated.

“It is your servant, sir, who insisted that you should be sent for,” he confided.

“You will excuse me?” Alexander begged, turning to the girl.

“Of course.”

She leaned forward in her chair to watch him as he hurried away. She was finding it hard to realise that this person with the deep, pleasant voice and easy manners, with whom she had been conversing during the last ten minutes, was indeed the shadowy, dramatic figure behind the curtain of her life since she had been enrolled one of the workers on the *European Review*. His movements had been shrouded all the while in so much mystery—it was, indeed, the first time that she had ever seen him face to face. Certain vague prejudices which she had once conceived were already almost entirely dissipated. He carried himself, she was forced to admit, as a man should. His head and shoulders were finely set and there was an air of restrained vigour about his movements which suggested strength of limb and body. She noticed that people whom he passed looked at him with respect, that the cabin steward who accosted him raised his cap and remained uncovered while they spoke for a few moments. Then he disappeared and she found herself reassembling her impressions of him with almost feverish energy.

Alexander’s first sensation as he entered his cabin was one of mild amusement. Likinski was seated bolt upright upon the edge of the only easy chair. Towering over him stood Paul, who had very much the air of a bulldog guarding his captive.

“What has happened?” Alexander asked simply.

“I returned from the pressing room a few minutes ago,” his

servant explained. “I found this person in possession here.”

“What were you doing in my cabin?” Alexander demanded, turning towards the intruder.

“Absolutely nothing,” was the prompt reply. “Your servant is mad, as most Cossacks are. I explained that a friend had asked me to visit him. I understood that the number of his cabin was twenty-seven and I came here. I was perhaps misinformed. While I was hesitating, your servant enters and he refuses to allow me to leave.”

“You permit me to speak, Monsieur?” Paul enquired.

“Certainly.”

“This gentleman says that he mistook the number of the cabin. For a man who had made such a mistake his behaviour was peculiar. When I came in he was examining the fastenings of the portholes.”

“What were you doing that for?” Alexander asked curiously.

“Tell me the reason yourself, if you can,” the man in the chair replied. “What interest could I have in the portholes of your stateroom? I simply raised myself up a little to look out, because I fancied I heard the fog signal.”

“The sun was shining,” Paul observed stolidly. “Furthermore, Monsieur, the drawer of your desk was open. It was closed when I left the room a few minutes before.”

“That is a foolish thing to say,” Likinski declared. “Am I likely

to be a thief?”

“Very likely indeed, I should think,” Alexander remarked.

“You say that to me—a stranger!” Likinski cried angrily.

“You may be something of a stranger—although I know about you—but your companion is most certainly not,” was the calm rejoinder.

“Who, Nicolas Grodin?”

“A thoroughly bad lot,” Alexander observed.

“You are in a state of ignorance,” Likinski scoffed. “You talk of one about whom you know nothing. I will let you into a secret—if it does not appear upon to-day’s news. Nicolas Grodin is at the present moment the accredited Minister to the English Court.”

“You astonish me!” Alexander exclaimed. “To think that our government should have fallen as low as that!”

Likinski rose to his feet. He was still a little afraid, but he was also very angry. There were points of fire in his small eyes.

“I shall not stay here to be insulted myself or to hear my friend insulted,” he declared. “My presence in your cabin—Mr. Alexander—if that is what you call yourself—was accidental. I shall now leave it.”

Paul glanced towards his master. Alexander, standing with his back to the door, was looking down at the intruder thoughtfully.

“I am wondering,” he confided, “whether I ought not to insist upon searching you first.”

Likinski buttoned up his coat.

“If you lay a finger upon me,” he threatened, “I shall go to the Commander and shall charge you with assault.”

Alexander’s smile was one of kindly indifference.

“That would be a very foolish thing to do,” he said. “See that he remains where he is, Paul, for a moment.”

He strolled across to the desk, looked at the contents of the open drawer and made a cursory examination of several of the others. He picked up a pocket-book and glanced through it. Then he swung round.

“Nothing missing here,” he admitted. “You were quite right, Paul, to send for me. You can go now, Likinski, only listen. Do not make this mistake again. I do not like strangers in my cabin.”

Likinski seemed on the point of an outburst, but the open door was too much for him. He made a rapid and undignified exit. Paul watched him with an air of dissatisfaction. His master remained a little puzzled.

“You did quite right to send for me, Paul,” he repeated, “but I cannot think what on earth the fellow was after. He must know that I should never be likely to leave any papers of importance lying about.”

“He is a bad man,” the servant said simply. “I do not believe

that he found his way here by accident, any more than I believe that England would accept his master as a Minister.”

“His Excellency Nicolas Grodin,” Alexander murmured with a faint smile. “It does not sound right, Paul. I almost wish I had searched the fellow.”

Along the corridor-way, Likinski, hurrying to the refuge of his cabin, was busy mopping the moisture from his forehead.

III

It was the custom of the passengers on the *Queen Anne* to dine early, and at eight o'clock that evening there were barely a score of people in the smaller cocktail bar attached to the smoke room. Amongst them were Nicolas Grodin and Joseph Likinski, seated together in a remote corner. Alexander, arriving alone and unnoticed, stood for a few seconds upon the threshold glancing around. He was not a man with whom anyone would associate the idea of indecision, but there was about him that evening, as he lingered there and again hesitated before an empty table, a suggestion of irresolution. In time, however, he made up his mind. He crossed the room and approached the table at which the two men were seated. There was something furtive in Likinski's manner as he looked up and, recognising the newcomer, shrank a little back into his place. The other, partially recovered from his indisposition, a thickset, burly man, with close-cropped black hair and imperial, flaccid cheeks, a heavy jowl and a determined expression which seemed somehow out of keeping with the upward curve of his mouth, frowned as though inclined to resent the approach of a stranger. It was he whom Alexander addressed.

"You will forgive my intrusion," he begged. "We are all three known to one another so I will not waste time in useless introductions."

"I do not think that you know who I am," the man whom he addressed declared.

“I could more easily forget my own personality,” Alexander continued in a calm, even tone, “than the personality of Nicolas Grodin, the budding diplomatist, the one man in his country who is supposed to possess the complete confidence of his master. As for you, sir,” he went on, turning to Likinski, “I will admit that I know little about you except that I remember you as an underling at Moscow University and later as a secretary to a statesman now leading a retired life in Mexico. You still call yourself, I believe, Joseph Likinski.”

“The immediate question, sir,” Grodin suggested, “is why you have addressed us and what it is that you have to say.”

“It is a poor game that you are playing,” Alexander observed. “I shall not weary you with the repetition of my name because you know it very well already, but this is to let you know, my friends —or perhaps I should say my enemies—that you may have my room searched, or even my person or my trunks in the hold. You may take out the cushions from my automobile and cut them to pieces, you may do the same with my mattress. You may find your way into my private apartments when we arrive at our destination—in comprehensive words you may search, search, search, but you will never find in my possession a single line of writing likely to be of the slightest interest to you. Furthermore, if ever I should find you loitering in my cabin again, taking an interest in the fastenings of my portholes—without any fear of the consequences, I shall shoot you on sight. Even in this centre of civilisation I shall find means to justify myself.”

“We have a madman for company on this pleasant voyage,” Nicolas Grodin declared. “It is of no import. Continue, sir, I beg

of you. My friend and I have talked enough good sense for the day. Let us listen further to your ravings."

"Alas, I have not much more to say," Alexander concluded. "Only this, which may perhaps interest you. I paused for a few minutes on my way here to write a letter—a thing I seldom do—to the purser of this ship. I have informed him of your names, of the presence of Likinski in my cabin, and two other facts concerning you both which should be enough to set the wireless busy for an hour or so if ever the time comes for the letter to be opened. It is to be delivered only in the event of anything untoward happening to me in my sleep or hours of relaxation. A whim, perhaps, the writing of it at all, but I feel that it will make the voyage a pleasanter one for me and I feel, too, that with the knowledge of the price you would have to pay for expediting my departure from this world you will probably wait until we are on dry land."

"I myself have been called wordy," Grodin said. "You, sir, are worse. You are prolix—you are inexplicable."

"Crazy," his companion echoed. "Without a doubt, crazy."

Alexander smiled and turned away with a farewell bow in which there was a touch of irony.

"The letter," he assured them, "is by this time in safe hands."

He left them both looking after him. Nicolas Grodin shook his head.

"He is hard to deal with, that one," he muttered. "He knows too much. The trouble of it is that the authorities are always on his

side. He is powerfully protected."

"What does it matter?" Likinski asked softly, in a voice which sounded like a whisper after his companion's throaty tone. "Some day he, too, will make the foolish mistake that others have made. There is a lamp, my friend, hung over the frontier of our country and sooner or later they come to it like moths, and then—"

"And then," Grodin muttered with a cruel gleam in his eyes, "they disappear—as he will. Fate has played us a kindly trick in this matter, Joseph. It has given us the means of leading him towards the menacing light. That will be your task. I would it were mine."

Likinski stroked his upper lip thoughtfully.

"It will need much manœuvring," he said, "but I have faith in the workings of the drug. It will be a joy to watch his will grow weaker and weaker, to have him like a puppet obeying my directions."

Grodin glanced at the speaker and there was a grudging respect in his small eyes.

"I think, Joseph," he said, "you have more courage than I gave you credit for. It is a serious task that you have chosen."

"I have faith in the drug," Likinski repeated. "To-morrow I do not think that the great nobleman will be stalking proudly about the ship. He will be cowering in his cabin. His poise will be broken. He will obey the bidding of even poor Joseph Likinski. He will follow me onto the freight steamer which sails from

Southampton to Rotterdam on the day after our arrival. He will cross Europe with me. He will come to where the lamp is burning."

Grodin chuckled with amusement.

"You make for yourself eloquent words, Joseph," he declared. "You speak like a prophet."

Alexander diverted his passage through the crowded dining-room and paused before the small table at which Anna Prestnoff had just taken her place.

"I do not like the situation you have chosen," he remarked with a little bow.

"Neither do I," she rejoined. "I did not choose it, however. It was thrust upon me. The ship is very crowded, you see, and I dislike very much being at a table with other people."

"If a single harmless person could be tolerated," he proposed, "it would give me great pleasure to offer you the vacant seat at mine."

She rose to her feet without hesitation.

"You see how quickly I accept your offer."

He led the way to his own very desirable corner, installed her in his place and took the vacant chair by her side. Anna smiled as she realised, from the respect with which he was greeted by the

chief steward and the head waiter who came hurrying up, how little his incognito had availed him.

“It is better, this?” he asked.

“Infinitely,” she replied.

“And for me also,” he assured her with a faint but very attractive smile.

The ordering of dinner, over which Anna had been hesitating, became a simple affair—a suggestion or two from the head waiter, an amendment by Alexander, a courteous reference to her, and the thing was arranged. They exchanged a few commonplace remarks over their hors d’œuvres, then he lowered his voice slightly and leaned towards her.

“You are asking yourself a question. What is it?”

“How clever of you!” she murmured. “Well, I was really wondering why you chose to single me out for this undeserved honour. Why, to be quite frank, you thought it wise to let anyone on the boat who might be interested see us on apparent terms of intimacy.”

“You are old-fashioned, Anna Prestnoff,” he said. “Not in your clothes or your coiffure or your contemptuous disuse of cosmetics, but in your outlook upon the present conditions. You think that because I am the instigator of the *European Review* and am known to be a serious person devoted to the task of liberating my country, and because you have some connection with the Russian circle in London and are a contributor to my paper, we should remain apart.”

“You should go a little further than that,” she rejoined. “Part of my work, with which you, too, are connected, is done behind the curtain from these people’s eyes. It is, in a sense, secret service, you know. Some of them might guess at our interest.”

“Precisely,” he admitted, “and yet what does it matter? The modern spies, the most successful ones, have adopted modern methods. They have their own names printed on their visiting-cards, they patronise the popular restaurants and they have a flair for baffling the enemy by sheer candour.”

She sipped appreciatively the *Berncastler Doctor* which had been poured into her glass from a tall, yellow-tinted bottle.

“An intriguing outlook,” she acknowledged, “but I wonder if it is sound. For instance, there are people in the world who know that the *European Review* is not only the name of a justly famous monthly publication, but amongst its many outside activities it controls, under your guidance, the secret watch over Europe by means of which you who are interested obtain your information of what is going on in Russia. It is one of the most secret of secret associations, that. You are its Chief and its inspiration. I have the honour, and I am proud of it, to be a contributor. There you are. That is why I wonder that I should be in this place at your table. There are two very crafty and dangerous members of the Russian Administration on the boat at the present moment.”

His eyes twinkled.

“Crafty is the word,” he admitted. “If Likinski knows that you are a member of our inner circle it will mean nothing to him that

we are here as comrades. If he is not assured of the fact he will doubt it when he sees us together in this fashion."

"It is a brave outlook," she said. "I like it and I am the gainer. I subscribe to it willingly. Have you, by the by, congratulated Nicolas Grodin upon his new appointment?"

Alexander shook his head.

"I shall neither congratulate him nor shall I believe as yet that the authorities in Moscow have dared to send him to the English Court as a representative of the Russian nation. I treat the appointment as a jest."

"Well, I daresay you are right," she agreed.

"At the same time," he continued, "Grodin and Likinski between them are a dangerous pair of knaves. Likinski had the bland impertinence to rummage about in my stateroom amongst my belongings this morning. Fortunately, Paul caught him there. That is why I had to leave you so abruptly on the boat deck."

"A little crude for a front-rank conspirator," she observed.

Alexander shrugged his shoulders.

"It was probably just one small piece of information he was in search of," he remarked. "When Paul caught him, however, he was examining the fastenings of my portholes."

She laughed musically.

“That does not seem very formidable.”

“Neither is Likinski,” he declared. “He is not exactly formidable. Grodin I fear more. There is a man who might do us great harm.”

“Please go on,” she begged. “The more I understand the easier it is to work.”

“Grodin’s appointment as Minister to England could mean only one thing,” Alexander proceeded earnestly. “Whether the man who gave him the appointment realises it or not, it will be Grodin’s ambition to stir up ill-will between his country and Great Britain. Personally, I think that his outlook is a short-visaged one. He is angry because Great Britain permits the establishment and the continuance of the *European Review* in its capital. It is against us that he wants to strike. I am already taking precautions.”

“Would it matter very much if we had to move to Paris?” she asked.

“Enormously,” he answered. “We should be at the mercy of one of these ever-changing governments. Besides, however much we may regret it, we cannot conceal from ourselves that France and Russia are far nearer to one another politically than Great Britain and Russia. Our establishment in Paris would not be popular. I doubt whether its continuance would be possible.”

“And there is no other place from which we could work?”

“Nowhere in Europe,” he answered.

“You have considered the question then?”

“I have been obliged to. There are obvious objections to every one of the other great capitals. I have a scheme in my mind for solidifying our position in London without alienating in any way France’s sympathies . . . Now I think that we have talked seriously long enough. Will you join me in the lounge for a cigarette and coffee?”

“With great pleasure,” she replied.

IV

Alexander, a man who had never known fear, lay panting upon his bed in the early hours of the following morning, a new, unanalysable sense of terror chilling his blood. He was breathing in short, laboured gasps, at the back of his head was a feeling of giddiness, a strange lack of control which he had never before in his life experienced. A sense of terrible weakness and depression was upon him. He had an almost overmastering impulse to close his eyes, lean back amongst his pillows and court sleep, forgetfulness, to step out of the world of action the nearest and the easiest way. The thing came in waves, followed by faint reactions during which his will made frantic efforts to reassert itself. It was during one of these that he realised what was happening and with a mighty effort plunged into battle, a battle with himself. He sat up in bed and turned on the light. He looked around him in amazement. All three portholes were firmly closed. There was a slight mist in the room, a curious sickly and yet not altogether unpleasant odour, and a faint hissing sound in his ears. He crawled out of bed and staggered to his feet. By the side of the lamp which he had just turned on was an ordinary medicine bottle, from the cork of which protruded a tube of rubber. Something in the bottle was bubbling. Out of the end of the tube came little spirals of the grey mist. He laid his thumb upon the bell. Almost immediately, he felt a curious desire to withdraw it and crawl back to bed. He set his teeth. His thumb remained rigid. In the background of his mind he knew that there was something to be done. He began to ask himself furiously what it was—something

outside the room—something to be done even while this nightmare laid its clammy fingers about him. A knock at the door. He called out, although he failed to recognise his own voice.

“Come in!”

The handle was turned. The door was locked from the outside. Alexander rose to his feet, though his knees trembled. He tightened the muscles all through his body and moved towards the door.

“Passkey! Use passkey!”

When the steward entered he found his passenger half upon the floor, gasping.

“Open port—open port—”

The man looked around the room and grasped at any rate the obvious part of what was happening. He hurried to the portholes, struggled with them for a few moments, flung them open and hooked them up. A fresh breeze swept into the room. Even with its first breath, Alexander felt relieved. He pointed to the bottle.

“The bath,” he cried. “Take the cork out of the bottle. Turn on the water.”

The steward was a man who had his wits about him. He himself was already coughing but he gripped the bottle, flung open the bathroom door and in a few seconds there was the sound of rushing water. He came back to find his passenger standing up

without support, a ghastly colour but steadily breathing in the fresh air.

“What’s it all about, sir?” he asked. “Someone’s been fiddling about with them portholes.”

Alexander was grasping his forehead. There was something he had to do. It was there at the back of his mind. Something—

“God!” he muttered. “Three hundred and two, steward. Hurry to number three hundred and two.”

“That’s the young Russian lady’s room, sir.”

“Hurry! Get there quickly. Break open the door if you have to. I will come after you as soon as I can.”

The man nodded.

“You had better lie down, sir,” he cried. “I’ll go and see if the lady’s all right.”

With a sudden access of strength, Alexander pushed past him. The two men made their way down the corridor. A word from the steward to the night-watchman whom they found doing his accustomed promenade, and the latter followed behind. They reached the door of three hundred and two. Even as they stood there, Alexander fancied that he could detect that ghastly sickly odour. The steward knocked. There was no reply. He knocked again.

“Passkey!” Alexander cried.

He himself was first in the cabin. Notwithstanding that clogged sense which seemed to deprive him of everything except a sort of instinct, he felt a throb of relief as he realised that Anna's ordeal had been a shorter one than his. There was a mist in the room but only in little spirals. She was awake, her frightened eyes staring at them as they entered, her breath coming in quick, convulsive jerks. The steward threw open the portholes. Alexander seized the bottle with its hissing liquid which stood by her bedside.

"The bath," he cried, "the bath. Turn on the water."

The watchman nodded and holding the bottle gingerly in his hand disappeared into the inner room. Alexander grasped Anna's cold hands and held them tightly in his.

"You are all right?" he asked anxiously. "How long have you been awake?"

She shook her head.

"I do not know," she moaned. "It hurts me to breathe. Oh, the air!"

He lifted her into his arms and carried her to a porthole, staggering unexpectedly, but recovering his strength. The wind blew through her hair. Her breathing was instantly more regular. Her head fell back.

"Keep me here," she begged. "Hold me closer to the wind."

He obeyed, although his knees were tottering beneath him. He

called to the steward.

“Get some brandy.”

The man hurried off. The girl’s cold fingers were clasped round Alexander’s neck, her head moved slightly from side to side, her eyes were half-closed.

“I cannot remember what happened,” she faltered. “I was asleep and when I awoke I was stifling. There was someone closing the portholes. I tried to call out but he was close to the switch and it was all dark.”

“How long ago?” he asked.

“I do not know. Then you came—I am tired.”

The steward brought the brandy. Alexander forced a little between her lips, then he gulped some down himself.

“There is an empty stateroom opposite,” the steward told them. “The stewardess has it all prepared—hot-water bottles, anything else the young lady would like.”

“That is excellent,” Alexander replied. “Lock up this stateroom as soon as we have left it.”

He carried her into the cabin across the alleyway. The stewardess threw back the bedclothes and placed a hot-water bottle at her feet.

“The poor young lady!” she exclaimed curiously. “Has she had a shock or something, sir?”

Alexander shook his head. He was leaning against the wall recovering his own breath slowly. The breeze was streaming in at the open portholes. The air of the room, fragrant with ozone, was like wine to him.

“She will soon be all right in this atmosphere,” he said.

The night-watchman prepared to take his leave.

“Do you wish me to report anything, sir?” he asked.

“Not yet,” Alexander replied. “Wait until the morning.”

The man departed and the steward followed a moment later. The stewardess bent over her charge. Anna was looking round and there was trouble in her now wide-open eyes.

“Please do not leave me,” she whispered to Alexander.

He forced a little more brandy between her lips. The stewardess, whose hour it was for going off duty, felt her pulse.

“The young lady is quite all right now, sir,” she reported. “Is there anything more I can do?”

“You had better stay. I shall have to remain till she goes to sleep. You can lie down on the other bed for a time.”

She breathed a sigh of resignation, folded her arms and sat in the easy chair.

“Send her away,” the girl whispered. “I do not like her being here. I like to be alone with you. I am afraid something has

happened to my brain. I feel different. What is it?”

“Nothing that you will not easily get over,” he assured her.

“You, too,” she went on. “You look strange.”

He forced a smile.

“Never mind. We will talk about it all in the morning. Can you sleep?”

“Perhaps. If you do not go away.”

Ten minutes passed. Alexander himself was desperately sleepy. He closed his eyes and opened them with a start to find her hands holding him more tightly and her eyes wide open.

“Send that woman away,” she begged once more. “I cannot bear her here. Please.”

Her distress was manifest in her twitching features. He motioned to the stewardess.

“You can go,” he directed. “If we need you again I will ring.”

She rose promptly to her feet.

“Ring the bell twice if it is urgent, sir,” she enjoined. “I will come or send my relief.”

The woman departed, closing the door. The girl’s eyes followed her. She smiled when at last they were absolutely alone. Her other arm stole round his neck.

“Lean down more,” she begged. “What has happened to me, Alexander? I can only feel that I must have you there. Do not go away.”

“I will stay so long as you are afraid,” he promised.

“I am not afraid now,” she said. “Only I do not understand myself. I cannot think. Do you believe anything has happened to my head?”

“Nothing that will not have passed in the morning,” he assured her. “Have you any pain?”

“None whatever. I just feel—comfortable, almost happy. You will not go? You will not leave me here all alone?”

“Of course I will not,” he promised.

“You are very cold, Alexander. You are very far away,” she whispered.

“You must close your eyes,” he insisted. “You must sleep, Anna Prestnoff. Hear me tell you that, please—you must sleep.”

There was a faint indication of the little pout that he had once or twice admired. She closed her eyes but her grip upon him tightened. He looked at the clock. It was ten minutes to four. She began to breathe more naturally. At six o’clock he opened his eyes. He looked around the cabin in amazement—moved a little. Her arms fell away slowly. He stood up and looked down at her, he himself aching in every limb. She was asleep. He rang the bell twice and opened the door softly.

“You stay with her,” he told the stewardess who answered him. “Listen—you will receive a present from me later on, but you must not leave until you see me again or hear from me.”

“I quite understand, sir,” the woman said. “Mrs. Hanner told me that the young lady had been ill. I will not leave her alone.”

Alexander staggered off. He made his way back to his own room. The fresh air was sweeping in and through the portholes there was a gleam of sunshine. He threw himself down and slept.

He was awakened a few hours later by the steward, who brought him his usual cup of tea. Directly he opened his eyes and looked around him he remembered what had happened. He had no definite feeling of illness but a deadly sense of inanition. It was a trouble to answer the man. It was almost agony to contemplate rising. He set his teeth and fought.

“How is the young lady, James?” he asked.

“Still sleeping, sir. Mrs. Hanner went round some time ago. We thought you might like the few drops of what was left in the bottles kept. Anyhow, I have them in my pantry.”

“Excellent. Turn on my bath and send Paul to me.”

“How are you feeling yourself, sir?” the steward asked a little curiously.

“Quite well, thank you. You need not wait.”

Alexander dressed and made his way out on deck. The sky was grey and a thin, drizzling rain was falling. He mounted to the upper deck, wrapped his mackintosh around him and walked steadily for over an hour. When at last he sank exhausted into a chair, he felt the blood once more warm in his veins. There was a slight glow in his cheeks. He knew that he was winning. He made his way into the saloon, drank some coffee and made a light breakfast. Then, with the bottle which the steward had given him in his hand, he presented himself at the surgery.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Alexander?" the doctor asked, rising at once to his feet.

"Tell me the contents of this bottle," Alexander replied, handing it over.

The doctor smelt it, moistened his finger with it and tasted it. He shook his head.

"I am not a chemist," he confessed. "I have no means on board for making an intricate analysis. Why do you ask me?"

"Because something which requires explanation has happened upon this boat," was the calm reply. "May I ask if you are in possession of any drugs the properties of which might be described as unusual?"

The doctor's expression of polite indifference was suddenly changed. He had the appearance of a man who had received an unexpected shock. He stared at his visitor wonderingly.

"Good God!" he exclaimed.

Alexander waited—stonily silent. The doctor recovered himself in a few seconds.

"I have parted with, to a passenger," he confided, "a very small quantity of a drug I know nothing about and which has a similar odour. Here is the remainder of the bottle."

He opened the cupboard, withdrew the bottle labelled *Texacon*, and handed it to his visitor. Alexander held the bottle up to the light, drew out the cork and smelt the contents. He returned it to the doctor.

"Would you care to tell me how you came into possession of this stuff?" he asked.

"In a somewhat curious manner," the doctor explained. "Professor Hartlow, who is President of the Society of Analysts, Chairman of the Metropolitan Hospital in New York, and a very famous scientist, brought this bottle on board an hour or so before we left. It was wrapped up in a brown-paper parcel and sealed. He brought a letter of introduction from a friend even more famous than himself and a request that I should convey it to Southampton and hand it over to someone whose name was given. It was explained to me that the drug was extraordinarily scarce, it had only recently been discovered and it was likely to revolutionise certain classes of medicine. The Society did not wish to trust it to any ordinary method of transmission so they asked me to put it in my surgery cupboard and, as I have said, hand it over to someone who would be waiting for it at Southampton."

"And you agreed?"

“Wait a moment,” the doctor begged. “I agreed, but thank God, although I was very rushed, I insisted upon putting the matter before the Commander first. We went to see him. He, of course, was terribly busy, as we were just sailing, but he listened to what my visitor had to say and he gave permission. He insisted upon it, however, that the parcel be unsealed and the bottle placed with my other medicines in my cupboard. Naturally enough, he could not countenance anything which looked in the least like smuggling.”

“It was apparently, then, only in your charge,” Alexander remarked. “How did you come to part with any?”

The doctor told his story in a few words.

“I am a married man,” he concluded. “My insurance policy has just lapsed. I have two children, and the man into whose revolver I had to look meant business. A small phialful of the drug as against a man’s life. I do not pretend I played the part of a hero but I did what ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have done. I accepted his offer of five hundred dollars and he marched off with the phial.”

Alexander reflected for a moment.

“I wonder how the fellow knew that you had it on board,” he remarked.

“I think that I can explain that,” the doctor said. “He paid me a visit on behalf of a seasick friend and the door of my cupboard was open. He could see the label on the bottle from where he was seated.”

“Have you ever heard of a new drug,” Alexander asked, “which is powerful enough to paralyse at the same time mind and body, to destroy the human will and to induce a complete lack of resistance to all the ordinary energies of life?”

“There was an article in the *Lancet* last month,” the doctor acknowledged, “about a new drug which they said had been discovered in the Kremlin Laboratory at Moscow.”

“Well, that drug, or something very much like it, thanks to your parting with the phial of the preparation you were taking to Southampton,” Alexander said, “was administered last night to myself and another person on board. I have been through the whole of the symptoms and I am still suffering from exhaustion. My fellow-sufferer did not inhale the fumes as long as I did and I hope her recovery, too, will be complete.”

The doctor was evidently thunderstruck. He reached for his cap and glanced at his watch.

“This is terrible news, Mr. Alexander,” he declared. “I must face it out at once. Will you come with me to the Commander?”

Alexander held out his hand.

“Wait a few moments, please,” he begged. “This is a serious matter and I do not wish to act rashly. I know the man to whom you delivered the phial, of course, and I can guess at his motive. I know the man with whom he is travelling, also. I have been watching them ever since we started on the voyage.”

“In any case, sir,” the doctor pointed out, “I feel sure you will agree with me that it is necessary to interview the Commander

at once."

"That is naturally the obvious course," Alexander meditated, "but sometimes the obvious course is not the best. So far, only the young lady and I have been the sufferers by your action. We may decide that we would prefer to deal with the matter in our own way."

The doctor was frankly puzzled.

"But I don't understand," he exclaimed.

"Is it necessary for you to understand?" Alexander asked gently. "You must be content when I tell you that in dealing with this matter there are larger issues at stake than the attempted destruction of any two human beings. The young lady and myself are alone concerned. We may decide that it is better to act upon our own initiative."

"But what action could you take?" the doctor protested. "You could not even have the fellow put out of harm's way for the rest of the voyage."

"Could you?" Alexander asked shrewdly. "No one saw him put this abominable preparation in our cabins, nor could anyone identify the drug which you supplied to him. I cannot prevent your reporting the affair to the Commander, if you choose, but my advice would be that you leave it alone for a few hours. Suppose you come and pay the young lady a professional visit?"

The doctor acquiesced with alacrity. He had steeled himself to face the inevitable, but if there was any chance of escaping that interview with the Commander he was all for it.

“We will go round at once,” he proposed.

Anna Prestnoff was still in bed when the two men were admitted to her stateroom, but she confessed wearily that it was an intense laziness which kept her there. She was wearing a dressing-jacket *négligé* and had taken her coffee. She was singularly colourless, however, and the easy vivacity of her manner seemed temporarily to have departed. She took no notice whatever of his companion but she held out both hands to Alexander.

“Give me something to make me want to get up, doctor,” she begged, without even glancing in his direction, “and you please, you must not leave me alone like this,” she went on, her fingers tightening on Alexander’s wrists. “I have had a long sleep but I am too lazy to sleep any more. Can you understand that, doctor?”

“It is unusual,” he admitted. “Forgive me.”

He took her pulse and blood pressure, asked her a few questions and stood for a moment deep in thought.

“Young lady,” he pronounced, “your symptoms seem to indicate that you have taken an overdose of some strong narcotic. I should advise you to get up at once and go on deck. This feeling of exhaustion of which you complain is unnatural. It would be better for you to fight it.”

“Very well, I will get up presently. Do not go away, please,” she begged Alexander as he showed signs of leaving.

“I will come back soon,” he promised, following the doctor out

into the passage.

“Well?” he asked.

“The symptoms are a little puzzling,” the other confessed, “but there is absolutely nothing the matter which will not pass off in a matter of hours, I should think.”

“Very well,” Alexander said. “We will let the matter rest, if you please, doctor, for the present.”

“At your request, sir,” the doctor assented cheerfully. “Remember, I am perfectly willing to face the music.”

“We will see about that later on. I will take the responsibility of your silence for the moment.”

Alexander returned to his place by Anna’s side. She took his hands in hers and stroked them. There was a revealing tenderness in her tone and manner which at the same time thrilled and embarrassed him.

“I think the doctor’s advice was good,” he said. “You must get up, Anna Prestnoff. I will ring for the stewardess.”

“Five minutes,” she begged. “I am far too exhausted to dress. Could we not sit down here and talk for a time? Why do you look so stern? I would like you to be a little kinder.”

“I can assure you,” he declared cheerfully, “I never felt more kindly disposed towards anyone in my life. All the same, what you need, and what you are going to have, is a salt-water bath

with a spray almost cold afterwards and then a brisk walk on deck.”

She shivered.

“You are being very stern with me,” she complained.

“I am behaving like a sensible person,” he assured her.

“I have behaved like a sensible person all my life,” she went on. “Just now I feel—”

He rang the bell for the stewardess. A shadow of the old petulant grimace lightened and then darkened her expression.

“You should offer to be lady’s maid,” she suggested sleepily. “The stewardess is so clumsy.”

“I am afraid that I should be much worse. I will come down for you in half an hour.”

“And you will not leave me all the rest of the day?” she begged.

“That is hard to promise. And when you get up and walk about you will feel differently. I must do some writing.”

“I will be your secretary,” she declared eagerly. “It is quite time I, too, did some work.”

The stewardess bustled in. She set the bath running and remained waiting. Alexander slipped away and hurried to the doctor’s quarters.

“For God’s sake can you not give us some sort of a tonic, doctor?” he begged. “Both the young lady and I seem to be getting a little weak in the head.”

“I cannot give you any sort of direct antidote,” the other confessed, as he shook up one or two bottles and prepared a concoction, “because I have no knowledge of the drug itself. This cannot do you harm. It ought to give you strength to fight the inertia. Drink your dose off now.”

Alexander obeyed. The doctor poured the rest of the mixture into a phial and handed it to his patient.

“I cannot claim that it is anything very original,” he continued. “The best cure for you and the young lady is sea air, and heaps of it. Eat whatever you feel like and alcohol won’t do you any harm, but if you take my advice you will hurry Mademoiselle up on the top deck, set her with her face to the wind and both of you do breathing exercises for as long as you can stick it. Perhaps I shall hear from you later in the day,” he added a little wistfully.

“I will give you a call,” Alexander promised. “I do not think you need worry unduly about this,” he added with a pleasant though rather forced smile. “We are on the fringe of a very serious matter but your personal share in it exposes you to little blame. No man can be censured for saving his own life.”

The doctor produced a roll of notes from his pocket.

“The five hundred dollars,” he explained. “They were left on my table this morning.”

Alexander waved them away.

“Put them back and forget all about it, doctor,” he advised.

V

“I am better,” Anna Prestnoff declared two hours later. “I believe that I am quite as well as you are. We have recovered. I think that we are very fortunate.”

“So do I,” he assented.

She pressed his arm. They had just finished a vigorous promenade on the boat deck and were seated side by side with the wind in their faces.

“You were so quick,” she said. “You did everything so wonderfully. It was quite an adventure—yes?”

“It might have been a very serious one,” he agreed.

“Just now,” she confided, “I feel physically almost myself. The trembling has left my knees. I am not so depressed, yet I feel somehow stirred up. Something has happened to my mind. I do not know what it is. Perhaps I have lost what they used to call my poise. Do I look any different?”

“Not at all,” he declared, regarding her critically. “You are very good-looking, Anna Prestnoff, and you know it.”

She laughed musically.

“Well, if it is the drug that has made you say that,” she said, “I have something to be thankful for. You never looked at me

before as though you remembered that I was a woman and that you were a man. I think I rather like that you should see me sometimes that way, my noble Chief.”

“Bad for the work,” he assured her laconically.

“What do you mean?” she demanded. “Bad for the work. What is the most important part of my work, then?”

“To attract bad men who may be working against our country,” he explained. “To find out their secrets, to convert those that are worth converting, to hand over the unregenerate to me, then to use that clever pen of yours in writing articles to proclaim the truth to people of other countries.”

“That part of it I do not mind,” she confided, “but I do not wish to make myself attractive to anyone—only to you.”

“But I am already a convert,” he reminded her. “Very soon you and I will be looking into the future with the same eyes. Then our work will begin in earnest. Our close contact during these few days will be of immense importance.”

“Work,” she repeated a little petulantly. “It is always work. Is there nothing else, then, worth a thought in life?”

“Many things,” he assured her, “and as they come to us, Anna Prestnoff, so shall we deal with them. Just now we have been through purgatory together. We have to remember—”

“I am always remembering,” she interrupted. “You are a tiresome man, but, in the most respectful of fashions, I am very fond of you. Now I have done all that you told me. I

have had a hot sea bath and a cold one afterwards. I have taken my tonic, I have gulped down this sea air for one hour, I have walked for half an hour, I have been preached to all the time. Now we will have a cocktail—yes? Just in that corner of the lounge bar."

"I suppose that until you are perfectly recovered," he reflected, "you must have your own way."

"In that case I will have a champagne cocktail," she decided. "I am beginning to live again. That walk—it was wonderful. When do we talk seriously, my friend? When do we really discuss what has happened to us?"

"No hurry," he answered. "There are several considerations to be taken into account."

They found a retired corner in the bar lounge. The cocktails were ordered and served. She drew close to him.

"Now, my master," she said, "for I suppose I must call you that, I shall tell you what I have been thinking, since I was able to think again. What happened to us, in a small degree—has it not occurred to you?—is exactly what has happened to Adek and Morodkin—to all those other men."

He remained silent.

"A man like Adek—brilliant, a great speaker, a man of brains—to plead guilty, to remain a dumb white figure in the dock, a nervous wreck in the hands of his accusers," she continued. "Is it common sense? He acted as I felt for a few hours, as I should still be feeling if you had not rescued me. Do you

believe in that theory that those Moscow men were drugged whilst they were in their cells, drugged so that they lost their nerve and their will and had to be helped into court?”

He passed her a cigarette and lit one himself. She threw back her head and inhaled luxuriously. Alexander began to wonder whether this period of convalescence was not in its way a dangerous time. He was uneasily conscious of the warmth of her presence, of the pleasure of listening to her speech with its slight foreign accent so much more pronounced than his, and the thrill which her changed manner, the sudden breaking down of the barriers between them, gave him. Stretched out in her chair, with her fur cape thrown back from her throat and her closely fitting dress which followed so seductively the lines o her delicate figure, he became conscious of what he had felt so seldom in life—the joy of that sense of proprietorship which, since their adventure together, he seemed, without any definite reason, to have acquired.

“You have instinct as well as intelligence, Anna Prestnoff,” he admitted. “I believe that what you suggest is the truth. There are two of the most dangerous men who were ever born in Russia on board this ship. They are aware of the work I have already begun and the chain of workers I am trying to establish through Europe. Without a doubt last night’s attempt came through them—indeed, I am absolutely convinced of it. I am hesitating as to what steps to take. We are safe from anything except blatant assassination and that is not the way of these men. But all the same Likinski and Grodin are here to do us a mischief if they can.”

She sipped her cocktail thoughtfully and took another luxurious

puff of her cigarette.

“Oh dear!” she exclaimed—“and I thought this was going to be such a dull voyage. What are you going to do?”

“I have not made up my mind,” he told her. “The circumstantial evidence against Likinski is overwhelming, but of definite proof we have none. They are already under suspicion—Grodin because his dossier is an open book for anyone’s inspection, even though he has been appointed Minister to Great Britain, and Likinski because—he does not look as though he had the courage, does he?—he forced the doctor here, at the point of a revolver, to give him a phialful of that foul drug which he is conveying to Southampton.”

“Where did the drug come from?” she asked breathlessly.

“A laboratory in New York which Likinski has visited several times lately,” he told her. “He had an introduction from the principal chemist at the Kremlin Laboratory but he never seemed to win the confidence of the people in America. I do not believe, as a matter of fact, that they trusted him.”

“You think that it is the same drug—that the Americans, too, have discovered the formula, or that it has been passed on to them from Moscow?” she asked eagerly.

He touched her arm and she broke off in her speech. Likinski and Grodin were passing through the room together. Grodin caught Alexander’s eye and bowed an unctuous good morning. His companion passed them without apparent recognition. They continued their progress towards the bar. Alexander looked after them, a queer, almost contemptuous, smile parting his lips.

“They have not much luck, those two,” he observed.

“Explain, please,” she begged.

“I have no certain knowledge, but I believe that Grodin is on his way back from an unsuccessful journey to Mexico. If news of that journey ever reaches Moscow, I should think that his appointment to London would be cancelled.”

“And the little one?”

“He took his chance with us and he failed,” Alexander reminded her. “Fate does not treat too kindly in these days the men who fail.”

“Grodin has brains and vision of a sort,” she remarked. “Of the two, he is the one I fear.”

Alexander watched them for a moment. Grodin was drinking champagne out of a pewter mug; Likinski was imbibing some cloudy mixture through a straw.

“Dangerous fellows!” Alexander exclaimed with sudden emphasis. “Dangerous fellows, both of them, although of a different genus. One should deal with them severely. There are times when civilisation is too fettered.”

She smiled at his so readily kindled anger.

“You should be a Dictator,” she said. “How would you like that? Sit on a throne of iron, try your prisoners logically and according to the facts and wave them off to execution. Yet when our own country does that same thing—do not be angry with me

—you find it barbaric.”

He looked at her in surprise.

“Are you serious?” he asked coldly.

“Not altogether,” she admitted. “The trouble is that you fancy you would destroy crime by destroying the criminal. It is not good logic, my friend.”

“You would turn the world into a huge reformatory, perhaps?” he suggested.

She yawned slightly.

“Perhaps it is the effect of the poison still in my veins,” she said. “Perhaps it is because I have once or twice known great men who were also criminals.”

“Are you judging them by the deed or the motive?” he asked.

She hesitated.

“I shall go carefully with you,” she warned him. “You are trying to lure me into a cul-de-sac. Nevertheless, to kill a man because you have a personal grievance against him—say jealousy—is murder. To kill a man because he has a foul disease, whether of the mind or the body, which is poisoning the world, is justifiable.”

“If I ever have the slightest ambition to be a Dictator, it is not because unlimited power would give me the least pleasure,” he said. “It is simply because if I saw clearly and had the power to

act, I should be cleansing the world of all these burdens of evil government."

"I am beginning to believe that I have stumbled upon the truth," she sighed. "You are ambitious to join those others. You wish to become one of those autocrats—the dread figures of Europe."

He leaned back in his chair smiling.

"You were right," he declared. "The poison is still lingering in your veins."

She laughed—a vibrant, delicate little gesture, musical and intriguing—then she met his eyes with their critical, uneasy light and the impulse of mockery passed.

"I think you did not say that seriously," she said, "but it was a wise speech, nevertheless. I am not myself. You are not quite yourself this morning. We will be serious no longer. I will break the stern habits of my long life of comparative abstinence. We will have another cocktail. Please do not say no, my master."

"I had no idea of discouraging you," he assured her. "I should say this was the one morning in your life when wine was good for you."

He touched the bell and gave the barman an order. Presently they walked on the main deck until the lightly falling rain drove them into shelter. They sat in a small alcove close to the Marconi office. Overhead was a rustling and crackling of electricity. Closer at hand two of the operators were bending over their work, and they could hear the harsh, uneven ticking of the instruments.

“Someone has a great deal to say to the *Queen Anne* this morning,” Anna observed.

“Perhaps,” he meditated, “the news is already being flashed in black headlines on the front pages of the American papers:

> The owner of the mightiest vehicle of thought in the western world—the *European Review*—has joined hands with its most wonderful contributor.

How does that sound?”

She drew her long fingers through his.

“Entrancing,” she murmured.

VI

The Commander glared disapprovingly down from his bridge as the white launch, flying the French flag and a silken burgee of the Yacht Club of France, drew up at the foot of the gangway. The *Queen Anne* was hove to outside Cherbourg waiting for mails and to disembark passengers.

“No visitors allowed on board, Francis,” he growled to his first officer.

“I’ll pass down word, sir,” the latter replied.

He returned a few minutes later. The launch still remained at the foot of the gangway.

“Sorry, sir,” he reported, “but the gentleman on board announces himself as the Prince de Chambordine. He has a permit to board the vessel from the company’s agent here and also a letter from the Admiralty asking for your consideration. A great man, the Prince, sir, if you will forgive my reminding you. His daughter would have been the Czarina of Russia, if the present débâcle had not arrived.”

“Invite him on board,” the Commander ordered brusquely. “Show him the usual civilities. If he asks for me I shall be in my cabin presently.”

The officer returned to the head of the gangway and signalled permission to disembark to the occupants of the

waiting launch. A tall, slim man of dignified appearance, wearing yachting clothes and casquette with the badge of the Yacht Club of France, mounted the gangway, followed closely by a most attractive young lady, who was obviously enjoying the adventure. Her figure, although girlish, possessed already lines of distinction. Her smile was the smile of contented youth, with that fascinating suspicion of provocative enquiry which seems to be the special heritage of the young French woman. Under her neatly-worn tam o' shanter were full coils of rich brown hair. The Prince exchanged greetings with the first officer and addressed him courteously.

"You have my card, I trust," he said. "I am anxious to have a few words with a friend and relative who is travelling on this steamer."

"Certainly, sir," the officer replied. "Whom shall I send for?"

Alexander at that moment made his appearance. He approached the two bare-headed, his hands outstretched in welcome. He stooped and kissed the girl on both cheeks. The Prince took his arm affectionately.

"I am delighted that you have returned from that grim enterprise," he said. "I received your cable and I am here—also Simone, who is enchanted at the idea of seeing you. Where is it that we can have this talk which you desire?"

"I have a small sitting-room attached to my cabin," Alexander suggested. "The lounge just now is rather noisy."

He led the way to his suite. The deck and companionways were

crowded with disembarking passengers and they scarcely exchanged a word until they reached the door of number twenty-seven. The girl gave a little exclamation of delight as they were ushered in.

"What luxury!" she cried. "Dear cousin, for a man travelling alone, you have a quite excellent idea of comfort."

Alexander pointed to the piles of papers and books upon the table, the volumes on the bookshelves, many of them a little dreary in appearance. Notwithstanding the flowers, which still survived, there was an air of industry about the apartment.

"You forget, my dear Simone," he said, "that I am an arduous worker. I have to address several very important meetings as soon as I am re-established in England—one within a week. Then there is my monthly open letter to my countrypeople—in the *European Review*—which is due for publication a few days after we land."

"Marvellous idea, those letters," the Prince declared, as he laid his hand affectionately on the young man's shoulder. "How on earth you manage to get a single copy of the *Review* across the frontier I cannot imagine. But, my dear nephew, you should be careful. There is a gnashing of teeth, there is fierce anger against you amongst the ruling members of the government. If you had not sent for me to meet you I should have come—if only to warn you that our enemies have representatives of the secret police in every capital in Europe. In their black lists you are the most prominent figure. You remember Arminoff?"

"The old General?" Alexander exclaimed. "Of course I

remember him. His last article which we published was splendid."

The Prince shook his head solemnly.

"Too splendid," he sighed. "He left his home ten days ago for his usual evening *apéritif* at the *Café de la Liberté*. He was seen there talking to some strangers—Russians, it was believed. He left the place with them at his usual time. He has not been seen or heard of since."

"Another victim," Alexander muttered with a frown. "What had the French police to say about that?"

The Prince shook his head once more.

"Nothing that gives us any hope," he confessed. "Listen, Alexander. You must keep away from France—from Paris, especially. It is only in London that you are safe."

"And when I want him so much to come!" Simone declared petulantly.

"I have a better idea," Alexander confided smiling. "I shall discuss it presently with your father. Now, what can I order for you, Prince?"

"Too early, *mon ami*," he regretted. "You retain your splendid health, I am glad to see. I was afraid that you might find the States strenuous."

"I found plenty to do there, but nothing of any real importance," Alexander admitted. "The *Review* is to be published in New

York but it will be censored in Washington. The measure of our success will depend upon what the gentleman with the long scissors does to us, of course. Tell me, have you received any news from private sources?"

"Nothing very encouraging," the Prince said gravely. "You had your radio messages, naturally."

"Shocking!"

"They say that Adek was arrested with a smile upon his lips," the Prince continued. "If so, it must have been a bitter gesture. The news which I have for you, dear nephew, is certainly not good."

"It must be told," Alexander sighed.

The Prince considered for a minute.

"It is somewhat vague, as yet," he announced. "Although there is no doubt whatever that the secret council of the present Moscow government consider that they have effectually swept away all that was imminently dangerous to their authority, a crusade of a different order is being organised throughout the country."

"That sounds interesting," Alexander murmured, accepting a cigarette from the Prince's case and lighting it. "A crusade—yes?"

"The scanty news that we have has cost good men their lives," the Prince said. "We lost three invaluable adherents within a week. No trial for them. They were arrested at ten o'clock one night and shot before morning. One was a

woman."

"Not Vera—" Alexander exclaimed—"not Vera Marchevsky?"

The other nodded.

"It is a shock, of course," he said, "but it is necessary that you know how we stand. She was staunch to the end. Not a word passed her lips."

"And Serge?"

"Real drama," the Prince declared with a flash in his eye. "Serge was commanding a squadron of heavy armoured aeroplanes within sixty miles of the Polish frontier when he heard the news by telephone. They were starting on an experimental flight the next morning and his plane was all conditioned. He left barracks secretly at two o'clock, got away successfully and came down in Hanover. How he managed the rest of his exploit I do not know, but he is in London to-day."

"A military deserter," Alexander frowned. "That may mean complications."

The Prince smiled.

"You can call him that," he observed. "He has been a happy and a hard-working traitor to the government in whose army he was enrolled since the day he received his flying certificate. As the brother of Vera Marchevsky he was a doomed man if he had remained where he was for another twenty-four hours."

"And this crusade makes progress?" Alexander asked

eagerly.

“An uphill business, I fear,” the Prince sighed. “There is no doubt whatever that the Russian government is well served by its spies. As I was saying, with the arrest of Adek and his friends, they have struck a deadly blow at the new party in Russia, the party who had finally decided that capital is as necessary to the country as is bread to the peasant. And now, by some means or other, they have word of our own movement. As yet we have made little progress in Russia itself. Not a single meeting has been called at which our doctrines have been preached, not a single journal published in Russia has dared even to discuss the question of any form of democratic government as against the distorted Communism of the Soviet. The whole of our strength still lies scattered in Europe. This crusade of which I have spoken is an attempt to assist our followers to become a corporate body. A list of the spies who are working against it together with the cities and countries to which they are allotted is in existence, but, alas, none of our agents know where. If Vera had lived, we should have had it. Since her murder—shooting without a trial is murder—there has been a blank wall of silence. We do not know who is left. We only know that every place in Europe where we had established ourselves is threatened.”

“Life will not be pleasant for a time,” Alexander said wearily. “It will be like camping out when you have to lift the mats and carpets every day to search for scorpions. And France—tell me about France.”

The Prince lifted his hand in a helpless gesture.

“How can anyone speak for France?” he exclaimed. “Her character is the character of her women—she is wanton, she is cruel, she is changeable. At the least excuse she rushes to extremes. Taking her seriously, she is the most Communistic of all the countries of Europe outside Russia.”

“*Mais, mon père*,” Simone remonstrated, “you exaggerate. It is simply that the wrong people are making themselves heard. The spirit of France is for good.”

“I agree with Simone,” Alexander declared. “France is everything that she seems to be on the surface, but she possesses a basic solidity of national purpose which few people in the world appreciate at the moment, Prince—and this is the most important thing I have had it in my mind to say to you: Paris is no place for you. You have a great house standing empty in London. You have many influential friends there. You have many enemies amongst these Russian spies who would do their utmost, knowing of your position with us, to involve you in trouble. We need you in London. I want you to remain there.”

“Alexander is right,” Simone declared regretfully. “We know already, dear cousin, more than my father has told you about the plots all around us, the way we are spied upon. Our house in the Bois is watched night and day. My father cannot go so far as his club without being followed.”

“Is this true, Prince?” Alexander asked.

De Chambordine nodded sadly.

“I am afraid it is,” he admitted. “The only place where I can speak a single word to a friend without fear of being overheard

is in the sanctity of the Jockey Club. And there there is no one who is anxious to hear what I have to say."

"The position I feared has already arrived then," Alexander declared. "I beg, my dear Prince, that you will not hesitate. You must come to London."

"He shall come," Simone cried joyously, springing to her feet. "For us Paris becomes more *triste* every day. You shall give me some work to do in London, dear cousin. There I shall be happy."

The Prince glanced at the clock and rose to his feet.

"It is a great idea that you have put before me, Alexander," he admitted. "In a day or two you will hear from me. Meanwhile, I was warned not to linger on board. Your Commander is restless to be off. For a few days everything remains as before—my house, my club, our method of communication. It is for you to let me know from London if the situation is in any way changed."

"That I shall not fail to do," Alexander promised.

De Chambordine glanced at the clock once more. He laid his hand upon his nephew's shoulder.

"Our conversation," he said, "has taken a curious turn. I came on board to greet you, Alexander, with different things in my mind. I had made up my mind during the last few weeks that it was my duty to speak to you seriously. You are still a young man and your life is being dedicated to a weary task. For one of my generation it is no matter, for I know well that the light will not come in my time. I feel, though, that it is my duty to

warn you that you may be giving your youth to a hopeless cause."

Alexander smiled.

"No cause that is good is hopeless," he declared. "There has been a great unsettlement in the world and the Russian government has surprised us all by making sane and steady progress in many directions. Nevertheless, its doctrines are founded upon a fallacy. The great structure which it has reared is built upon the sand. It is doomed to collapse and it will collapse."

Simone took her cousin's arm as they passed through the door into the companionway.

"But I do not wish," she remonstrated earnestly, "that you give your whole life to this tiresome business of working for other people. Is there to be no golf, then, no polo, no little parties in the South, no shooting the high pheasants at Rambouillet, no Scotland, no Cowes? Alexander, you must not be so serious."

"My time for frivolities will come, I hope," he answered smiling, "but not just yet. Ah, this is a friend who arrives, Simone."

They came face to face with Anna Prestnoff at the corner of the gangway. She stopped short as she saw them. Alexander detained her.

"Anna Prestnoff," he said, "I wish you to know my relatives. The Prince de Chambordine, the Princesse Simone de Chambordine. Mount with us, please. My friends are on the

point of leaving."

The two girls fell behind. The Prince took Alexander's arm as they reached the upper deck.

"If I had a son," he said quietly, "he would have been as you are—entirely Russian on his mother's side. Nevertheless, I should have advised him as I advise you—to let ill alone. I believe like you that some day the Russian government will inevitably crumble into dust, simply because no nation can exist and flourish without a soul. Yet in arms and in cunning they are very powerful. A few scattered individuals against them are helpless. You are wealthy, you have a position in the world—I pray of you that before you commit yourself to any definite enterprise you spend a month or two with us in seclusion. We shall be at my Argonne château for the summer. Come to us there, Alexander. If only for a few weeks."

Simone came eagerly forward. They were awaiting the officer in control at the head of the gangway.

"Alexander," she said, "my father invites—I insist. You must come. A few weeks' delay will make no difference and afterward we will come to London. You are going to plunge yourself into all sorts of dangers and just now it is useless. The time has not arrived. Remember, no one in the world has been a more vehement upholder of the old traditions than my father. The very idea of any other form of government in Russia has sent him into a fury, and yet it is he now who begs that you have caution. It is he now who is growing into the belief that the present government is tying a rope around its own neck. Before we go, promise me that you will make no rash

movement."

She raised her eyes to him beseechingly. He took her hands and held them tightly. Nevertheless he answered her in a lighter tone.

"When the time for holidays comes I will fly to Argonne," he promised. "I am not a fanatic. Like other men, I enjoy a respite from work. But that time is not yet. My work is only half-accomplished. I am needed in London. I may soon be needed elsewhere. The *European Review* and its organisation has become the greatest stumbling-block those who plan the ruin of our country have yet encountered. Whatever the risks may be, I am prepared to face them."

The Prince sighed. He was no longer a young man. He, too, loved his late wife's country. He loved his daughter. He loved Alexander, and he regarded him a little wistfully from the French parent's point of view. He was one of the few remaining noblemen of Europe who would be a suitable and desirable son-in-law. He realised the impossibility, however, of moving him from his purpose.

"In that case, my dear nephew," he said, "if the mountain will not come to Mahomet, Mahomet will come to the mountain. I will send orders at once to the steward of Kensington House. The place shall be prepared. We will be with you within a fortnight."

A deafening blast came from the tug. The two departing visitors hurried off to their launch. Simone had lost some of the gaiety with which she had mounted the gangway. The Prince, still

dignified and debonair, seemed suddenly to have aged.

“That girl friend of Alexander’s is Russian,” Simone said to her father peevishly. “I do not trust her.”

VII

It was during the second call of the dinner bugle that evening that the doctor at last succeeded in his search. He found Alexander and Anna Prestnoff sitting on the sheltered side of the ship watching the lights of the channel.

“No further tragedies to report, I hope, doctor?” Alexander enquired curiously.

“I am hoping you won’t find it so,” was the anxious reply. “It has been a shock to me, I can assure you. I have just left the purser’s office. That fellow Likinski and his companion left the ship at Cherbourg.”

Alexander threw his cigarette into the sea and watched it for a moment thoughtfully.

“Clever of them,” he remarked. “How did they manage that?”

“Simply enough. I insisted upon having Likinski’s passport until you made up your mind whether or not to report the affair of the *Texacon* to the Commander. I have it still.”

“Do you mean that he left the ship without a passport at all?” Alexander asked.

“He did indeed. They tell me at the Marconi office that Likinski sent off two long cables yesterday—one to an unknown person in Paris and the other to Cherbourg. They were

either in Russian or some code—quite unintelligible. Anyhow, just as you were seeing your friends off, Nicolas Grodin and Likinski left in a police launch on the starboard side of the ship. The officer in charge there had no instructions to interfere with them and the police commissioner at Cherbourg met them on the dock and presented them with a note granting them permission to land with or without passports, and signed by the French Minister of the Interior. No one was in a position to make any objection, so off they went. They left a note for the purser and the usual fee for the steward, instructing the latter to pack their belongings and send them to the Russian Consulate in London. I hope you will understand, Mr. Alexander," the doctor went on earnestly, "that I was entirely ignorant of their projected departure. I knew nothing about it until a few minutes ago."

Alexander smiled reassuringly.

"My dear doctor," he said, "your news is really a relief. To tell you the truth, I was exceedingly puzzled as to what steps to take about Likinski which would not involve me in any way with Grodin, his companion. The difficulty has solved itself."

The doctor drew a long breath.

"I don't pretend to understand anything about the matter, sir," he said, "but I must confess that your attitude is an immense relief to me. I was glad to notice at luncheon time that you and the young lady seem to have made a complete recovery. You are feeling all right, Miss Prestnoff?"

"Absolutely," she answered. "All the same, I think we ought to have done something about it."

“I was the person to blame,” the doctor confessed, “but I felt compelled to do exactly as Mr. Alexander wished. They would never have been allowed to leave the ship, though, except for the French police launch fetching them off with an official permit.”

“Entirely my fault,” Alexander admitted, “but it really is of very little moment, doctor. I am content to let the matter drop. Neither Mademoiselle nor I have suffered, beyond the discomfort of the first few hours, and that is the end of the matter.”

“Your attitude, sir, is most generous. As you can understand, the affair would not have happened at all if the Commander had not insisted that the packet be opened and the bottle put in my cupboard as though it belonged to the ship’s store.”

“What have you done with it now?” Alexander asked.

“It is packed up again and addressed to a Dr. Wilkinson who is to call for it at Southampton. I understand it to be your wish, sir, that the matter is not to be mentioned to anyone.”

“Not even to the Commander, if you please,” Alexander begged. “Dismiss the whole affair from your memory. Blot it out. We have had our warning and that is something.”

The doctor saluted as he turned away.

“Nothing that has ever happened to me in life,” he assured them earnestly, “will be forgotten more readily.”

It was about ten minutes later when the astonishing thing

happened. Alexander was explaining to his companion the immense importance of de Chambordine's coming to England, an event which for some reason or other Anna Prestnoff seemed to contemplate without enthusiasm, when suddenly he broke off in the middle of a sentence. He gazed at an approaching figure coming along the deck towards them. The man was short, stout but with the broad shoulders of a prize fighter. He wore a camel-hair overcoat which increased his girth, a brown Homburg hat and he was smoking a long cigar. He walked with the uneven, jerky footsteps of a man unused to taking any form of exercise. As he drew near, Anna touched her companion's sleeve.

"Why, see who this is—coming down the deck!" she cried.

"It is Grodin—Nicolas Grodin—or the devil himself!" Alexander exclaimed.

To their amazement Grodin came to a standstill before them. He raised his hat in salutation and paused for a moment to take breath. There were drops of perspiration upon his pale forehead.

"I am addressing, I believe, the gentleman travelling on the boat under the name of Mr. Alexander. The young lady's name," he added with an awkward bow in her direction, "I have not heard."

"Well?" was the curt response.

Nicolas Grodin replaced his hat.

"Mine may be known to you," he went on. "It is Nicolas Grodin.

If permitted, I have a word of explanation to offer to you and the young lady."

Alexander possessed to the fullest extent the gift of chilling silence. He made no reply. In his eyes there was a faint expression of disdainful surprise. Grodin was not a sensitive man. He proceeded untroubled.

"I understand that my late travelling companion, Joseph Likinski, has been guilty of what I choose to regard as a clumsy practical joke, directed against you, sir, and the young lady. His confession of the fact led to words between us. I requested him to leave my company. I will cut a long story short. I myself conducted him to the railway station at Cherbourg and left him there."

"Most interesting," was Alexander's sarcastic comment. "The exploit of your friend, however, sir, lacked one redeeming quality. The perfect practical joke should be imbued with a sense of humour. Personally, the only trace of that quality I can find in his effort is in your explanation of it."

Grodin knocked the ash from his cigar on to the deck.

"Pardon," he begged. "I speak English quite well, I think, but there are times when I lose myself. I gather, though, that you consider Likinski's a very bad joke. I agree. We have parted company. I am here to present my apologies."

"Quite unnecessary," Alexander assured him. "The young lady and I have been very much interested. Let me ask you a question, if I may. The drug with which our two cabins were sprinkled in that playful fashion—was it Russian in origin? Was it by any

chance the discovery of a Moscow chemist?”

Grodin glanced down at the cigar which he was holding between his fingers. There was a brief silence. He looked up and met his questioner’s enquiring gaze.

“To tell you the truth, Mr. Alexander,” he confessed, his voice thicker and more guttural than ever, “I have not one idea. I was suffering from seasickness at the time.”

“You have quite recovered, I trust?”

“I thank you, yes.”

“I have known you by name and reputation for some years, Nicolas Grodin,” Alexander continued. “The reason for this so-called explanation of yours, I must confess, however, puzzles me. You must consider Mademoiselle and me a couple of naïve children. Or you have some purpose in addressing us that you have not explained. Perhaps you have something more to say?”

One of Nicolas Grodin’s fists was deep down in the pocket of his bulky coat; with the other hand, the fingers of which held his cigar, he made a little deprecatory wave in the air.

“You are being sarcastic, Mr. Alexander,” he regretted. “You do not take me seriously.”

“Pardon me, I take you very seriously indeed. That is why, having said your little piece, I beg that you will now leave us undisturbed and go on your way.”

“You object to my presence,” Grodin grunted. “You do not know, perhaps, of the new official position which I hold.”

“Your first surmise was correct,” Alexander said. “I do very strongly object to your presence.”

“We are fellow-countrymen,” Grodin insisted. “I have heard that you are supposed to be a patriot and friend of all Russians, and all those who work for our country’s welfare.”

“I do not count you amongst that number.”

“I am the accredited Minister of Russia to the Court of St. James’s,” Grodin declared, his small, bright eyes glittering.

“Not yet,” Alexander replied. “It is an audacious gesture on the part of your master, but you have yet to be received.”

Grodin was imperturbable. He stood facing them, squat and immovable. It seemed as though the lash of words was wasted upon him.

“Very well,” he said, “it is like this you choose to receive me. You wield an eloquent pen, you present yourself to the world as a friend of Russia. I, too, am a friend of Russia. It is a pity that we cannot be friends.”

“I am weary of you, Grodin,” Alexander confided, with the first touch of irritation in his tone. “The Russia which I serve is not the Russia to which you belong. Leave us, I beg of you.”

Very slowly Alexander rose from his seat. Grodin looked up at him from his squat position upon the deck. His stock of bravado

was exhausted. He obeyed the outstretched arm. He stumped off towards the companionway. Alexander held out his hand to Anna.

“Quick!” he exclaimed. “We must purify the air. A promenade upon the boat deck!”

VIII

Alexander and Anna Prestnoff, one morning a few weeks after their landing in England, issued from the block of flats in Chelsea where Anna had a studio and walked across the courtyard side by side.

“You are satisfied with your new abode?” he asked her.

“It is wonderful,” she exclaimed enthusiastically. “The studio is fast becoming the joy of my life. I have already planned out the tableaux for ‘The Forest Lovers.’ I shall probably begin to design the dresses to-morrow.”

“There is only one drawback of which I should warn you,” he told her, pointing across the tree-shaded thoroughfare. “That house.”

“But it is charming!” she cried. “Even though one can see so little of it. I caught a glimpse of the gardens the other day through the postern gate. They are beautiful.”

“The drawback is perhaps with the owner,” he said. “It is where I live most of the time when I am in London.”

She looked at him in astonishment.

“You live there?”

He nodded.

"Paul and I will invite you to dinner in a few nights' time," he promised. "It is really an attractive little place. It is built for solitude and I think that it achieves it."

"I do not imagine that I shall find it a drawback to have you for a neighbour," she smiled.

"There are times when I have late visitors," he warned her.

"My studio is on the other side," she told him. "Anyhow, I hope that some day you will show me your domain. . . . For what you have done or me I am very, very grateful. You have so much on your mind that it is wonderful to think of such an unimportant person."

"And Leopold? You are permitting him your acquaintance?"

"I do as you say but he is tiresome. He will come to a bad end, that young man. He is eaten up with conceit. Soon that conceit will begin to prey upon his genius. He will have a failure and he will go crazy."

"You know that Grodin has been accepted?" he asked her abruptly.

She nodded:—

"The British government is long-suffering. I wonder what has become of Likinski."

Alexander made no reply. Through the leaves or the trees opposite he seemed to be watching a barge being towed down the river. The time had not yet arrived for him to tell Anna

Prestnoff what had become of Likinski. . . . It was a warm and pleasant morning. The Embankment was crowded with loiterers, the river itself with many small craft. He felt a sudden desire to breathe the perfume of the limes.

“Come and walk in my garden,” he invited. “You do not need a hat—or do you?”

“To cross this little strip of road?” she laughed. “I will love to come. Have you flowers?”

“You will see.”

He led the way to the green postern gate set in the high brick wall. They passed through and Anna gave a cry of delight. There was a vista of green lawns, flowering shrubs, beds of standard roses, brilliantly scarlet geraniums. They left the house, larger than it looked from the outside, on their right, and crossed the gardens to where a thick avenue of limes sheltered them from the Embankment. They sat down. She half-closed her eyes with the pleasure of it.

“I never knew that lime trees smelt like this,” she murmured. “Even the geraniums have an odour and your roses are too wonderful. I could have imagined a hundred places where you might have lived, my friend, but never here.”

“I have owned this house for a great many years,” he told her. “Ever since I was at Oxford University. I must confess, though, that I have a more banal dwelling elsewhere—a small suite at a block of flats which I seldom enter. There are times when it is necessary. It is here, or at my rooms at European House, that I think out my plans.”

“Tell me about them,” she invited.

“It is hard to say,” he replied, offering her his case and lighting a cigarette himself. “My immediate plans within the course of the next few days will take me, it seems, to Germany.”

“That is not so bad,” she declared. “Germany is a safe country. Still, one wonders why you should go there yourself.”

“One of our agents is not giving us complete satisfaction,” he confided. “I have been making a few enquiries about him and think that it will be necessary for me to follow them up. As you remark, Germany is a safe country. A great many of our direct communications with friends in Russia come to us through Germany. My secretary—”

“I should like to be your secretary,” she interrupted.

“I do not think that you would. Besides, your present work is too valuable.”

“Anyone can paint scenery or design clothes.”

“It is not only that,” he told her. “You will find that when the rehearsals of ‘The Forest Lovers’ commence you will come more into touch with the other members of the ballet. There are two people you will have to watch even more closely, one in particular.”

“Leopold?”

He nodded.

“You could not do anything of that sort if you were my secretary,” he pointed out. “Besides which, my secretary has to be deaf and dumb and blind, and I do not think that I should like you to be deaf and dumb and blind.”

“I want to come to European House and sit with you one day and watch you at your work.”

“You would probably find it exceedingly dull,” he assured her, “and if you did not find it dull you might perhaps find it exceedingly dangerous. We have a strange lot of people who visit us at European House. There have been so many stupid plots framed for our destruction that we have even to keep a guard in the cellars to be assured that no one is planning to blow us up. And the number of riff-raff that we get from the ragged Far East of Europe would astonish you. We are getting quite friendly with Scotland Yard. We handed them over one of the cleverest manufacturers of illicit weapons from the Far East the other day.”

“Why should these people come to you?”

“I suppose they associate us,” he reflected, “with the powers we are out to destroy. We have made up our minds to destroy the present Russian government, but, you see, we do not propose to do it with bombs.”

“England is stupid!” she exclaimed. “Why does she, a clean and healthy-minded nation, accept a man like Grodin as Minister here? Why should you have anything to do with the dregs of humanity?”

“They are not quite that, Anna Prestnoff,” he remonstrated.

“There are brilliant men in Russia. There are probably as many idealists as in any country of the world, only the pity of it is they are following the false light. Now we are talking politics. We are becoming foolish. You have seen my garden, you know what the fragrance of sweet-smelling flowers is like even in the heart of London. Now I shall show you my dining-room and my study and give you a wonderful *apéritif*—sherry I laid down when I was at the University. Afterwards, you must go to your woman’s lunch, which is generally a silly thing and not a luncheon at all, and I must go to a Russian lunch which is also silly but errs on the side of excess.”

They walked across the lawn to the house. Paul, who had seen them coming, threw open some well-guarded French windows.

“The *Tio Pepe* sherry,” his master commanded. “We will take it in the study.”

Paul asked him a rapid question in an undertone. Alexander shook his head.

“I am lunching at Kensington House.”

“The Prince has arrived then?” Anna Prestnoff asked.

“Last week. This is a luncheon he gives to celebrate his taking up his position as vice-president of the *European Review*.”

“And the Princesse?”

“*La petite* Simone is here, too,” he told her. “Also her duenna, the Duchesse de la Motte. I will bring them to see you before long. Simone saw some panels of yours in the Paris Exhibition. I

think they were for ‘Les Cygnes.’ She was fascinated.”

“They were good,” Anna said simply. “I will show anything I have of my work to your friends whenever you like and I shall welcome you at any time.”

They lifted their glasses. He hummed a Russian toast under his breath. Anna dropped him a little mock curtsy.

“Shall I see you again before you go to Germany?” she asked.

“It is doubtful,” he answered. “I might be going at any moment.”

“Where shall you stay?”

“The Avalon. I need not remind you, however, that our Association does not write letters.”

“The great and holy Chief need have no fear,” she replied. “His toilers will remain at their tasks. If one should wander as far as Germany it would never be in anything more than thought.”

He took her fingers in his—exquisite white fingers, shapely and of exceeding delicacy—and raised them to his lips. The glancing sunlight coming into the room, with its stately old-fashioned furniture and slightly faded, wonderful rugs, touched her hair for a moment with almost a Titian light. She was wearing a dress closely buttoned up around her throat and fastened there with a small but beautiful little crucifix of engraved silver. The dress itself flowed around her amply but in lines of unbroken simplicity. It might almost have been a studio gown for her work.

“You are very lovely, Anna Prestnoff,” he said. “You are so entirely a creature of the Renaissance School. What some of those old painters, who were short enough of models in those days—Andrea del Sarto, Raphael or Murillo—would have made of you! Even the little monk Fra Lippo Lippi might have left his wife out of the picture for once.”

She set down her glass. Her eyes were soft. There was music in her tone.

“Are you trying to turn my head? Your words have more power to do it, you know, than even your wonderful wine.”

“I would rather,” he told her with a little bow and a curious note of earnestness in his tone, “that they reached your heart.”

Paul was standing upon the threshold. Alexander turned round to receive his announcement.

“The automobile attends Monsieur. One would remind him that luncheon is for one-fifteen at Kensington House.”

Anna made her escape through the window and crossed the road with flying footsteps. Alexander looked after her for a moment and then surrendered himself to Paul, who was waiting for him with hat, coat and gloves.

“This afternoon,” he announced, “I have an appointment at the rooms in Buckingham Court. Be there in case I need you, at five o’clock.”

“At that hour I shall await Monsieur,” was the toneless reply.

IX

Alexander found himself inclined to smile at the first question asked by his neighbour after they had settled down to lunch at Kensington House. The Princess Sophia was a daughter of one of the reigning Houses of Europe—popular, versatile and beautiful. She was also a distant connection of Alexander himself.

"There is an air of expectation about this party," she remarked as she toyed with her caviar. "Are we celebrating anything, do you know?"

"Only, I think, the return of the de Chambordines to London," he answered. "There is no better host in the world than de Chambordine and no one who so thoroughly understands the mixing up of various nationalities."

"I am sure you are right," his neighbour assented.

"Who but a social genius would dream of placing my madcap cousin, Francis Joseph, side by side with Hélène de Bourdon?"

"Or a Hohenzollern," the girl pointed out, "even though he is not in the direct line, side by side with my beautiful but far too sad aunt, Olga Brusiloff?"

"If it comes to that," he went on, "what about us? You who pass more than half your time in a royal palace and I who am at the best only a Pretender and who have not even the lands

which go with a single one of my titles."

"Not just at this moment," she murmured, "but you know, my dear friend—my not too distant cousin—if all that people whisper about you is the truth I think you are more to be envied than any of these exiled monarchs, any of these wandering scions of nobility in a sheltered country."

"Why?"

"Because you are the champion of a strong and beautiful cause. You have great and powerful friends. You are working dangerously, without a doubt, but towards a wonderful end."

He raised his eyebrows slightly.

"Are we not becoming transgressors?" he asked. "It was the Prince's delicately hinted suggestion that this was not to be in any way a political gathering. It is a social party, a meeting of old friends, a very delightful reunion."

She nodded.

"I forgot for a moment, but I said just what I feel, all the same. You are right about our host's suggestion. We are not supposed to be interested in politics. Some of us who are struggling to keep our places in the world, and a sprinkling of those who have lost them forever, and a fine splendid handful who are working for the future—still, de Chambordine was right, without a doubt. No politics. That is, I suppose, why he dared to give a luncheon party of fifty, nearly every one of whom is a connection of Russia, and not invite this new Minister . . . How pretty Simone has grown!"

Alexander glanced towards where the girl was seated a few places away. She was talking gayly to the Polish Ambassador, whose son was a tennis champion.

“Simone will be a great beauty,” he prophesied.

“Will be?” his neighbour repeated. “My dear man, she is twenty-one. For a French girl about whom there is as yet no talk of marriage that is a great age.”

He nodded.

“You are right, it is. I saw so much of Simone, however, when she was between the ages of ten and fourteen, before I had settled down to steady work, and it is hard for me to think of her as grown-up.”

“Then it is quite time you began to do so.”

“Why?”

“I must be careful not again to transgress,” she reflected. “I am to keep from politics. Still, you two are almost all there is left in the direct line.”

He sighed.

“Even at your tender years,” he complained, “you have imbibed one of the vices of your sex. You have become a matchmaker.”

“One thinks of these things,” she remarked. “Simone’s mother was in the direct line of succession, of course, and you are the accepted choice of all your countrypeople. Still, that is of the

future. Is it true what we all hear of this great uneasiness in Russia?”

“I cannot discuss these things even with you,” he replied. 94
“Through our organisation we have news every way.
Some of it is true, some of it is false. It takes us a long time sometimes to ascertain the facts for ourselves.”

She leaned back in her chair with the air of one seeking another outlet of conversation. She addressed, indeed, a few remarks to her other neighbour, but although he was a very distinguished person, she found it difficult. Alexander, finding one of the last of the veritable grand-duchesses on his other side engaged in a desperate flirtation with the Hungarian Minister, leaned back in his chair and devoted himself to an interested survey of the guests. De Chambordine had known what he was about, he decided. They were almost all representative of the great families of Europe and nearly every one of them was some connection of his own country. There was no one present of the new régime, yet the conversation to which he listened and in which he occasionally joined was entirely free from any political significance. Not one word was spoken of the agonies which might be going on on the other side of that eastern frontier. What was happening there seemed to be taken as a matter of course, and yet all the time Alexander, with his quick instincts, was one of the first to realise that there was a real purpose in this gathering. No one knew better than the Prince de Chambordine and Alexander himself how near the crisis was.
The very failure of their recent attempts to get correct 95
views from the right people was an indication of what
was happening. Messengers crossed the frontier, commercial travellers, financiers, tourists, self-declared political agents,

philanthropists—some of them with famous names—but they did not return. Something of what was happening was known now to the men who were working night and day at European House, but the news which reached them never passed outside its doors. There were others in the room who belonged to the organisation, but Alexander and the Prince were the only two who knew the whole truth. There was to be another luncheon party in a fortnight's time, if it could be arranged—the same crowd, with perhaps a little more of the cosmopolitan element and a few statesmen of the old-fashioned type. Alexander found himself wondering if he would be there or whether his time would have come. The Princesse leaned towards him.

"Even if we discuss folk-songs or the ballet or any of the side-shows, let us talk for a little time," she begged. "I believe that you think that I am a chatterbox. I can assure you that I am not. Our present host gave me luncheon, last time he was over, at European House, where you have never once invited me. He has not, of course, your fascination or your knowledge of what is going on, but he did try to interest me and he often succeeded."

"A fortunate man," Alexander sighed, "and I—"

"Do not be foolish," she interrupted. "Every word you speak I hang upon. I love to hear you talk of the things which are dear to both of us. I am a little peevish sometimes because I feel something is going on of which we know so little. We are so outside everything. However, you have your reasons. I will possess my soul in patience."

He smiled very pleasantly at her.

“My dear cousin,” he said, “believe me, there is nothing definite which I can tell you of what is going on at the present moment, although I will admit, perhaps, that we see a little more behind the curtain than the general world. We have plans and they are maturing. Our only trouble is that the wholesale slaughter of our spies, many of whom are perfectly harmless people, which goes on all the time makes it difficult for us to sort out our information.”

She shuddered.

“That sounds very terrible.”

“It is not,” he assured her. “We find that no spy who crosses the frontier really and honestly expects to come back again. They seem to have imbibed a special form of fatalism. They make their effort because they must. But notwithstanding this lull in the news, I think myself that we are on the brink of movement of some sort. . . . There, have I been rash? I do not care. You are a faithful and devoted adherent to our cause, so I risk a slight indiscretion.”

She took his hand and pressed it in hers.

“I thank you so much,” she said. “You see, the Duchesse has designs upon us. I am so glad that I recovered from my fit of sulks just in time.”

She left him with a little smile.

In the chapel-like lounge of Kensington House the luncheon party broke up into groups of old friends and intimates.

Alexander found himself literally torn away from the small gathering of more serious members of the company who were grouped around de Chambordine. Simone led him into a small room adjoining, so obviously feminine in its decoration and atmosphere that it was clearly her own retreat. She gave him some coffee, laid a box of cigarettes on the table and invited him to sit by her side on the divan which stood in one of the curved bay windows overlooking the gardens.

"I am obliged to be stern with you, dear cousin," she said. "You are so elusive. Now that we are here all alone we talk a little—yes?"

He smiled, but with a measure of deprecation in the gesture.

"There were others who had the same idea, I fancy," he remarked, "but I am not the one to complain. You are very charmingly established here, dear Simone. Tell me that you do not regret Paris. I feel to a certain extent responsible for your coming to London."

"I do not regret Paris," she replied, "so long as I see you sometimes."

"Are you trying," he asked, "to turn my head?"

"I am always trying," she sighed, "but it is very difficult. You keep your head so straight that I cannot twist it. And your heart also—is that invulnerable?"

"What do children like you know about hearts?"

"I could show you, if you insisted," she threatened.

He patted her hand contentedly.

“This is the end of a serious luncheon party, Simone,” he declared. “We must remain in the atmosphere.”

“Very well,” she agreed, “I will be serious. Tell me what is coming—the great events. One feels the shadows cast before them. Everyone is a little serious. It is something to do with the *European Review*. There is no talk of war, no movement of troops anywhere. What is it really that is happening?”

He shook his head.

“You are ahead of the time, Simone,” he told her. “Your senses are quickened, you feel the future even before it has gathered shape.”

“I think I should make a good prophetess,” she agreed composedly. “There is a touch of the Joan of Arc in my blood. I should like to go marching back into our torn and mutilated country with you at my side.”

“Russia, at the present moment, is no place for women,” he assured her a little sadly. “When I go back, Simone, if ever I do go, there will be no woman in my entourage unless conditions are entirely changed. I can promise you that.”

“No Anna Prestnoff?”

“Certainly not.”

Simone sighed contentedly.

“Well, that is something, at any rate,” she declared. “Do you see her every day?”

“I saw her this morning,” he confided, “for almost the first time since we landed.”

“Better and better. I become again light-hearted. Anna Prestnoff is too beautiful and too dangerous. You must not see a great deal of her, Alexander. You and I together—we stand for Russia.”

“Anna Prestnoff is also Russian,” he reminded her.

“Yes, but she is not the same.”

“Anna Prestnoff is also of noble birth.”

“That may be. She is not in the direct line.”

“Why do you bother your head about these things?” he asked gravely.

“Because you have spoilt me and I am jealous,” she cried. “I have never, never seen you look at a woman with interest before in my life. She works for you and I cannot. When you think of Russia I want you to think of me and of nobody else.”

“Then you are very foolish,” he told her. “Russia just now, and perhaps for many years to come, is a man’s affair.”

She was silent for a few moments. Some of the light seemed to have gone from her face. The eyes which were watching the restless rustling of tenderly green leaves in the elm trees opposite appeared to have become deeper-set than ever

during the last minute or two.

“Is it that there is a crisis close at hand, Alexander, which makes you so stern and far away?” she asked, and her voice, too, seemed to have lost something of its music.

“I do not think,” he told her, patting her hand tenderly, “that there is any great change in me, little Simone. You seem to have the gift of looking away into the future. Perhaps then you are right. Perhaps there is a graver time ahead for all of us.”

“For you, especially. Perhaps for me.”

The door behind them was thrown open. De Chambordine entered with two or three of his guests. The Duchesse brought up the rear. They were all talking very happily. Alexander, a few minutes later, made his escape.

X

The door of the salon in Alexander's small suite at Buckingham Court, which he held for his occasional occupancy, was thrust open from the outside. A very young and exceedingly handsome man had made precipitate entrance, slamming back the door in a matter of seconds. He stood there, livid and breathless, the palm of one hand pressed against the panel, his long white fingers searching frantically for key or bolt. The former he found and at the sound of its click his panting for the moment ceased. Even then, he stood feverishly listening, his dark eyes flaming with terror, his breath still coming fast, his slim, elegant body shaken as though seized with a paroxysm of fear. Alexander, who was standing on the hearth-rug, a cigarette in his mouth, the evening paper in his hand, looked across at his visitor with a smile half-amused, half-contemptuous.

"Is it a regiment which pursues you, Leopold?" he enquired. "I hear no trampling of feet, nor even the rattling of sabres."

The young man listened intently, then, as though with reluctance, his hand left the door. He peered down to see that the lock was in place, then he partially straightened himself and turned towards Alexander. His voice was hoarse and weak as though from shock.

"It was Grodin, sir," he gasped. "He was at the desk, talking to the concierge. He was turning his head as I stepped into the lift."

"Nicolas Grodin?" Alexander repeated. "Well, why not?"

“Here, in this block of flats!”

“Again, why not?” Alexander demanded. “Grodin is much too clever a man to encourage all the people with whom he has dealings to visit him at the Embassy. Besides which, I understand that the rooms there are not all ready for him. You will find that he is in Flat 70, 71, 72 and 73, two floors down—a very handsome suite of apartments.”

“You knew that he was coming?”

“Of course I knew,” Alexander replied. “Why else do you suppose I am here? I not only knew that he was coming, but I could tell you pretty well how he will spend his time, what he will seek to discover and how far he will succeed. Hold up your head, my friend. Grodin is no super-man. He has done plenty of foul work for his master and done it successfully, but that was before he received his present appointment. You must know that now he has to walk warily.”

Leopold took a deep breath. He was exceedingly well-dressed and his figure, which was really amazing, permitted of all the extravagances affected by the young man of fashion. His black bow, although large, was faultlessly tied, his soft-fronted shirt was beautifully pleated and his pearl studs priceless. His silk socks and patent shoes were irreproachable. As he came dubiously a little further into the room, his movements had all the grace of a panther. His pale oval face, his deep-set dark eyes and his thick black hair, completed a *tout ensemble* which the fashionable photographers and a crowd of neurotic women had made famous.

“I ask myself whether by chance he saw me,” he faltered.

“What if he did?” Alexander demanded. “On the top floor there are no fewer than four members of the ballet in their little nests. Lower down there is Gregoire, the musical director, and any one of these might be expecting a visit from you. I was rather surprised to find that you were not staying here yourself.”

Leopold shivered.

“Banal,” he muttered. “Hundreds of rooms, a herd of tourists—abominations. In such surroundings my genius would wither.”

“Compose yourself, Leopold,” Alexander enjoined. “What can I offer you?”

“I will smoke one of your cigarettes and drink a glass of water,” the young man replied.

Alexander pointed to the opened box of cigarettes, the cut-glass pitcher of water and the siphon upon the sideboard.

“If that contents you let us proceed,” he said. “You paid your visit to Mademoiselle?”

“This afternoon.”

“Well?”

“I had my usual success,” he announced a little wearily as he sank into an easy chair a tumbler of water in one hand and a cigarette in the other. “That was not difficult. Mademoiselle, however did not talk freely. I am to dine with her on Thursday

evening. I shall introduce her to a small place in Mayfair where I am well-known and where the food is excellent."

"She had news to tell you of the march of events in Moscow?"

Leopold waved his cigarette with an airy gesture.

"She was not communicative," he admitted. "She had little to say on serious subjects. I fancy," he went on, with a reminiscent light of pleasure in his extraordinary eyes, "that she was perhaps a trifle—what shall I say?—unbalanced. It was my first visit. She did not expect me. At the theatre she knows of my peculiarities. She realises how seldom I approach any members of the cast. My appearance at her studio was a surprise to her."

"Do you think that that is why she was so uncommunicative?"

The young man nodded languidly.

"I myself proceeded with caution," he confided. "I wished my visit to seem just a friendly call."

"All persons of genius," Alexander observed, "possess the gift of penetration. They have the instinct for judging others. Tell me your opinion, Leopold—is Anna Prestnoff to be trusted?"

"After Thursday I shall answer your question definitely," the other promised. "At present I can trust only to what you term instinct. I noticed her twice in the theatre at Moscow when she came to make notes for some scenery I required. She did not impress me. To-day, I should say that she had developed. She has become a woman of great attraction. That may be because she knows more of the world than she did two years

ago. She has lost some of her simplicity. She has the air to me of having gone through some experience. I find that it makes her more interesting."

Alexander, whose eyes scarcely left his visitor's during his last speech, had the appearance of one who is gently amused. He smiled to himself for several moments, then he rose suddenly to his feet.

"Well, that is enough, Leopold," he said. "There is one thing more I want to ask you. You remember a young man, a graduate from Oxford he was a few years ago, a young man of strange views, who used to be continually paying visits to the ladies of the ballet until he embraced what he called the higher life and disappeared?"

"Ambrose Stornoway!" Leopold exclaimed. "Yes, I remember him. I thought he had joined the staff of the *European Review*."

"That was a year or so ago," Alexander assented. "He only stayed with us a very short time, however. He wanted to do independent work. We had a vacant post in Germany and he has been sending us occasional reports from there. You never hear from him now?"

"Never."

"Or of him?"

Leopold shook his head.

"Sometimes there are people who call me a little mad," he said, leaning farther back in his chair and resting his delicate long

fingers upon his throat. “That is because I am eccentric. It is not madness with me. I do not flatter myself when I say that it is genius.”

“Capital,” Alexander murmured. “I hate all people with an inferiority complex.”

“Stornoway,” Leopold continued, “developed even more pronounced eccentricities. I should not be surprised to hear that he was in an asylum by this time. He was a wild and excitable fellow, who, in my opinion, is not to be trusted.”

Alexander lit a cigarette gravely.

“Why do you think that, Leopold?” he asked.

“In Berlin,” the young man confided, “he came to me—it was in the midst of one of my greatest successes—he proposed that I should join him in some crazy new enterprise. I could not make out even what he was talking about but we were to give all our money to what he kept on calling The Cause. We were to live in poverty and cast aside refinement, culture, art—everything which makes life bearable—for the sake of the masses. He would have had me forget even that I was a Russian.”

“He found you a little unsympathetic, I should think,” Alexander observed.

Leopold waved his beautiful hands. There was no doubt about the lack of sympathy.

“I let him talk and I escaped. He came to the theatre again but I never saw him. That was the end of Stornoway.”

Alexander rang the bell.

“My coat and hat,” he ordered from Paul. “Can I drop you anywhere, my young friend?” he asked. “Your conversation has been so interesting that you have revived all my interest in Anna Prestnoff. I must go to Chelsea at once and call upon her. Can I drop you anywhere?”

“Anywhere you will,” Leopold replied, rising to his feet, “but do not leave me alone in this hideous block of flats frequented by the brutal Grodin. I do not wish to meet him.”

Alexander took his hat and coat from Paul and rested his hand upon his visitor’s shoulder as they left the room.

“I will escort you safely off the premises,” he promised.

Alexander found the young woman of whom he was in search perched upon a step-ladder at the far end of her studio, painting in the midst of a dazzling beam of artificial light.

“Who is that?” she asked without turning her head.

“Alexander,” he replied. “A very apologetic intruder.”

She came swiftly down the steps, laid down her brush and palette and turned off the light. She ran towards him across the bare floor with her hands outstretched and a welcoming glow in her eyes.

“You are here again so soon,” she cried joyfully. “I am beginning really to forgive you for this blank fortnight.”

“I have stayed away from you because I thought it was wise,” he said. “I have contented myself with asking questions about you from the amazing Leopold. This morning I decided that to hear from you indirectly was no longer sufficient. I decided that it was time I came and talked to you myself. Now I come again because I have a real question to ask.”

She pressed the bell and they sank on to a large divan.

“There is news, perhaps?”

“None,” he answered, “or rather, none that we could discuss. Yet I have a queer feeling that things are happening and that there is a great movement going on. Reports which we used to get two or three times a week are failing us. Tell me, Anna Prestnoff,” he went on, “and this is what I came to see you about, do you remember Stornoway—Ambrose Stornoway—a wild young man of good birth?”

“Of course I remember him,” she acquiesced. “I went to one of his parties when he was at Oxford. He commenced life by joining what they called the Oxford Group. Afterwards he went mad—yes, I am sure that he went mad. I have heard him talk the most beautiful and convincing Christlike socialism and deride it within an hour. I have heard him expound a new theory that every form of government of one human being by another is imbecility, and a few hours afterwards I have heard him declare that a despotic monarchy was the only logical form of control. Next time I hear from him I expect to be told that he is in an asylum.”

“Worse than I thought,” Alexander groaned. “We sent him to do

work for us in Berlin some time before I went to the States, and our communications with him since have been very unsatisfactory. Now he is trying all the time to get me over there for some purpose or other. I think I had better see what he is up to."

"I should not," she advised promptly, "unless you go there to get rid of him. He could not be of any use to anyone as a serious helper. He is fanatically religious, if you like, but you could not trust him an inch. A very dangerous type of young man."

"All the more reason for not letting him run loose," Alexander reflected. "Let us have done with the fellow. . . . Anna Prestnoff, let me congratulate you. You have achieved a great triumph. You have contrived to interest the impregnable, the marvellous Leopold!"

"Have I?" she answered drily.

"I have my doubts about Leopold, as you know," he continued, "and for that reason I let him fancy that I am interested in reports he brings me about people in the ballet and their visitors, including yourself. He is beginning to imagine himself an important figure in international politics, but his chief concern seems to be that he himself keeps out of any danger. I asked him questions about you, Anna. I gathered that you met with his approval."

She laughed softly.

"Leopold would never be of any use to you, or able to do you any great harm," she declared. "I am not so sure about Stornoway. Why do you waste your time upon such people? You

keep me here employed in the most foolish of all fashions, when I would much rather be doing serious work, however dangerous it was."

"When the time comes, Anna Prestnoff," he said, "when there is great work to be done, I will see that you take your share in it, even though there is also a risk, but I will not have you take a part in this minor plotting which is even more dangerous and which might place you, at any moment, in a humiliating position."

"Why will you not?" she asked.

He laid his hand upon hers and she felt the swift response of everything in her being towards this new seriousness.

"Because you represent something to me, Anna, which some day I think will be the greatest influence in my life," he told her simply. "That is as much as I ought to say just now."

"It is enough if you promise one thing."

"Well?"

"Promise me that before you face any great danger—anything that might separate us—you will, when we are sitting like this alone and shut out from the world, take me into your arms, if it is only for ten seconds, let me feel your lips on mine, give me the embrace which, if you never come back, will be the last I shall ever have from any man."

"I hope that you realise what that means, Anna," he said after a moment's pause.

“I do,” she confessed.

He leaned towards her and took her into his arms. He kissed her fondly and yet with a joyous passion that thrilled every fibre of her body. Then he drew away.

“Anna, my dear,” he murmured as he led her towards the door, “every time I face danger I shall repeat that little sacrament until the days of danger are past. I kiss you now, and again and again,” he added, as he kissed her eyes, “because to-night I am obeying an urgent summons and going at once to Germany to look after that fellow Stornoway.”

“I guessed that was coming,” she declared. “Wait—” she unlocked a drawer in her writing cabinet and drew out a small packet. “This is for you,” she told him, placing it in his hand. “It is not very important but it might be of service. Do not open it until you are in Berlin. Promise.”

“I promise,” he assured her, thrusting it into his pocket.

Alexander crossed the road to his garden-encircled house and rang the bell for his servant, who had accompanied him in the car from Buckingham Court.

“Paul,” he said, “pack two lounge suits and some morning clothes. Telephone to Heston. Tell them to find my pilot. He will be in his room. He is to have a plane ready at seven o’clock.”

“For a long journey, Monsieur?” the man asked.

“To Berlin.”

XI

The Baron Adolf von Hertzfeldt, who held an important permanent post in the government of his country, sat in his private bureau, high up in a massive block of buildings fronting the most famous thoroughfare of Berlin, awaiting a visitor. The note from his Chief containing certain secret instructions, written in the departmental code for use amongst its officials only, lay torn into small pieces in the wastepaper basket. The air immediately around him was fragrant with the perfume of a cigarette which he had just lit. A somewhat difficult position, this, which he was called upon to face. . . .

There was a tap at the door. An orderly, obeying the invitation to enter, made his way swiftly to the desk, saluted and stood at attention.

"The gentleman who sent in his card of entrée a short time ago, Baron," he announced.

Alexander, dressed in morning clothes as though for an official visit, entered the room. The Baron rose from his chair and bowed stiffly. The orderly departed, closing the door behind him. Alexander accepted the chair which had been placed in readiness for him.

"I had hoped," the latter said, "to have been received by your Chief. As that does not seem to be possible I am happy to find myself with an old acquaintance."

Von Hertzfeldt bowed once more.

“The Chief decided with regret,” he confided, “that during the present period of strained relations between various European Powers, it would be better if he received no visitors of your nationality. He desired me, however, to express his friendliness and he has placed considerable powers in my hands. Will you explain what we can do for you?”

“Willingly,” Alexander assented, accepting a cigarette from the box which the other had passed to him. “There is very little secret about my position. Here it is in plain words. I am not a disciple of the gentleman who has sought exile in Mexico, although that is the impression in some quarters. I stand for a new line of thought and action which I pray that Russia may before long adopt.”

“You are a revolutionary so far as the present government is concerned?” the Baron, who was anxious to keep the conversation within certain limits, enquired.

“The present government is in difficulties,” Alexander replied. “To you who are at any rate a little way behind the scenes that is a known fact. The great and from many points of view the worthy experiment of which my country has been the unfortunate victim has met with very qualified success. It is my aim to direct her into a position where she can hold her own in dignity and honour amongst the other European nations.”

“As a Fascist country?” the Baron asked bluntly.

“The fundamentals of every modern political faith have been, during the last twenty years, torn to ribbons,” Alexander pointed

out, “therefore I shall not accept the terms of any one of them as a definition of our new faith. The existing system has reduced its citizens to bondage. It will be the scheme of the party I represent to set them free.”

“Those matters are not for our discussion,” the Baron said, although his gesture was one of sympathy. “You will understand that under the circumstances it would be indiscreet for the Chief to accord you an audience. Tell me what we can do for you. Within the bounds of diplomatic propriety my instructions are to assist you.”

“You can give me a card, signed by yourself as the head of the department,” Alexander replied, “rendering me immune from police arrest whilst in your country.”

“You ask for a great deal,” was the Baron’s doubtful comment.

“Not really,” Alexander declared. “Your Chief is convinced of my bona fides. I am a friend of your country but I think you know yourself that your city is suffering from a plague of spies. To perform my work here, which is not work for the benefit of my soon to be recreated country only but on behalf of every civilised nation, I need protection.”

The Baron remained thoughtful.

“We have no secret tribunals in this country,” he reminded Alexander. “Everything that is done here is done in the open.”

“I give you my word of honour,” Alexander assured him calmly, “that the use of my—shall we call it laissez-passer?—here, if ever I do use it, will be justifiable even at Geneva.”

“You have an agent, I understand, in this city,” the Baron asked, “whose function it is to convey literature and even, if possible, propaganda of other sorts into Russia and to receive communications?”

“I shall not attempt to deny or conceal the fact.”

“You will realise,” the Baron continued, “that while I agree that our present relations with Russia are strained and difficult, under certain circumstances we might be compelled to deal with your agent and his activities under the provisions of international law.”

“I admit that,” Alexander acquiesced, “and I am content to take the risk.”

The Baron reflected for several minutes longer, then he drew a sheet of paper from a drawer of his desk which he first unlocked, and grasping a fountain pen in his pudgy, over-manicured fingers, scribbled a few lines in bold scrawling calligraphy. He blotted them, read them through carefully, placed the note in an envelope and handed it to Alexander.

“There is your protection,” he said. “Make use of it only in case of necessity.”

“Easily promised,” was the confident reply. “I am a man who does not seek trouble.”

The Baron rose to his feet. His visitor followed suit.

“So far as I may say so and preserve my official position,” the former declared, “I wish you fortune. Every thinking and

patriotic German desires the re-establishment of Russia. I bid you good-morning, sir."

"I offer you my thanks," Alexander rejoined with a bow.

"I am gratified to have served you," was the formal response.

Alexander drove back to the famous hotel where he had engaged a small suite. Paul, who was waiting for him in some anxiety, was standing on guard in the little salon.

"I will change my clothes," his master announced. "An English tourist, you understand, Paul. A brown or grey tweed, not too new, a Homburg hat, and *négligé* shirt. You have the idea?"

Paul acquiesced with a faint gesture of disapproval. He had filled many rôles besides that of a valet but he still had a dislike of anything slovenly in his master's attire.

"There have been no callers?" the latter asked.

"No callers, no telephone—only this."

He handed an envelope to Alexander, who glanced at it with a frown. It was a very cheaply-made envelope and looked as though it had been dropped in the mud. There was no name upon it, only the number of his room. He tore it open. There was inside a half-sheet of thin, pinkish paper such as a servant girl might use. There was a big blot at the bottom of the page and across the paper was scrawled one word:

Beloved

Alexander's first expression of supercilious curiosity faded from his face. Its lines had suddenly become rigid. He looked once more at the envelope, he looked once more at the half-sheet of pink notepaper. Then he tore both carefully into small pieces.

"Who left this extraordinary communication, Paul?" he asked.

The man shook his head.

"All my time," he explained, "has been spent between this room and the sleeping apartment. When I returned here from pressing your trousers I found this in the cage letter-box. There was no sign of where it had come from. I only know that it could not have been there five minutes."

Alexander submitted himself silently to Paul's ministrations, refilled his pockets with the articles he had left upon the dressing-table, added to them a small but sinister-looking weapon, the loading of which he carefully examined, glanced at the clock and picked up his hat.

"Monsieur will return for *déjeuner*?" Paul asked.

"If the good chance remains with me," was the cheerful reply.

XII

So into the streets again and another taxi, this time soon threading its way through a denser traffic into the business quarter of the city. Alexander sat with folded arms and a slight contraction of his eyebrows. He noticed very little of the thoroughfares through which he passed. Before his eyes all the while was that pink half-sheet of notepaper, the word "Beloved," the blot at the bottom of the page, and that little memorandum book of code messages to be used only in times of danger which Anna had thrust into his hands some hours before. The taxicab, after what seemed to be an interminable drive, pulled up half-way down a busy narrow street in the northern part of the city. There were warehouses on either side, heavy motor vans seemed to form a continual chain delivering and receiving bales of merchandise. The building which Alexander descended before and, after a casual glance around, entered, announced itself as a restaurant and hotel for commercial travellers, but on the right there were doors, on one of which was a small brass plate inscribed with the name:

AMBROSE STORNOWAY—Leather and Skins

Alexander opened the door, which automatically rang a bell, and stepped into a warehouse of considerable size. The place was stacked almost to the ceiling with bales of goat skins. At the farther end was a counting house. From it issued the person whom Alexander had last seen, a well-groomed, somewhat supercilious young man about town, at a luncheon party at the Ritz. He wore over his clothes a linen duster, and a

pair of heavy spectacles shielded his eyes. He seemed thinner and gaunter than ever and as he removed his spectacles to greet his visitor he disclosed sunken, feverish-looking eyes and features which seemed as though they had been ravaged by some disease.

“You will come into the counting house?” he invited. “There is no one there. I keep only a typist-clerk and I have sent him out to lunch early.”

“In a moment,” Alexander replied, looking round and sniffing distastefully. “So you have gone into business, Stornoway.”

“A commission agent,” the latter confided. “The business is concerned with the importation of Russian goat skins. I have visitors from Russia every day. It seemed to me a good opportunity.”

“Excellent,” Alexander agreed. “Do you know anything about the trade?”

“Not much,” Stornoway admitted, “but I took over the clerk from the old business. Between us we manage. Within the last month we have exported two hundred bales of woollen goods in part payment of skins we have taken and nearly every one of them has contained half a dozen of your new pamphlets from European House. I get reports from our agent in specially-marked bales of skins. As soon as I have been established a little longer I shall be able to take a journey into Russia.”

“You have made friends here in the city?” Alexander asked.

“It is not easy,” Stornoway replied. “There is bitter enmity on every side towards Russia.”

“You have no opportunity of making known our own views to a few sympathisers?”

The young man shook his head.

“Too dangerous to attempt to form a circle. There are Russian spies everywhere. On the slightest suspicion that we were sending Fascist or Anti-Communist pamphlets into the country we should be in trouble. The authorities here might be in sympathy with our views but they would close us up all the same. If you do not mind I think you had better step into the counting house. I cannot pretend to be showing you goods and this is an inquisitive country.”

Alexander followed him into the small office and ensconced himself in a swivel wooden chair in front of the desk. Stornoway drew a cane settee up to his visitor’s side and sank onto it wearily.

“What are your political views exactly nowadays, Stornoway?” Alexander asked abruptly.

An unhealthy hectic flush streamed across the young man’s face. It passed quickly, leaving him paler than ever.

“I am as much a hater of the present form of government in Russia as ever I was,” he confided. “At its inauguration its sponsors had a great chance. They lost it. They have failed. Even where they have succeeded they have failed.”

“Explain yourself,” Alexander directed.

“On the return of my clerk, who has gone out for lunch and who has the keys of our hidden safe,” Stornoway promised, “I will show you my latest pamphlet. It is like this,” he went on, drawing a piece of paper towards him. “On this side I have a column headed ‘Mines.’ Opposite that I put down the number of miners at work, the approximate number of tons of coal, iron, tin, quicksilver and the gallons of petrol the workers produce. I put down the value of their output monthly, less working expenses. On the other side I put down what the government has paid in wages. The difference is gigantic, inconceivable. I address myself to the Russian workman, the slave of the present administration. I remind him that he is supposed to be an enemy of capitalism. I ask him—where has that vast sum of money disappeared to? Some of it may have gone in armaments, aircraft, guns. Where is the rest? That pamphlet is called *The New Capitalism*. I know for a fact that five thousand copies have gone to the mines.”

“A very good pamphlet,” Alexander agreed, “but it has its weak point. It is purely destructive. Your business, Stornoway, is to indicate the more logical, the more humane system of government which we propose.”

Stornoway remained silent. His visitor’s eyes never for a moment left his face.

“What I should like to see,” Alexander went on, “is some of your propaganda starting on the thesis that the present system of government in Russia has failed, and putting forward our schemes for its overthrow. I ask you once more, what are your

views exactly?”

Stornoway was again silent.

“I will show you my pamphlets,” he mumbled, “but it must be when my clerk returns. He has the keys. He has gone out to lunch.”

Alexander nodded.

“There appears to be a restaurant in this building,” he said.

Stornoway rose to his feet and threw off his duster.

“Let me invite you there,” he begged. “You shall see the Russian trader in his best clothes, at his hungriest and worst. This is the Russian section of the city, you know. Such trade as Germany permits is done round about here.”

Alexander hesitated. He was inclined to be fastidious and the atmosphere of the place was unpleasant. Nevertheless, he remembered Stornoway’s dossier—the younger son of a member of the peerage, a family of great antiquity. He remembered that he had started writing obscure but beautiful verse for a magazine devoted to such dilettante performances. He rose to his feet.

“Very well,” he agreed. “I shall at least see a few of my fellow-countrymen. Pin a notice on your door telling the clerk to come for us on his return.”

Stornoway did as he was bidden, then they both crossed the tiled hall outside and entered the restaurant of the hotel. The

place was crowded with men talking loudly, eating and drinking noisily, smoking between their courses vigorously. The smell of hot coarse foods, the lack of ventilation and the clamour of voices were all nauseous. Nevertheless, Alexander took his place at the table to which he was led, affected to ignore the stained tablecloth of rough linen and took up a paper menu written in Russian. Stornoway, for some reason or other, seemed nervous and excited. His eyes were blazing and only his voice, in which his companion noticed with some amusement the remains of that high and nasal Oxford accent, remained calm.

"It is best to choose one of the dishes that are ready," he advised. "Cod's roe and veal and beer—yes? There is no wine to be had."

"Thank you, that will do for me," Alexander acquiesced. "A glass of vodka first, perhaps—the old if they have any—and with your permission I will smoke a cigarette."

Stornoway ate little but smoked incessantly. He talked, now, in vague, somewhat incoherent fashion. Alexander was for the most part silent, but he listened attentively, with the air of one weighing in his mind every word his companion uttered. Towards the end of the meal, when mugs of coffee stood before them, a thin, shabby-looking man, bare-headed, pushed his way to their table and handed a written message to Stornoway. The latter glanced it through rapidly.

"My clerk," he announced, looking up. "Two merchants with whom I have affairs have arrived. One of them is chiefly responsible for the distribution of our pamphlets in certain directions. You will perhaps have a few words with him?"

“Certainly,” Alexander replied. “In fact I think I should prefer to talk to anyone in the world than to drink this coffee.”

“We come at once,” Stornoway told the clerk.

He laid down the money for the bill. A moment or two later they passed through the crowded room. There was not a single woman in evidence and the men were evidently of the type of small merchants or *commis voyageurs*. The bare floors were anything but clean, the three huge gilt mirrors which adorned the inside wall were each one of them cracked and unpolished. There was no ventilation and the stale odour and harsh conflict of voices suggested a chamber in an ill-kept menagerie rather than a restaurant. Alexander followed his guide across the shabby entrance hall outside with a sensation of relief. He had no sooner passed through the door on which was the small brass plate—

AMBROSE STORNOWAY—Leather and Skins

—and heard the click of the key behind him, than he realised that he was faced now with something worse than squalor. First amongst the thoughts which flashed through his mind was an impulse of gratitude towards the sender of that half-sheet of pink note-paper.

“Are these your two merchant friends, Stornoway?” he asked.

Stornoway, swinging the key of the door upon his little finger, slouched into the foreground. His head was bent forward, his mouth had taken to itself an embittered curve. He still retained, however, something of that classical accent.

“They are not exactly merchants, these men, Mr. Alexander,” he said. “They are officials of a Russian organisation you may have heard of. Captain Savinkoff and Major Kuskova of the Russian Ogpu Police.”

“Indeed,” Alexander exclaimed. “They have business with me?”

The two men wore civilian clothes but their carriage was military. The tone of the older was brusque but not altogether unpleasant. He had the air of an official who was not to be trifled with but who desired to be conciliatory.

“If your name is Alexander, as I am given to understand,” he said, “my comrade and I are on a mission here which concerns you. We have with us an authorisation calling upon you, as a Russian citizen, to return with us to Moscow and to give evidence at the trial of various political prisoners which is to take place within a few days.”

“That,” Alexander replied, “would be inconvenient. I am afraid it would be impossible. I regret, gentlemen, that I have other affairs on hand. I cannot accompany you.”

The smaller man coughed. He produced a paper.

“This,” he indicated, “is the order demanding your presence. It is signed by the President of the Court. We have no alternative but to insist upon it that you, as a loyal Russian comrade, should submit to the summons.”

“You have nothing to fear,” his companion added calmly. “You are not, strictly speaking, under arrest. Accommodation will be provided for you close to the scene of the trial and your return

journey will be arranged for."

"It is just my return journey that I would be a little anxious about. Whereabouts would they consider my home to be, I wonder?"

"Those are not affairs," the man who answered to the name of Major Kuskova acknowledged, "with which we are concerned."

"This business, Stornoway," Alexander asked, "has been arranged by you?"

"Yes," was the hectic reply. "Do not ever believe that I came here to preach your bourgeois doctrines. I am a good sound anarchist. If I have a fault to find with the present form of government it is that they are too easy and slack. They do not go far enough. *Faute de mieux* they have my sympathy, but I look forward to the time when a bolder and more daring organisation succeeds them."

"This, then, I perceive is a trap," Alexander said, and his voice had changed so that the words poured from his lips with a queer biting crispness. "Put up your hands, the three of you!" he went on, as his right hand, which had strayed for a moment towards his hip pocket, flashed out and his revolver covered Savinkoff, the nearest one. "Up with them! To hell with you, then," he added.

Savinkoff, for a heavy man, had felt for his hip pocket quickly but not quickly enough. Without even a cry, he doubled up and fell upon his face, the bullet from Alexander's revolver in his chest. His comrade's arms were already high up. Stornoway had followed suit. The other Russian, for the moment, Alexander

ignored. He covered the other steadily.

“Stornoway,” he ordered, “drop that key upon the floor and kick it towards me.”

The young man hesitated for a second. A glance into the speaker’s face, however, was enough. He dropped the key and did as he was told. Stooping down an inch or two at a time, with his right hand always outstretched, Alexander picked it up and held it in his left hand.

“Ambrose Stornoway,” he said, “you are a traitor.”

“Not to my real party,” was the angry retort. “I am a Communist to the finger tips, an anarchist, if you will. You are an aristocrat. You are worse even than the capitalists.”

“Nevertheless, you joined my party,” Alexander reminded him, “and you laid a cunning plot to get me into the hands of these men. You knew very well what would have happened to me in Russia. I should have stood in the dock and not in the witness-box.”

“You would have stood with your back to the wall,” Stornoway cried fiercely, “when you left the Courthouse. You would have gone where all your slobbering crowd belong.”

“You are a traitor, Stornoway, and you are about to die,” was the calm response. “Have you anything to say?”

The young man moistened his dry lips.

“I am unarmed,” he faltered.

“So should I have been when I stood with my back to the wall,” Alexander reminded him. “Ten more seconds, Stornoway.”

Stornoway gave a shout which rang through the room. He crouched and sprang at Alexander. The bullet crashed into his brain. He lay doubled up upon the floor, an unpleasant-looking sight, with his twisted mouth and lips still quivering.

“More comfortable, this,” Alexander said, stepping a little backwards and confronting the other man, whose hands were still steadily uplifted. “Where is your gun, Major?”

“I am not armed,” was the gruff reply. “We did not expect this. We were told that you were a man of peace. Savinkoff carries a gun night and day. He has enemies who follow him everywhere. With me it is different.”

“Turn round and lift up your coat,” Alexander enjoined.

The man obeyed. His hip pocket was obviously empty.

“Now take off your coat and throw it towards me.”

He did so. Alexander felt the garment with his foot. There was nothing but a pipe, tobacco, papers and a bottle.

“You are a very lucky man, Major Kuskova,” Alexander assured him pleasantly. “What does that bottle contain?”

“A drug. We did not expect that you would come with us without a little trouble. A tablespoonful of that, however, and you would have had no will left. You would have come where you were taken. You would have confessed to any crime. You call me

lucky. I think it is you who have the chance up till now."

"You may be right," Alexander admitted. "But I have had a dose of that stuff before. What the devil are you doing?" he asked, suddenly catching sight of the clerk, who was standing on the threshold of the office, also with his hands well over his head.

"I saw it all from in here," the man declared. "I have done no wrong, sir, and I would not hurt anyone."

"Then you have nothing to fear," Alexander told him. "Bring me the ledger with the names of your correspondents in Russia."

The clerk hurried away, grey and characterless. He looked like a little rat as he came out with a book under his arm.

"This is all that we have, sir," he explained with chattering teeth. "Mr. Stornoway would keep no books. He destroyed every letter. He always said it was according to orders from headquarters."

"Where is your stock of pamphlets which go out in the bales of wool you send away?"

The clerk shook his head.

"I never knew, sir," he declared. "Mr. Stornoway used to fetch them as they were required. He would drive down in a *droshky* with two or three big packets of them. He had a strong room at the bank. They may be there. If I may say so, sir, I do not believe that they were the pamphlets which he was expected to send."

Alexander considered for a moment.

"As this is Germany, not France," he reflected, "I cannot see that it makes much difference where they are. Follow me."

With the little man trotting behind, Alexander opened the ledger and glancing through several pages, each one of which recorded transactions with the *European Review*, led the way to the great stove which stood in the centre of the warehouse.

"Where do you put in the fuel?" he asked.

The clerk showed him. He picked up an iron implement and opened the door.

"Put this in," Alexander directed.

He obeyed with obvious delight. He closed the door again and sniffed.

"Oh, it will smell—it will smell a great deal. People in the building will wonder what we are doing. What else can I do, sir?"

Alexander glanced at the two bodies upon the floor. The little clerk turned his head but he pressed his filthy hands over his eyes.

"Two men," he sobbed, "both dead. The master, he was mad, but he is dead."

"A regrettable necessity," Alexander said coldly. "Listen to

me.”

The man listened, shivering with fear.

“You have a heavy knife somewhere, I suppose, that you use for cutting the ropes of these skins?”

“It is there, sir, hanging on the wall.”

“Fetch it.”

The clerk obeyed, handing it over with quivering fingers.

“Come into the office,” Alexander directed. “Good. What on earth are you shivering for all the time?”

“I am afraid,” the little man confessed. “I heard the gun go off and I saw the master’s face all twisted, and there he lies—dead. I am afraid.”

“Take the knife and cut that telephone wire,” Alexander ordered.

The other did as he was told.

“You will not hurt me, sir,” he begged. “I have a wife and a large family. I will do you no harm. I will never say I saw you fire the shots. I will forget what you are like.”

“You need not worry,” Alexander told him. “What I have done was just a trifling act of justice. There is no law can touch me.”

He crossed the room and picked up the bottle which lay by the side of the discarded coat. He turned to Kuskova, who was all

the time standing with folded arms.

“You may keep the rest of your belongings, my friend,” he said. “I am curious, however, about the contents of this bottle. I shall have it analysed.”

“It took the cleverest chemist in the world three years to handle that drug even after he had discovered it,” the man assured him earnestly. “You would have been with us as quiet as a lamb by this time, on our way back to Russia, if things had gone as we planned them.”

Alexander turned towards the door.

“No, you are not to come with me,” he told him, holding out his hand. “I am going to lock the door on the outside. You will stay here and keep the clerk company. If you shout and hammer loudly enough I expect you will soon be free.”

“Who are you?” the man asked, with a sudden burst of curiosity. “Are you used to killing men like sheep? How do you think you are going to escape?”

Alexander smiled.

“I imagine that if the German police find out that you are a member of the Russian Ogpu,” he remarked, “and that you were thinking of arresting me and then dosing me with this drug, you are a great deal more likely to get into trouble than I am. You see,” he added, fitting the key into the door, “I leave you now. I shall lock you in and keep the key as a memento of this little visit. *Au revoir.*”

He stepped out into the entrance hall, locked the door behind him and made his way into the street. He found an empty taxi almost at once. In two hours' time his plane was a speck in the sky sailing westwards.

XIII

Anna Prestnoff was lying stretched upon a divan, her elbow upon a cushion, her head resting upon her hand, studying with intense concentration, mingled with a certain amount of disapprobation, a large canvas which stood upon her easel a dozen yards away. The stumps of two extinct cigarettes were in the ash tray by her side. She lit a third.

“To think that that fool could see quite clearly what he wants, that he could explain it perfectly, and yet I cannot produce it,” she muttered.

Once more her whole attention was riveted upon the canvas. There was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” she invited impatiently.

She half-turned her head. A tall figure had crossed the threshold and was closing the door behind him. There was something familiar about his movements even in that little pool of darkness. She sat up with a start as he came towards her.

“Alexander!” she exclaimed.

“Why not? Surely the first visit I pay on my return should be to you?”

She swung round to a sitting position. Her eyes watched his approach. It was ridiculous that his coming should be so

disturbing. Still, he was back, he was unharmed and she realised that she was conscious of an immense sense of relief.

“Why should it be to me?” she asked quietly.

“Because your little pink message with the blot at the bottom of the page saved me from my besetting fault of over-confidence. I kiss your fingers, dear Anna,” he said, raising them to his lips. “Thanks to your warning I slipped a small plaything into my pocket and I killed the men who had it in their minds to make away with me.”

“Killed them?” she repeated.

“It was absolutely necessary,” he went on as he seated himself beside her. “Theirs was quite a clever scheme, and I was walking into the trap with all the folly of a credulous jackass. I ought to have known better, too. I never had any real confidence in Stornoway. That is why I made that trip to Berlin. He came down from Oxford a do-or-die revolutionary. Our creed was like milk and water to him. It was only because he loathed the present government so much that he joined us to make use of our machinery to distribute his own propaganda. However, all’s well that ends well.”

“It did end well, then?”

He smiled.

“Behold me, I am alive,” he pointed out, “and Stornoway is dead. So also is a smooth-tongued, deceitful rogue who announced himself as Captain Savinkoff—an Ogpu agent with a

drug in his pocket which would have reminded you of the steamer, and a warrant to take me back to Moscow.”

She looked away and there was a shadow of reflective sadness in her tone.

“Ambrose Stornoway,” she murmured. “Full of passionate life, the last time I saw him—all aflame with his schemes, his wild, mad schemes for purging the world. Death seems a sudden end.”

“Death is only merciful when it is sudden,” Alexander reminded her. “Anna, my dear, this drama in which you and I are taking part has to be played out according to the laws of necessity. We make our own right and wrong. We are responsible only to our own consciences. Both those men asked for their fate and deserved it. Stornoway was betraying me to a Moscow prison and death. The other man, well, it is true he was only an official but it was his life or mine. He had to go.”

“But you,” she asked him, “did you just have your will with these men and leave Berlin without trouble?”

“Thanks to you again,” he acknowledged, “I went to see an old friend of mine, a man who stands in the shadow of the Dictator himself. He gave me a laissez-passer which brought me out of the country as easily as I entered it. But tell me, Anna, for it is I now who am curious. You slipped into my hand, just as I was leaving, that packet which contained the code signals of imminent danger, but how the mischief did you get the warning into the room of my hotel in Berlin?”

She reflected for a moment.

“Is it a wise question, that?”

“Wise or not, I beg you for an explanation.”

“The night you left I telephoned to a connection of mine who—do not be shocked, please—was a General in the army of the Grand Duke twenty-five years ago, although he is now night-watchman at the hotel where you stayed. I told him to search the shops until he found one that would sell him pink note-paper. I told him to write the word ‘Beloved’ in the middle of half a page and to be sure to drop a blot of ink below it, to place it in an envelope and deliver it to you. That is how you got it. It is quite simple. My friend is known at the hotel by the name of Urnoff. He would do a great deal for me. He would do a great deal for you. He would give his life for the cause that we stand for although he has often lately been in danger of starvation.”

“How can I find words to thank you?” Alexander asked simply.

“Do not try,” she begged. “We will not speak further about it.”

“But this man Urnoff? He could probably be of use to us. We have a list at European House of such people. He would be freed from the danger of want.”

She shook her head.

“It would be too dangerous,” she said. “After years of struggling he has found a post where he has a living wage—even more than that—enough for his small luxuries, his tobacco and his glass of wine. He has wretched health and he is not very clever. If it were discovered that he was receiving money from outside he would lose his post immediately. Leave him

alone, please.”

“It shall be as you wish, of course,” he acquiesced. . . . “And now tell me—how have you been faring? Life has not been too grim?”

“It is very hard to find amusement in this great city,” she confided, “but you sent me Leopold.”

“Leopold for amusement! Why I should not think that he would bring a smile even to the lips of a clown!” She laughed appreciatively. “I think I will admit that never in this world have I come across a human being so egregiously devoid of all sense of humour. Ten minutes after he had paid me his first visit he unbent so far as to offer to open the gates of Paradise for me. The only thing that I must not expect was fidelity. He belonged to the world, he was too great a gift for any one woman. He belonged to the world and to his art!”

“I wonder to whom he would belong if he sprained his ankle,” Alexander meditated.

The telephone tinkled noisily. Anna lifted the receiver from the instrument on the small table by her side and listened for a few moments almost in silence.

“Alas, my dear Lydia,” she said at last, “it is impossible. At this very time there is here with me a gentleman who has called to invite me out to dinner. I cannot come. To-morrow I shall be working here. After that it is uncertain . . . *Parfaitement. À sept heures et demie.*”

She rang off.

“Where is the gentleman who is waiting to take you out to dinner?” Alexander demanded.

“Is not that to be your tribute of gratitude for my having saved your life?” she asked. “Or is it too great a price to pay? I am not an expensive girl. There are small restaurants close by, where one is sufficiently hidden, where one eats cheaply or dines moderately.”

He rose and made her a little bow.

“If you will do me the honour of dining with me, Anna,” he said, “it will give me the utmost pleasure. Life, however, is too short for cheap meals. I will give myself the happiness of fetching you,” he added, glancing at the clock, “at eight o’clock.”

“Are you not a little overpowering?” she smiled. “I do not know that I have a frock for a great occasion.”

“I will risk it.”

“And will you, please,” she implored, as she strolled with him towards the door, her hand resting lightly upon his arm, “withdraw your terpsichorean sleuth with his haunting violet eyes and insolent manner at the same time? My studio here will seem to me purer when it is freed from his perfumes.”

Alexander hesitated.

“I would like you to keep in touch with him,” he decided, “but I promise that he shall trouble you no more. Till eight o’clock then.”

The breeze from the river tempted him as he stood outside looking at his own green postern gate, and instead of crossing the street he walked slowly down towards the Embankment. The window-boxes and public gardens were gay with flowers. Outside the mansion of a famous portrait painter he lingered for a moment to inhale the sweetness of the roses and a little farther along he lingered again as he passed a flaming border of geraniums. The slight mist over the river was blue-tinged, the Houses of Parliament, serene and stately, seemed to have gained a new beauty softly but sharply defined in the luminous haziness. He walked slowly and in that very rare humour into which he had drifted he seemed to attain as nearly as possible to complete relaxation. The hard, firmly outlined angles of life, with their grimly immovable finger-posts, seemed to fade away. The world of puppets, the men and women whom he met day by day, fell back into a sort of gentle chaos. After all, he wondered, must the purpose of existence be always so grim and steadfast a thing? Must he be always girding up his loins to struggle with giants? Left alone, they would topple from their high places in time. Without a doubt, he acknowledged to himself in those few minutes, he was missing much of the music of life, much of its beauty, many of its joys. He crossed the broad meeting of the ways of Parliament Square and continued his somewhat melancholy progress along the Embankment. Soon he was opposite the great block of flats where his temporary abode was situated. He felt reluctant to cross the road. He sank onto a seat and watched the gulls drifting downwards on the freshening breeze, listened without hearing to their sad cry. He counted backwards. For eleven years he had sacrificed ambition, all personal feelings, risked dangers, courted trouble and loneliness, by reason of that deep, passionate impulse which he had never been able wholly to

understand, which prompted him to devote all that he had or was capable of to the liberation of a country which, after all, he had first quitted as a boy. Now, in these few minutes, he seemed to have reached one of the halting places at which one sometimes pauses to breathe and reflect. He looked down the carefully defined avenue of his future and with the influence of those last few days upon him he was grimly conscious of his waning enthusiasms. Life, after all, was a precious gift, something to be prized and treasured, not to be risked in that almost flamboyant manner which he seemed lately to have adopted. Years ago, a boy of sixteen, he had ridden into battle, his sabre in his hand, the courage of a young lion in his heart, without fear or question. That was a different thing. In these days he was risking not only death but ignominy. All the time that chill doubt was torturing him. Was it worth while? He whose political convictions should have made him the complete individualist was suddenly grimly doubtful both of himself and of the whole structure of his future.

XIV

Alexander reached the end of his turbulent promenade at last, climbed a short but famous hill and made his way to his small flat in Buckingham Court. There he found that for once in his life Paul had flatly disobeyed him. Lounging in an easy chair in the sitting-room, studying some photographs in an illustrated paper, was Leopold.

“What the devil,” Alexander enquired, “are you doing here, young man?”

Leopold made not the slightest attempt to rise. He threw the illustrated journal on one side, however, and knocked the ash from his cigarette.

“I telephoned and found that you were back,” he said. “I wished to see you.”

“You should have waited until you were sent for, then,” was the curt reply.

Leopold shivered a little. Men who lived outside the world of culture, he reflected, were so crude in their speech.

“How could you tell that I wished to see you?” he argued gently. “It concerns Anna Prestnoff.”

“I am satisfied about her,” Alexander declared. “You need bring me no further reports.”

"But I am not satisfied," Leopold explained pathetically. "When the hour arrived for that little dinner I told you of, Anna Prestnoff sent me a note to say that she had a headache and was unable to leave the studio. I sent flowers and I called there —no reply. I see her at last at the theatre. She is talking all the time with our director. When I present myself for a few minutes' conversation she—it may seem incredible but it is nevertheless true—she had the air of one who was thinking about something else. Anna Prestnoff is not well, or something has happened to her. I am glad that you are home again. I should be glad if you would tell her that I am not angry—the dinner was only postponed. I am free for two evenings next week—Tuesday and Thursday—and either is at her disposal."

"Perhaps she does not want to go out with you," Alexander suggested.

The young man stared at him.

"I am not altering any of my plans," he said. "I shall be giving up nothing. You could say that it will give me pleasure to meet her."

A gentle buzzing came from the telephone instrument by Alexander's side. He took off the receiver. For a moment or two he answered in monosyllables. Finally he glanced at the clock.

"In five minutes," he said, "I shall be disengaged, if you will do me the honour of paying your visit, Madame. My room is number two hundred . . . Very good. I shall expect you."

He hung up the receiver.

“Perhaps,” he suggested, turning to his visitor, “it would be as well if you tore yourself away, my young friend. You evidently have nothing more to report to me at the moment. See me after Wednesday—say Friday morning.”

“The morning,” Leopold declared peevishly, “does not exist for me. I rise at two, and as regards Anna Prestnoff—”

“All right, come along here at three, then,” Alexander interrupted. “As regards Anna Prestnoff, you can leave her alone for a time. I do not wish to hurry you now,” he added, as the young man rose languidly to his feet, “but my visitor bears a somewhat terrifying name. You would doubtless like to avoid meeting her.”

“Who is she?”

“Madame Grodin.”

Leopold snatched up his hat. He seemed on the point of hysteria.

“Madame Grodin!” he repeated. “Olga Sherbatoff of the Grand Opera. The Holy Saints! She is worse than her husband. She has sent more men to the firing squad than anyone alive. She is a sadist. She loves and she kills. She is coming here? You receive her—alone?”

“My reputation will support even that danger,” Alexander assured him.

The young man’s fingers were already clasping the handle of the door.

“I go above,” he explained. “I pay a visit to the little Anita, who will lose her head, but what matter? I shall rest there until I can leave this awful place.”

Alexander made no reply. He closed the door behind his departing guest and looked in through the connecting door to his bedroom.

“Paul!”

The man, who was busy at one of the wardrobes, turned around.

“Monsieur?”

“Why the devil did you let that young popinjay into my rooms?”

Paul smiled deprecatingly.

“Monsieur,” he explained, “I found him out in the passage trying the handle of the door, and frightened to death. He begged me for shelter. He said that he had important business with you and he was afraid of being discovered here by some very dangerous person or other. I thought he was so harmless that it did not matter.”

“You are quite right, as it happens,” Alexander admitted. “But listen.”

“Monsieur.”

“A lady is visiting me—at once.”

“*Bien, Monsieur.*”

“An old acquaintance, Paul. You knew her as Olga Sherbatoff.”

The man straightened himself.

“Monsieur will have a care,” he ventured.

“And you will keep out of the way, Paul. Lock the door of the room on your side and do not unlock it unless it is I myself who speak. You are a link with the old days. You remain unseen. It is understood?”

“It is understood, Monsieur.”

Alexander nodded and left him. A few seconds after he had closed the door, he heard the key turned. Almost immediately afterwards there came a low mysterious tapping at the outside entrance. Alexander smiled as he listened. It was odd, he thought, how much a woman could convey by the mere touch of her knuckles against mahogany.

“Enter,” he invited.

The door was opened and closed. He paused for a moment as he confronted his visitor on the threshold of the saloon—a tall, very elegant woman with dark sad eyes, a creamy white complexion and with a figure which defied the discipline of her perfectly cut travelling clothes. She drew back half a step and curtsied, a faint irony in the smile which played about her mouth. He frowned at her. Then she held out her hands. He raised them to his lips.

“Say that you are glad to see me,” she insisted.

“Madame,” he answered, “you are welcome. This is the first time I have the privilege of receiving you in such a fashion.”

He closed the door behind her. She sank into the chair to which he pointed.

“It might well have been Olga, my own name, with which you greeted me,” she complained. “My marriage was, as you might divine, something of a farce. It is for the sake of the British passport.”

“Grodin, as I remember him—” Alexander began.

“Be quiet, if you please,” she interrupted. “I did not come here to talk of him—not until later, at any rate.”

“That is as you wish,” he replied, handing her cigarettes. “The marvel to me is that you should have come here to talk with me about anything or anybody.”

She looked at him with steady, enquiring eyes. He would be difficult, this man. She knew something of him from the past. He had not changed. Her task suddenly seemed to her impossible.

“I do not know why I came,” she confessed with a perfectly genuine feeling of helplessness. “Simply I knew that you were here so close under the same roof and, after all, I may call myself, may I not, an old friend, an old acquaintance, if you will?”

“My dear Olga,” he said lightly, “I have very charming memories of our brief past before you became famous, in the days before the mutterings of the storm. Alas, that world has

slipped away. You, they tell me, are a very important figure in the new Russia."

"That is because I am the only woman whom the Dictator will permit to have a permanent residence within the boundaries," she confided. "I am the only woman in whom he has any trust."

"Something to be proud of, that," he observed. "Tell me, Madame, you still work for your country?"

She looked at him steadily from underneath her slightly lowered eyelids.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"It is not necessary for me to explain."

"You mean that you still think, even now that I suppose I rank above any other woman in Russia, that I am a spy?"

"You were a very excellent one in the old days," he reflected. "I remember having a narrow escape from a firing squad myself some six years ago. A poor student in the Nevsky Prospekt, you know, who had friends above his station and a weakness for Kerensky."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"If you care to believe it," she said. "All the same, it is not true. No one can say that I ever betrayed a friend. Your intimacy with Kerensky was known to others besides myself."

"Oh, finish with all this talk of betrayal, Madame," he begged.

“We are in London, the freest spot in the freest country in the world. How you contrived to have your husband appointed Minister to the Court of St. James’s, is not my business. Why you pay me this visit, on the other hand, I have the right to ask.”

She had the air of a woman pained, a little humiliated. Her eyes drooped before him. One might have conceived that she was trying to hide from him the slight mistiness which for the moment obscured their beauty.

“It was my husband’s wish that I come,” she said. “He is in a difficult position. I may tell you facts. They are simply for you to consider.”

“But your object in telling me anything?” he asked. “That is what I should like to know.”

“Our old friendship,” she replied. “My husband’s belief in your great gifts as a leader of men.”

“He flatters me,” Alexander murmured.

“He does not. He would have liked to talk to you upon the steamer. He would like to meet you himself, but in his position there are difficulties.”

“Still Lord High Executioner of a wavering people, is he not?”

If he was trying to sting her into a retort he failed.

“My husband has been Chief of the Ogpu.”

“Of whom the whole world is in fear,” he said simply.

“He is now,” she went on unruffled, “the representative of the Russian people in Great Britain. His position affords him great opportunities. He is perhaps the first man of brains belonging to his party who realises that underneath a mask of seeming prosperity this greatest experiment the world has ever known has not met with complete success. . . . Beyond the limits of his own powers he looks into the future. He sees the coming of a new dynasty, the triumph of a new school of thought. It is being preached now vigorously enough from without, by no one more eloquently than you. There is one place from which it could be preached from within, hasten the end and be the salvation of hundreds of thousands of lives.”

“You interest me, Madame,” Alexander said quietly.

“I should.”

“And that place?”

“By one holding the post of Field Marshal of the Red Army,” she answered, “hand in hand with his Chief of the Staff, sole director of the military operations in case of war.”

There was a silence prolonged, it seemed to the woman, almost beyond human endurance. All the time he sat with his eyes fixed upon her as though seeking to penetrate to the thoughts at the back of her brain. From below, through the half-open window, came the subdued sound of the hum and bustle of the street traffic punctuated with the hooting of motor horns. When at last he spoke it was as if his words possessed a gimletlike quality. Olga was a woman of great experience but she felt herself on the borderland of fear. No situation she had ever been called

upon to handle had given her such a thrill.

“Is this an offer?” he asked at last.

“Yes.”

“A serious offer?”

“In a sense, yes,” she repeated. “It is a proposition.”

“Does it come, I wonder, from the man whose name we so seldom mention, or from your husband? If it comes from the latter alone it means that the invincible, indomitable Grodin is qualifying for a post amongst the next gang of political miscreants whom the great man’s spies herd into the Court.”

She could bear his scrutiny no longer. She threw away her cigarette and sprang to her feet. She walked restlessly to the window and back again. He remained silent and rigid in his chair. The fingers of her right hand rested lightly upon her hip. She walked with a scarcely discernible sway, a gesture which half the feminine world had sought, and sought in vain, to imitate since the days of her first appearance on the stage.

“You forget,” she pointed out, “that it is my husband himself who is chief of all the spies who are working for the government. Besides, he is in London.”

She came to a standstill on the hearthrug, her elbow upon the broad mantelpiece, her eyes now seeking Alexander’s once more.

“You have grown colder and harder than in the old days,” she

sighed. “It has been my fate to bring you this wonderful offer. It does not move you—no? Can you not realise that it does away with twenty years of delay, of plots and counterplots? The government can hold its own against any form of political opposition. Against the army it is powerless.”

He changed his attitude with the rapid facility which can be inspired by genius alone. He became the artist brought face to face with perfection. A different light shone in his eyes.

“You are a very beautiful woman, Olga,” he pronounced.

“What has that to do with the matter of this moment?” she asked with impatience, almost anger, in her tone. “Do you realise that I have put before you an offer which might change the face of Europe?”

“I have just that curious type of brain,” he apologised, “which wanders. I think hard and then I rest.”

“I would rather know the result of your thinking hard than receive your flattery—at this moment,” she told him.

“Be reasonable, dear Olga,” he begged. “You surely never expected to hear the final result in something less than ten minutes.”

“You were always a man of quick decisions,” she reminded him. “Over-impetuous we used to consider you.”

“Perhaps I have learnt wisdom,” he smiled.

“You never made a mistake.”

“Even that remains to be proved. There was a time when I held a revolver within a few yards of the great man’s heart. I spared him because at that time, although I loathed his principles, it seemed to me that he was modifying them month by month. Was that a mistake, I wonder?”

“It is not a question for me to answer.”

He rose to his feet, approached her and stood by her side. She remained motionless. Emotion of a sort she was without a doubt feeling. Her eyes were a little distended. She caught his hand as he stretched it out, and kissed it passionately.

“Alexander,” she murmured. “Alexander—this is a great moment.”

“Was that the kiss of betrayal, Olga?” he asked her.

“Very likely,” she admitted. “The message I bring comes from one who has betrayed others. This time I tell you honestly that I do not know. Nicolas Grodin is a man who is as secret with his wife as he is with the world—whose thoughts no one yet has been able to read. Vulgar and even rough as he is in appearance he has qualities which the public knows nothing of.”

He led her towards the door.

“In other words,” he said, “I must take my chance while it is there.”

“Precisely. Whatever you may think of me, Alexander, I have at least been frank with you. You have asked me whether this is a genuine offer or one meant for your betrayal. I have answered

that I do not know. It comes through my husband—that is all I can tell you. It may be that he or his master are afraid of you and are choosing this way of getting you the other side of the frontier so that they may deal with you as they think well. On the other hand, it may be that it is a perfectly genuine, wise and generous offer which as a patriotic Russian you should accept."

"What is your advice?" he asked.

She dropped him a little mocking curtsy.

"Who am I to offer advice to you? When will you give me your answer?"

"Is a week too much to ask for?"

"It was my husband's suggestion. Shall I come to you?"

"If you will."

She looked at him thoughtfully.

"I should like to come to your secret pagoda in Chelsea," she said.

He shook his head.

"Alas," he regretted, "there is nothing very secret about it, but it is my resting place. I receive no visitors there."

She shrugged her shoulders slightly.

“Here, then—at the same time?”

“If you will.”

He held open the door. To the last minute his puzzled eyes seemed to be questioning her. Then she passed out, and although the question persisted, she evaded the response he sought.

XV

Anna Prestnoff, from her comfortable chair at the well-chosen but remote corner table in the fashionable restaurant of the moment, watched the rapidly filling room with interest. She watched, too, Alexander as he wrote out his order and handed it to the maître d'hôtel who had taken charge of them upon their entrance.

"I am feeling rather guilty," she confessed. "To tell you the truth, this is not at all the sort of thing I had in my mind. I imagined that you might have stayed on for a time at the studio, that I should have mixed you one of my not very good and never quite cold enough *apéritifs* and that we should have gone out together to one of those little restaurants close at hand."

"This is a feast of gratitude," he told her. "When I think of that exceedingly unpleasant fellow who came all the way from Moscow to take me back with him and remember that most noxious mixture with which he was planning to dope me and which we know something about already, my gratitude to you is more than a dozen such dinners as this could repay."

She shivered momentarily as she raised the glass containing the amber-coloured cocktail to her lips.

"Horrible stuff," she murmured. "Sometimes I wake up with a start in the night and fancy I can smell that slimy vapour stealing up my nostrils. Only a few nights ago I had to get up and throw my window wide open to get rid of the idea."

“When one is living under the conditions we have to tolerate just now,” he said, “fate makes no allowances. The weakling has to be destroyed and replaced. Without a doubt Leopold Zadaruski had a hand in that little affair in Berlin and hoped that he had seen the last of me.”

Her silence was sufficient answer. Alexander, after a moment or two, continued.

“What unspeakable ignominy,” he exclaimed, “to have been sent to death by such means! It is true that the young man is a mass of nerves. He is also a terrible coward. He heard the other day that Grodin had arrived to take up a temporary abode at Buckingham Court and he nearly fainted from the shock.”

“Why was he ever admitted into the circle?” Anna asked.

“Because he was the only person who had a free entrée backwards and forwards between Moscow and the rest of the world,” he explained. “One thing I must say for our misguided countrypeople: Even under the lash of the present form of government they have kept their love of music, the opera and especially the ballet. They speak of this creature, Zadaruski, with bated breath. He can walk the streets of Moscow with impunity, where either you or I would be whisked off to a fortress in a minute. The government may send out to the execution squad its *littérateurs*, its men of science, its philosophers, its great soldiers, but it dare not lay a finger upon Leopold Zadaruski. That is why we are obliged to take the risk of employing a possible traitor.”

“It seems to me,” she observed, “that the question is not what

the government of Russia, who have not yet found him out, might do to him, so much as what you are going to do."

He smiled.

"My dear companion," he said, "I have such courage as a man of action must possess, but I shall not interfere with Leopold Zadaruski. One cannot set one's heel upon every gnat that stings."

The service of their dinner commenced. Anna sighed with exaggerated content as she was served with the hot toast and the caviar. She approved most heartily of the vodka.

"Like all Russians," she confided, "I am a little greedy."

"And I more than a little," he confessed. "A truce to serious conversation."

"Willingly," she agreed. "You have taken a load from my mind already. If anything happens to Leopold, the ballet in London will come to an end and a great deal of my work be wasted."

"You need have no fear," he assured her. "I may have my own ideas about the association which existed between Leopold and Ambrose Stornoway but I shall make no effort to discover the truth. It simply does not matter."

The room was now almost full. Alexander had exchanged greetings with a few acquaintances, Anna with no one. Nevertheless, she had attracted a considerable amount of attention. She was perhaps the most simply-dressed woman in the room and she wore no jewellery except a small but beautiful

ivory cross. Notwithstanding that, more than one woman had whispered the magic name of Chanel as they studied the lines of her black gown. . . . Alexander, towards the end of their little banquet, gave way at last to an impulse which, half-developed, he had been carrying with him ever since he had climbed the hill from the Embankment a few hours earlier.

"Anna Prestnoff," he confided, "when I left your studio I did not return to my own little retreat. I walked slowly to my apartment at Buckingham Court. I gave myself the luxury of an hour's quiet reflection."

She looked at him with a soft smile upon her lips and invitation in her eyes.

"You will confide in me?" she murmured.

"Why should I not? Tell me your idea of what the men might do who are diplomats, politicians or men of affairs, at a certain period of their lives as they grow tired, when the things which seemed to them as they started life so magnificently worth all the turmoil of effort and struggle appear suddenly pointless?"

Anna shook her head, this time without comment.

"If they are not careful they fade away into the shadows," he continued. "I am the head of a society of men and women banded together for a common purpose. It has no name and few people in the world know of its existence. We have worked with one idea—to bring back sane government to our mutilated country, to re-establish her as one of the nations in the forefront of civilisation. And now to me personally has come calamity. I have a disturbance of the spirit, a mental malaise, a black

thought depresses me. I feel that I am wearying of my task."

"I do not believe it," she cried.

"But I am," he persisted. "Eleven years, almost the best years of a man's life, and our country to-day is where it was."

"That is not true," the girl contradicted eagerly. "This is just your Russian temperament which must every now and then assert itself. The whole world is beginning to realise that Communism in its present accepted form can never be applied as an active principle to a nation. The system has failed. You think that it is not a great work to have helped to make that clear?"

"But consider the situation," he pointed out. "I grant you the failure and doom of the present régime is at hand. Have we any prepared scheme to offer in its place? Where is our University of men of moderate principles who might act as successors to the illogical government? How can we reach this great immobile mass of men and women who ache to be shown the truth? The prophets are not there and it is only when we are driven to it that we know why. The rulers of Russia, since three years after the revolution, have taken the only sane way of keeping themselves in their position. They have swept away their scholars, their embryo statesmen, their intellectuals who rebelled against the grim fetters of arbitrary despotism, to the fortresses and prisons and execution yards of the country. Look at that long list of men who might have helped in our great work —murdered, many of them starved to death. Think of Adek, the genius who might have rallied the country. Anna Prestnoff, I am terrified that I may declare myself weary of it all."

She looked at him in dismay. She knew that strong man though he was, he was also temperamental, and that he was opening up his soul to her under the influence of a wave of depression. She was terrified.

“But what could you do, Alexander?” she protested. “You have gone so far. You have thrown so much of your life into the work —”

“Listen,” he interrupted. “I have two courses open. One is a certain road to death. It is an offer from Grodin to accept a Field Marshalship in the Red Army and the post of Commander-in-Chief of the entire Russian forces.”

“You would not accept,” she implored with growing agitation in her voice. “It is a trap! Grodin is not to be trusted. It is a trap to get you into the country.”

He smiled a little sadly.

“You are clear-headed, my friend,” he acknowledged. “It is the truth. But listen—supposing I should take the chance, I might pave the way so that they were compelled to give me time. I might announce myself and my policy and my hopes boldly so that the world would know them. I realise the cunning of those men, Anna. They would wait until the world had passed on to its next chapter of living a year, two years, perhaps, and then all of a sudden, at the dead of night, an arrest, a fortress, a Court-Martial—death. The only thing to be considered is that I should have been able to go far enough, if they gave me time, to light the torch so that the work would go on.”

“They would not,” she declared firmly. “The idea is madness.

You and I both know that if you crossed the frontier of Russia even if they give you a year or two years' respite it would be eventually to enter a fortress, to have your system poisoned with that horrible drug until you crawled into Court to a sham trial and joined the others. You are mad to dream of such a sacrifice."

"I am a little mad," he admitted, "because during all these years I have never once felt the call of life as I feel it to-day."

A wave of wondering emotion checked back the words upon her lips, a sense of amazing happiness was creeping through her blood, her eyes glowed. They went on talking a little uncertainly but everything that needed to be said seemed to be there like music floating between them.

"I will tell you what it is that I have felt," he went on. "I have felt that I am weary of the routine of patriotism, weary of this life of intrigue and of the people who stand in the way of my happiness. I want to live as a human being, thinking of myself and for myself and through myself—of you, Anna. I want the good and desirable things of life. I am tempted to become an individualist pure and simple. You know why."

"Oh, you must tell me," she begged.

"I have given so much to others," he said. "I could love as other men have loved. I could love you."

All the glory of her worship glowed in her eyes. Her hand fell upon his. She was speechless. She felt herself being carried by irresistible forces into another sweeter and loftier world. . . . Then banality. The old jargon of meaningless words upon their

ears. The empty space which had secured for them complete privacy suddenly invaded. Men and women, a large party of guests, were standing around the as yet unoccupied long table. The hostess, a very great lady indeed in the peerage and society, with a card in her hand, was directing her followers to their places. Greetings from one or two travelled across to Alexander's table. The Prince de Chambordine, stately and dignified, permitted himself an expression of slight surprise as he waved his hand to Alexander. Leopold, with an air of sleek insouciance, was taking his place between two middle-aged ladies of petting proclivities, and gradually recovering from the shock he had suffered a few minutes before in the ante-room of the restaurant when he had come face to face with the Grodins and found that they were fellow-guests. Grodin, who had come on to the opera after a semi-official dinner of recognition, was wearing orders and decorations. His wife was quietly elegant in a black satin toilette, her only jewellery a marvellous necklace of emeralds. Simone de Chambordine, in dazzling white, had thrown one glance of ill-concealed disturbance towards Alexander and subsided into her chair. The hostess, after looking at him for a moment, waved her hand.

"I hope we shan't crowd you out," she cried pleasantly.

"Not in the least," he assured her. "In any case, we were early diners. We are leaving almost at once."

The Prince, with a word of apology to his hostess, came over and after a formal salute to Anna laid his hand upon Alexander's shoulder.

“I rang up a few days ago,” he said. “No one could tell me where you were. I enquired at Heston and found that your plane was out.”

“I have been on the Continent,” Alexander replied. “You will hear my report on Thursday. Very likely the end of my voyaging for a time. . . . Tell me, what on earth is that fellow Grodin doing in your *galère*?”

The Prince shrugged his shoulders.

“I imagine that his chief claim to being one of the guests is that he is the husband of his wife. Olga Sherbatoff, as you must remember, was the greatest diva of her day and my hostess’s friends are chosen always from the world of music. We have even, as you may have noticed, that young cub from the ballet in our midst.”

Alexander nodded.

“Olga Sherbatoff will always remain a notable figure,” he observed, “but her husband—where did all the decorations and medals come from?”

De Chambordine smiled.

“He is an official person nowadays, Alexander,” he reminded his nephew. “He has, as a matter of fact, been attending an official dinner in his honour at one of the Embassies, and came on to the opera late. Will you dine at Claridge’s to-morrow night—just Simone and me?”

Alexander shook his head gently.

“I will let you have word,” he promised. “I fear that I may ask to be excused, though.”

“I must see you,” the Prince persisted.

He looked around. Everyone was settling down into his place. Anna was leaning back in her chair contemplating herself in the small mirror which she had drawn from her bag. He dropped his voice and spoke in rapid French.

“My friend,” he said, “there are curious rumours leaking across the frontier. I have been twice to-day to European House. Everything points towards a crisis. It is a time for action. Besides I want to hear of your visit abroad.”

“You are right,” Alexander agreed, almost under his breath, “but it is also a time for restraint. A single false move might throw us back for years. A proposition has been made to me within the last few hours. I cannot decide whether it is a serious one or not. To-morrow I shall be at headquarters all day. We shall certainly meet there.”

“My dear Prince!” his hostess called out to him in remonstrance.

She pointed to the empty place on her right. De Chambordine reluctantly moved away and Alexander resumed his seat.

“I was thinking,” he said to Anna, his wonderfully modulated voice sinking almost to a whisper, “of proposing a cabaret. Nothing could be better than this, however, for a few minutes. The curtain has risen and we occupy the front row of stalls. We can see how Leopold behaves in high society. We can listen to the most accomplished hostess in London or Paris drawing her

guests together. We can watch the German Ambassador looking askance at us from behind those horn-rimmed spectacles of his. We can amuse ourselves watching the porpoise-like efforts of Grodin to adapt himself to his new surroundings."

"And we can look, too, at that exquisite child, Simone de Chambordine," Anna observed, "sitting between a Royal Prince who looks as though he had nothing to say, and a great genius who dreams only of music. Neither of them have opened their mouths yet and she looks at us enviously all the time."

"Simone is only a child," he remarked.

Anna glanced across the table and there was a gleam of faint pity in her eyes.

"Children leave the convent too young, nowadays," she sighed. "I was like that myself not so very long ago."

"Still, you do not regret?"

"Regret what?"

"Your womanhood. The passing from that nebulous state of sentimental dreams to the world of real emotions."

"A few minutes ago," she told him almost shyly, "I was glad. I think that a time will come when I shall be glad again."

Alexander, several times during the remainder of the evening, was inclined to believe that he would never, altogether

recapture the moment of mental abandon which the coming of de Chambordine and his friends had interrupted. An hour afterwards, when, in shadow of Anna's dimly-lit studio, he had taken her into his arms and embraced her fondly and tenderly, she herself was tortured by vague doubts. It seemed to her that there was a leaven of wistfulness in his caresses, against which she instinctively rebelled.

"You meant it?" she whispered passionately.

He smoothed back her hair and looked into her eyes— never more beautiful.

"I meant it. I spoke them at a moment when words are born, not made, and all that I said was true. But Anna—"

"There is to be a but?" she cried.

"Not to my love for you," he assured her. "That will never change. The only question which remains is a simple but vital one."

"What is there more vital than our two selves?" she demanded.

"Nothing," he answered. "But you heard de Chambordine. There is a great change in him. He is all keyed up for action. Anna, I believe that he is right. The time is close upon us. Now that we are seated like this side by side and I can hold you in my arms I feel that I can think clearly."

"I can think only of you," she whispered in his ear.

Her lips sought his once more. She was happy because she felt

the passion still there. Presently, however, he drew a little away.

"You know, Anna," he said, "you were right. One cannot throw up a life's work in a moment. I ask myself whether I ought not to take up this challenge and accept the Command of the Russian Army. Remember that it is through the soldiers alone that Russia can find what she has never yet found—freedom."

She was for a moment distracted.

"But Alexander," she cried, "surely you are not deceived by that offer of Grodin's? You do not believe in it? You must know that it is simply an effort to get you across the frontier. You are the only man—you and one other, Molonieff—of whom they are afraid. You cannot believe that this is a serious offer, Alexander? They want you there not to direct their armies—you will never be allowed to go near them. They want you there to ply you with their drugs, to bring you to another of their mock trials and from there to the execution squad."

He smiled.

"I am not deceived," he assured her. "A child would know that that is their idea. On the other hand, it is not mine."

"But what can you do?"

"Appear to swallow the bait," he explained with growing eagerness, "and then take a few precautions which will probably lead them to move more slowly. For instance, I would insist upon the Press of Europe announcing the fact of my appointment. I could stipulate that I take three aides-de-camp of

my own choosing. I should arrange that they made reports to their countries—two would probably be English and one German—of my safe arrival at Moscow and the commencement of my work. If I were to disappear, my aides-de-camp would disappear. There would be a blank wall of silence and it is my belief, Anna, that the civilised world has had enough of these mock trials and bloodthirsty executions, and Russia, at the present moment, is not in a position to face concerted pressure from the whole world. . . . I should also remind Grodin that I had my own espionage system in Moscow and that it would not be possible to have me disappear there without the news leaking out. They would have to temporise with the situation, they would have then to let me take up my post, and I promise you that once there I should not lose a moment. They might find the tables turned. It might be I who would be holding the Court-Martials!"

"I will not let you go," Anna declared, dragging him down to her.

"You little revolutionary!"

"I have what you do not possess," she insisted. "It is common sense. Your scheme is sheer madness. The minute you cross the frontier you will be encircled by a ring of iron. They will never let you escape. At the first moment of pressure from outside they will shoot you. Then what does it matter however many nations protest? The world will have lost a hero, our country its saviour, and I shall have lost my lover."

"I do not think so," he said confidently.

Once more he yielded to her embraces, yielded to and returned them. The hours slipped by. When at last she moved away and with a low laugh of joy turned up the light and looked at herself in the mirror, she knew that the happiness of her life was established. There was a shadow of anxiety in her eyes but there was a softness in her expression, a gentleness in her voice, which seemed to have brought with them a new and exquisite charm.

"When do you decide?" she asked, her head once more upon his shoulder.

"Not in a hurry, I can promise you," he assured her. "I have to see de Chambordine first. I must summon a meeting at European House. I shall have to find my aides-de-camp and there will be some formalities to go through at the War Office here, and of course we shall have to get the reply to my conditions."

"You promise that you will not leave without seeing me—here in this room?"

"I promise."

She walked down with him to the door.

"I cannot talk any more," she sighed. "It is useless. I know that I have not the power to move you. Your promise must content me for to-night."

"I shall not break it," he assured her. "And listen, Anna, I will make a confession. I am not so indifferent about life or death as I was a short time ago. You have weakened my fatalism. You have given me desire for life."

A faint smile flickered about her lips. She gripped him by the shoulders as they stood for a moment in the night air listening to the rustling of the elm trees in the garden opposite.

"Thank you for those last words," she whispered. "You were beginning to frighten me. I like to think of you as human."

He took her once more into his arms. There was a drizzling rain falling outside, a policeman with the light from the standard gleaming on his soaked cape passed round the corner, a wan fragment of the moon peeped from behind a line of jagged clouds. Alexander's good-night kiss thrilled the girl almost to madness. A great joy took the place of those few minutes of icy depression. Nothing could take him away from her. Her lips moved. He leant forward to catch her words—a passionate fragment of Russian verse. Her eyes were shining as she looked up at him.

"Just a promise to our two selves and our love."

XVI

The Prince de Chambordine was the first of the larger party to notice the quiet but unhurried departure of their neighbours. He was just in time to wave his hand in farewell as Alexander looked back from the door.

"Your friend," his hostess remarked, "seems to be a man of great distinction. His face is familiar to me but I cannot for the moment recall his name."

"He is a relative of my wife's and one of her compatriots," the Prince confided. "As for his name, he has discarded it. I have known him ever since he was a boy. We have met often in Paris, in London and in New York. This is the first time I have ever seen him either dining or lunching alone with any woman—almost the first time, indeed, that I have seen him in a fashionable restaurant."

"What a record!" his hostess, who had been an anxious collector of attractive members of the opposite sex throughout her lifetime, sighed. "And he looks so charming! Tell me more about him."

The Prince shook his head.

"I have so much affection for my young relative," he said, "that I even fall in with his whims. He dislikes very much to be talked about, to obtrude, however harmlessly, into public notice. He comes of a noble family and in his quiet,

earnest way he works even now for the good of a country which, thank God, he never visits."

Madame Grodin leaned across the narrow table. Her eyes, too, had followed Alexander as he made his departure, and there was a misty light of recollection in their beautiful depths. For a few seconds she had once more breathed the atmosphere of Olga Sherbatoff—the atmosphere of sweet memories and sad regrets.

"I have my own wonderful recollections of the gentleman who has just left," she confided. "Not so many years ago, when I first sang at Covent Garden, his flowers were the most beautiful I received. I think I dare even say that they gave me the most pleasure, because he was not one who sent flowers carelessly. They were Gloire de Dijon roses," she added, addressing her hostess more directly, "the same shade as those with which your dinner table is decorated now."

"He is like myself," the Prince observed, "a man of sentiment. I must tell him, with your permission, of your memory, Madame. He will, I am sure, appreciate it."

She sighed.

"He has become a very serious person since those days," she said. "I myself am surprised to see him with a companion."

"I have met the young lady," the Prince remarked. "She travelled home on the same boat from New York. You remember her, Simone, I am sure."

"Perfectly well," the girl assented. "I recognised her directly

we entered the room."

"If you are curious," Leopold drawled, leaning across the table, "I can tell you who she is. She is Russian and an artist tolerably well-known. She is painting the scenes for my new ballet. I occasionally visit her studio. Her name is Prestnoff—Anna Prestnoff."

"There is something about her," the Prince meditated, "which reminds one of Russia—the Russia of the old days, I mean."

"For myself," his hostess observed, "I should have taken her for a Parisian. She does not interest me—women seldom do. Why this mystery about your distinguished-looking relative, my friend?" she asked the Prince.

He smiled.

"I always respect an incognito when it is an honest one," he replied.

She glanced across at Olga Grodin.

"And you, Madame?"

"I have always looked upon the Prince, though our acquaintance has been a slight one, as a model of courtliness and good taste," she said. "Where he leads I follow."

The hostess raised her eyebrows slightly. If she was annoyed she concealed the fact. The conversation drifted into other channels. Nevertheless, for one woman at least amongst her guests, the evening had become one of disturbing

memories.

The spell of those memories persisted. Hours later, when her maid was about to prepare her for the night, Olga Grodin threw herself upon the divan instead.

“Give me some cushions before you go,” she ordered, “and move the lamp over by my side. Make up the fire, too. I may read.”

The woman obeyed and departed. Her mistress, however, had no intention of reading. She lay quite still and her eyes were looking into a fully peopled world although a far distant one. At the sound of the opening of her door she turned her head in surprise.

“Nicolas!” she exclaimed, as her husband entered smoking a cigar. “What is the matter?”

“Nothing,” he answered. “I came to have a word with you.”

“Do not come a step nearer smoking that cigar,” she insisted. “Take it out of the room, please. You may smoke one of my cigarettes if you wish.”

He threw the cigar into the fire with a little grunt and lit a cigarette. He dragged up a chair to the side of her couch.

“Since you are here,” she said, “I have something to ask you.”

Grodin pulled down his waistcoat. He was conscious that his stomach was becoming somewhat protuberant. Nevertheless,

about his full mouth and solid jaw there was an air of strength even if combined with cruelty. He had caught the spirit of the times in which he lived.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It concerns Alexander.”

“Well?”

“I told you of our conversation,” she said. “I did your bidding. I told you the truth. I came away unable to make up my mind whether or no he believed that the offer I brought him was a genuine one.”

“And again—well?”

She turned her head and looked into his restless beady eyes.

“Was it?”

“Is that your business?” he replied. “I told you what to say. I trusted to the genius that you have in such matters to make the affair plausible. You asked no questions at the time.”

“Quite true,” she acquiesced. “Since then I have developed a curiosity.”

“The man was once your lover, I believe,” he snarled.

“You flatter me,” was the contemptuous rejoinder. “At the time I knew him, any woman living would have been proud to have been his mistress.”

“Be careful,” he warned her. “I am your husband, remember.”

“You are my husband,” she admitted, “but we are not in Moscow. To tell you the truth, Nicolas,” she went on, “I am not sure whether I shall ever return to Moscow with you. I should be afraid.”

He laughed silently—a not altogether pleasant gesture, for his frame shook although his lips remained rigid.

“I think you will,” he said.

“Answer my question, please.”

He shook his head.

“It is not your concern.”

“Perhaps it has become so,” she told him. “I have thought over this matter since my visit to Alexander. I know that you and your comrades are afraid of the army and I cannot believe that you would hand over its destinies, even for a week, to Alexander. There is something behind the curtain in that invitation of yours.”

“Indeed!” he mocked. “Well, if there is, it will stay there. Let that be sufficient for you—and Olga, have a care when you cross words with me. You are not squeamish. You know what has happened to other men, and women, too, who have failed to carry out my wishes. If I give the word, neither your beautiful looks nor that exquisite body of yours would save you.”

She swung round upon the divan. Her eyes were blazing with

anger.

“Answer my question and get out of my room!” she ordered.

He made no effort of movement. He permitted himself only a little contemptuous grunt. She rose to her feet and stood with her finger upon the bell. He lit another cigarette.

“If you ring that bell,” he said, “I shall have you thrown out of the place. I do not take a woman round with me who disobeys, even though she is my wife. If you want to know about your lover you shall. You made him the offer. If he accepts it you may have sent him to the execution squad. I do not know, you do not know, nobody knows what may happen to anyone when they cross the frontier into Russia. But listen. If you communicate with him in any way you know very well that I shall hear of it. I hear of everything. My spies make no mistakes. And as sure as you are alive to-night, so surely will you be dead in a week. Take that to bed with you and think it out.”

He rose from his chair with another grunt. Olga stood motionless, her finger still upon the bell. From the door Grodin looked back. There was something a little satyrlike about his expression, a smile that resembled a leer about his thick lips. She pressed the bell and he heard it tinkling down the corridor. Even while he hesitated the maid was in the room.

“You can prepare me for bed now, Moura,” her mistress directed. “Lock the door as soon as Monsieur has left.”

The woman opened the door and glanced respectfully at her employer. He paused for a single moment, then he passed out and they heard the door of his room noisily closed. Moura

turned the key and hurried to her mistress. Her eyes were full of fear. Olga laughed at her and slipped out of her *négligé* with a gesture of weariness. 181

“He fatigues me, that man!” she exclaimed.

“Madame should have a care,” Moura warned her anxiously. “In our country there is not a soul who does not fear him.”

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XVII

The doors of the Counsellors' Chamber were locked, the windows, as always, hermetically sealed. Ventilation was only possible through the ceiling in a fashion which science called "air conditioning." Not a sound was heard from the street below. Ingress or egress to the apartment, except at the will of the man who sat at the end of the table with a bunch of keys before him, was an impossibility. There were twenty-two men present, including the Prince de Chambordine and Alexander, who presided. It was a secretly-called meeting of the directors who were responsible for the existence of European House, and the most important meeting that had ever been held. The men who sat around in conference were of various nationalities. The majority were Russians of high rank who had preserved in their exile a passionate devotion to the land from which they were outcasts. There was a famous American known everywhere as a great international statesman even in these latter days of his life. There were the two Pretenders to the throne of France, also an Austrian and a German, both men of Royal birth who had withdrawn from the world as disaster came to their countries. There were three Englishmen, one of whom—Professor Leonard, a scholar and political economist of great distinction—had been made welcome in Russia until the arrival of the present dynasty. It was he who, breaking a somewhat prolonged silence, had just made the astonishing suggestion which had fallen like a bombshell amongst his auditors.

"There are probably," he said, looking round with a quiet smile

which was seldom absent from his lips but which was at no time an indication of any form of mirth, “two people outside Moscow who know the truth about this astounding invitation which Alexander has just laid before us. One is Nicolas Grodin. I have known Grodin for thirty years and it is my opinion that there does not exist a man present who could know at any time whether he was telling the truth or not. Personally I have found him, whenever we have come into contact, a shrewd and brilliant diplomat, also when it suited him, an egregious, a convincing and a wicked liar. I have also known times when with seeming risk to himself he has told the bare and unvarnished truth. The other is a man who I believe at the present moment is a semi-prisoner under this roof—Marc Zaritsch. To appeal to Grodin would be a ridiculous waste of breath. It is otherwise with Zaritsch.”

“Zaritsch,” the Prince de Chambordine observed from the lower end of the table, “has been absent from his own country for many months. How do you consider it is possible for him, Professor, to know the truth about so vital a matter?”

“Because, Prince,” he answered, “I am quite sure that this offer to Alexander is not the inspiration of a moment. It has been in the Dictator’s mind for a long time. It is its fruition only which has just arrived.”

“That,” Alexander admitted, “is a possibility.”

“In my opinion,” the Professor continued, “Marc Zaritsch is a man who has played for high stakes and lost. His secret mission to Mexico has cost him a fortune in money and also his safety in his own country. You, Alexander, are a man who seldom speaks

his whole mind, yet I have sometimes fancied that it is not only to keep Zaritsch away from his friends but to preserve him from those who were his friends and who are now his enemies that you have given him safe quarters within the walls of this establishment."

Alexander shrugged his shoulders. Those who knew him best were of the opinion that the gesture was an admission.

"I suggest," the Professor concluded, "that we put the question to Zaritsch: Does he believe this to be a genuine invitation or not?"

"It is an idea," Alexander reflected.

The Professor subsided into his habitual silence. Alexander, who sat at the head of the table, followed his usual custom when there was a subject for discussion. He asked each member of the Council in turn his opinion. The Prince had precedence.

"I look upon the question as dangerous and unnecessary," he announced without hesitation. "Zaritsch's answer would certainly be that he believed in the genuineness of the invitation. The man has a world-wide reputation which he has amply verified in his writing—a reputation for deceit and dishonesty when the exercise of such qualities is for the good of his country. Notwithstanding the generosity of our leader towards him he would be proud forever if he had been the one to cost us the great hope of our existence."

Alexander passed on without comment to the Prince's neighbour. More than half of the audience agreed wholeheartedly with the Professor. The American was in favour

of the question but only as a matter of curiosity. Two others thought it not worth while asking, because honest words had never yet passed Zaritsch's lips. A small minority were against any communication with Zaritsch. The time came for Alexander to give his decision.

"As you know, my friends," he reminded them, "however democratic my ideas may be in matters of State, in matters of this sort I am an autocrat. I have listened with respect and attention to all that you have had to say. I promise you that I shall not consider myself bound by the result, but I shall take an opportunity of asking Zaritsch his views sometime to-day."

De Chambordine flashed a glance of anger at the Professor.

"I shall pin my every hope to your common sense, then, Alexander," he said. "If that fails you will go to your doom."

Baron Gurdenoff, who had been Russian Ambassador to the Court of St. James's at the time of the revolution, rose to his feet and stood patiently waiting. They were well disciplined, this handful of men. To address the company it was necessary to stand silent until they were invited by the president to speak. Alexander hesitated only for a moment, then he made an affirmative gesture with his hand.

"I am in agreement to a certain extent with my friend Professor Leonard," Gurdenoff began. "I believe Zaritsch, if he chose, could tell us whether that appeals from my country to our president was a genuine one or not, but I beg that Alexander, and you who are his Counsellors, will remember also that the truth

is not in that man. He is a man of culture and abundant literary gift but he is also an opportunist of the rankest type. There is a price on Alexander's head and Zaritsch would gladly earn it."

He resumed his seat. One by one, with three or four exceptions, the others took his place, only to re-echo his convictions. In the end Alexander summed the matter up.

"My decision must be two-fold," he announced. "I have to decide first of all whether to follow the Professor's suggestion and interview Zaritsch. Secondly I have to decide whether, having done so, I should follow his counsel. As to the first, my mind, as I have told you, is already made up. I shall seek Zaritsch, I shall listen to what he has to say, but, my friends, do not be prematurely alarmed. I shall not pledge myself to believe him. If he says 'go,' I may go, but it will not be only because he has advised it. If he shakes his head at the proposition, I may discard it, but it will not be solely because he is against it. I seek truth in this business and I shall hope to find it not from the lips or counsel of any man but from inspiration."

De Chambordine rose to his feet and stood patiently for several moments. Then Alexander nodded.

"In a single sentence I would remind you, sir," the former pointed out, "that brave men have been carried to their doom with that idea."

He resumed his seat. Damasdri followed him, next in the line of the Royal succession, agile in body, supple in mind but with the worn face of the man who has sought life too furiously and

discarded his conceptions of it too often.

“I would ask a question, sir. Now and then we have had indirect communication with Molonieff. Has any word been received from him in confirmation of this message?”

“At present, none,” Alexander acknowledged. “Intercommunication has ceased. We wait hopefully for its re-establishment.”

“I suggest,” Damasdri concluded, “that without word from Molonieff the message be disregarded.”

Alexander made no reply. He himself rose to his feet. It was the signal that the meeting was over. The doors to a large reception room behind his chair were slowly rolled back. The little company of men trooped in. It was at such moments that the strange gift which Alexander possessed of withdrawing from any sort of kinship with his friends and supporters showed itself so distinctly. He stood almost like a statue as they passed him one by one or in small groups—a person completely apart, removed from the ordinary intimacies of friendship or even acquaintanceship. De Chambordine would have followed the others, but Alexander detained him for a moment with a touch upon his arm.

“I shall seek Zaritsch at once,” he confided. “Afterwards we will perhaps walk across to Buckingham Court.”

XVIII

Marc Zaritsch, surrounded with books of reference in many languages, journals and reviews of comparatively recent date, was seated before a writing-table in a small, simply furnished sitting-room when Alexander entered. Perhaps the atmosphere of the place, where the latter reigned supreme, perhaps the consciousness of the danger which awaited him outside, had in some way inspired a change of attitude. He pushed back his chair and rose to his feet when Alexander appeared. No evidence of respect, however, was manifest in his tone as he addressed him.

"I am honoured indeed," he said. "Is it my death sentence that has arrived? Am I to be thrown to the wolves?"

Alexander subsided into the one easy chair which the room afforded, lit a cigarette and gazed thoughtfully at the man whom he had come to visit. Externally he was by no means an inspiring sight. His small face was puckered up with lines and almost hidden behind his huge spectacles. His hair was unkempt and overlong. His voice, however, notwithstanding a certain petulance, was not unpleasant.

"No doubt that will be your end, Zaritsch," he admitted, "but for the present we are making use of you. Your last article was good. A few sentences removed and it will appear in the next issue of the *Review*."

"I am honoured indeed," Zaritsch observed again sarcastically.

“At your customary rate of payment, I trust?”

“We keep you alive and in safety,” Alexander pointed out. “Surely that should count for something.”

“Even in prison criminals earn their pocket money.”

“I thought that you great *littérateurs* who write for the benefit of society,” Alexander remarked, “scorned payment. Nevertheless, if you apply to Professor Leonard you will find yourself a richer man by a hundred guineas or so, as soon as the next issue of the *Review* goes into circulation.”

“It is not much,” Zaritsch grumbled.

“Your friend Grodin has increased his staff in this country,” Alexander said with apparent irrelevance.

Zaritsch shivered palpably. For a moment his voice lost its covert note of insolence.

“I was on the roof the other day,” he confided. “The same two are on watch. There is another one, the man who used to be in Berlin—Harkoff is his name. I recognised him through my field glasses. He was there apart from the others. He stopped as though to ask them for a light.”

“Grodin wants you very badly indeed, I think,” Alexander observed.

“Did you come here to tell me that?” Zaritsch demanded.

“By no means. I came here seeking your advice.”

“You will be very foolish if you take it,” was the cynical retort.

“I please myself as to that. You may be interested to hear that I have received a courteous invitation from the other side of the frontier to take up a position with my friend Molonieff, a position of some importance in the Russian army. What do you think of that?”

Zaritsch’s unpleasant lips parted in what seemed to be a smile of pure sarcasm. The smile, however, broadened. He laughed quietly in genuine though evil mirth.

“The invitation has come through Grodin?” he asked at last, taking off his glasses and wiping his eyes.

“Through His Excellency Nicolas Grodin,” Alexander assented.

Zaritsch recommenced to laugh. Suddenly he stopped and looked up at his visitor suspiciously.

“Why are you here to tell me that?” he demanded. “What has it to do with me? I am not responsible. As you know, I am a prisoner in this building.”

“A prisoner entirely in your own interests, Zaritsch.”

“Quite true,” the man agreed hastily. “If I were an ordinary person with ordinary sentiments I suppose I should be grateful. Grodin would have had me long ago drugged and across the frontier but for your protection. I am not denying that. You think that I am nervous, cowering here all the time. It is not that. I am not even such a coward as you think me. The only thing that I fear is that I may be done away with before I have

had a chance to kill Grodin."

"A trifle bitter," Alexander observed.

There was a curious glitter in Zaritsch's eyes, freed for a moment from the shelter of his spectacles.

"Yes," he admitted, "I am bitter. Grodin and I have been associates for several years. We have never disputed, because our interests have been identical. He knew that my lecture tour in the States was bogus and a fake. He knew that I never visited half the places I was supposed to. He knew that I made that journey to Mexico which was the real purpose of my visit to the States. He knew that the journey was a failure and he knew the reason. There was no object in deceiving him. Then, for the first time, our interests might be said to have clashed. Grodin, Nicolas Grodin, never hesitated. He sent a secret report of my actual doings to Moscow. Then came the letter of recall by that jackal of his whom he took to America. I knew what that meant. I knew very well indeed."

"You are getting somewhat long-winded, Zaritsch," his listener complained. "We both know that your letter of recall meant the firing squad. With the most supreme assurance you appealed to the *European Review* for protection. Here you are writing your articles in luxury, safely housed, waiting for the break-up eastwards. Now tell me, Zaritsch. You have a subtle mind and not only that—you have a clear comprehension of the brain of the man who is ruling Russia to-day. Is this a genuine appeal to me or does it mean the firing squad?"

The answer came unhesitating, tense and brutal in its directness.

“The firing squad. Death for you and a chance to get rid of Molonieff. If you are mad enough to go, leave word with such sane men as there may be in your organisation that I have warned you against it. Do not let me be liable for even a reflected shadow of the blame.”

Alexander glanced at his companion and there was a gleam in his eyes of something almost like admiration.

“What sublime egoism!” he muttered.

“Well, that is life,” Zaritsch snapped out. “I do not care whether you live or die but I do not want to be thrown out on the streets from here because your people think I advised you to go. I advise you to stay where you are.”

“I will make a point of mentioning the fact,” Alexander assured him as he rose to his feet.

De Chambordine and Alexander strolled arm in arm from the offices of the *European Review* to the block of flats in which the latter owned an apartment. Outside the closed door of the small lounge leading into the salon they found Paul standing as though on guard. He was plainly disturbed and as they approached him he indicated with a little gesture of despair that trouble of some sort was awaiting them. His master was momentarily puzzled. Paul never took liberties, never made mistakes. It was impossible to divine what could have happened.

“There is a lady who awaits Monsieur,” he announced gravely.

Alexander raised his eyebrows.

“A lady? You have admitted her to my room, Paul?” he asked, and although his tone was mild there was something in the words which hurt.

“It is the diva,” the man explained helplessly.

Alexander frowned, but he understood. Olga Sherbatoff was to Paul the enshrined goddess of his lifetime. He had heard her sing at a time when the world was at her feet, and although Alexander had been his god, music had been the joy of his existence.

“I could not deny her,” Paul muttered.

Alexander dismissed the whole matter with a nod.

“It was difficult for you, Paul,” he acknowledged kindly. “I understand. It is Madame Grodin,” he added, turning to the Prince. “Needless to say, I did not expect her. Will you listen to what she has to say?”

The Prince picked up his hat in haste.

“I will not,” he declared, “no, no, no. It is heresy perhaps to say so, Alexander, but I am not sure that I trust the wife of such a man as Grodin. Even in Paris, where the old craze for everything Russian shows signs of springing up again, Grodin is not a welcome visitor. Still, this visit must be dealt with. It is your affair.”

He took back his stick and gloves from the servant and laid his hand impressively upon Alexander’s shoulder.

“Weigh every word that woman says,” he begged. “Remember what your loss would mean to us, full now of newly awakened hopes. We know your courage but if your judgment fails courage will not save you.”

“I will not be rash,” Alexander promised. . . .

He found Olga installed upon his divan, a little table drawn up to her side on which reposed a cup of highly scented tea. A haze of cigarette smoke hung about the room. She held out her hands to him, a familiar gesture, and withdrew them reluctantly after he had touched them with his lips.

“You are not to be angry with Paul,” she told him. “We are old friends, you know. I wished to enter and he was powerless.”

“But why, Madame?” he asked. “My time is not up. I am to let you have my decision on Saturday.”

She waved her hand. It was a trifle, the enterprise to which he referred, the enterprise which was to cost him his life or bring him eternal fame! Her careless gesture dismissed it as of no importance.

“I have left Nicolas Grodin,” she announced. “I have lived with him for three years. It is enough. I need purification. I come here to you.”

“But you were at that dinner with him the other night.”

“It was afterwards that he came to my room,” she confided. “We had a dispute and I turned him out. I have lived with him for three years, legally his wife, actually never anything but his

mistress. He has no other ideas about women—even women who have reached the high places, as I have."

"But why have you come here?"

"I was disturbed and upset after the dinner party," she told him. "What were you doing there alone with that young woman?"

"Madame!" he remonstrated.

"Oh, I know that she was well enough. She is Russian, she is of noble family, she is well enough for anyone but you—"

"For anyone save me?" he interrupted. "Explain yourself."

"The words are simple ones, the reason you can divine. I want you for myself."

His reply was already upon his lips, then a rare thing happened to him. He hesitated. He left his place and seated himself on the divan by her side.

"You want me for yourself," he repeated. "Yet a short time ago you came to me as your husband's ambassadress. You came to me with a very tempting offer. But, Olga Sherbatoff, tell me this. Is it not true that that offer would have committed me to an enterprise which would have sent me to my death?"

"You cannot take that for granted," she cried passionately. "If you accept the offer which the Russian government has made you will become the saviour of your country."

“Do you believe that?” he asked steadily.

She had been lying curled up on the divan with all the graceful abandon of a cat. She suddenly swung herself into a sitting position and leaned towards him. Her hands rested one upon each shoulder. She drew his face close to hers.

“What do you think it means,” she demanded, “when I tell you that I have left Grodin? I come here to tell you that before anyone else in the world. Do you believe that now I am free I should send you to your death?”

He patted her cheek with a light caressing touch and looked unflinchingly into her eyes, beautiful but almost painfully wicked.

“Why should I trust you, Olga?” he asked smilingly. “You have green eyes. No woman with green eyes should be trusted. You are as beautiful as Circe herself. No man could resist you for long.”

“Then why try?” she answered. “If you go to Russia you are not to start for some days. I am here. I have told you that I am free. Have you so little confidence in your power to hold, Alexander —you who have been the despair of so many women— that you think, when the time came, I should send you to your death?”

He sighed gently without lament, an almost airy gesture.

“Dear Olga,” he bewailed, “women lend themselves to every law of the world except reason. There have been women in history, you know, who have sent their lovers to the lions for the

joy of seeing them torn to pieces. I always feel that those women, Poppæa for instance, must have had green eyes."

She drew a little away from him.

"Alexander," she said, "why are you talking to me like this? Are you making a jest of this moment—of my visit?"

"How could I take you seriously, dear friend, until I know? Wait until I have travelled safely into Russia, wait until I have galvanised that great army into life, built up anew in them the love of their country, shown them the path of honour and where glory lies. Wait until we meet again in Moscow. Then I will talk to you differently."

He felt her hands slip away from his shoulders. What, a moment or two before, had seemed like the clutch of a wild fit of passion, died away. He saw something in her eyes for a second which the bravest man in the world has never seen without a thrill of fear. He saw the passionate hunger for possession turn into the light of hate. Her little laugh was unrecognisable.

"Do you remember the night I sang 'Iseult'?" she asked, with the air of a woman flinging herself back into another life. "We will drink together once before I go—vodka—yes? You and I are Russians—men and women who know how to love and how to hate, and also how to drink."

He rang the bell. In a way, his victory seemed scarcely worth while, a victory of words over a woman. He ordered the vodka, ice and the tall glasses. They drank until her empty glass slipped from her fingers. Then, with almost studied deliberation, she pressed her lips to his. She drew away breathless and crossed

the room so swiftly that he was only just in time to open the door.

“In the night,” she warned him with a little gesture, a curious expression which remained utterly unanalysable, “you may wake and dream that I held an asp between my lips.”

XIX

At half past nine on the following day, a brief colloquy took place between Alexander and his faithful servant. The latter, who was engaged in pressing some clothes in a small room of the flat devoted to that purpose, looked around from his task to find his master standing by his side.

“Paul,” he said, “you are looking pale this morning. You have the air of one to whom a few hours’ holiday would be welcome.”

The man left his task and donned his coat which was hanging up behind the door.

“Good luck to you, Paul,” Alexander continued quietly. “Whatever I am doing during the day, I shall be back here at seven o’clock.”

“It is understood.”

In half an hour’s time, dressed in a quiet patterned suit of grey tweed, wearing a bowler hat and carrying an umbrella, Paul issued from the back premises of the block of flats and made his way City-wards. His idea of a brief vacation seemed to be of a peculiar order. He first of all filled a well-worn pipe with particularly strong tobacco and then set out to walk steadily. He walked with occasional pauses until he reached London Bridge. Here he spent a quarter of an hour watching with apparent interest the progress of the shipping, betraying also at

times a slight interest in the passers-by. Presently he boarded an omnibus and with restless eyes took careful note of the various passengers. At London Bridge Station he alighted, made his way down the steps and strolled along Tooley Street. At the third arch he paused and had his shoes polished by one of the boys stationed there. Again he took some slight interest in the passers-by. When he stepped back into the main thoroughfare, he walked with a little more decision. Finally, he turned down Market Street and plunged into a small open space. He lifted the latch of a warehouse on which was painted the name:

STEFAN DVORAK—Dealer in Foreign Goat Skins

Paul opened the warehouse door and entered. A man wearing heavy glasses, a long smock and with the air of a foreigner, stepped down from an open desk and came to meet him. The two shook hands. They conversed for a few minutes, after the fashion of business-associates, then Paul grunted in assent to his companion's proposition, refilled his pipe and sat upon an unopened bale of leather.

"I will examine these skins," he said, "but I must tell you that the last lot had many defects."

"There are a hundred thousand of these pelts and they are flawless," the agent declared. "Wait, my friend, while I fetch a knife."

The business of fetching a knife seemed a little complicated. Stefan Dvorak visited every corner of the warehouse, looked into the counting house, which was empty, opened

the door leading into the street and apparently satisfied himself that there were no loiterers. Then he scribbled on a small card "Back at twelve o'clock," pinned it on the outside door, closed and locked it on the inside and returned to where Paul sat waiting. The latter seemed to find nothing unusual in the agent's proceedings. He sat smoking his pipe in stolid silence.

"All is well," Stefan Dvorak reported, producing a knife. "We can proceed, I think."

Paul rose to his feet, watched the cutting of the ropes and the slow removal of the skins. Under their breaths the two men counted. At eleven they paused. Dvorak lifted the twelfth skin with care. He turned it round so that the place where the goat's head had been was visible. They stooped over it. With his knife Dvorak cut away a few invisible stitches, thrust his hand into a narrow space and drew out a neatly tied little packet wrapped in a strip of yellow oilskin. There was a guttural murmur as Paul took it into his hand. He crammed it into his pocket and stood back. The agent continued his task and they counted again. When they had gone as far as eleven, Dvorak paused once more. He raised the twelfth skin with meticulous care. In the same place he made a slight incision with his knife. Again he drew out a little packet also enclosed in a sheet of yellow oilskin. He pointed to the outside.

"It is marked with a cross," he said. "That means there is nothing else. Nevertheless, it is well, perhaps, to continue."

Paul nodded his assent. The second packet had joined the first in his pocket. They counted again to eleven, then examined the

twelfth skin without result. The agent brushed his hands together.

“It is finished,” he announced quietly. “Will you come into the counting house?”

He led the way there. Paul looked over his shoulder towards the door.

“It is locked,” Dvorak assured him. “No one can enter. The place is empty. Sit at the desk there. Here is pen and ink and paper. The stove outside is lit.”

Paul nodded, seating himself in the chair indicated. He opened the packets, drew out several thin but tough strips of paper covered with fine handwriting, and commenced decoding an irrelevant stream of Russian words, committing them to memory at the same time. It was an hour before he had finished. He had gone over every page from beginning to end twice, muttering to himself the result as he attained it. When he had finished he rose to his feet, looked out into the warehouse through the glass top of the door, turned the key, made his way towards the stove, tore in pieces the papers he was carrying and thrust them into the embers. When nothing was left but ashes he closed the stove, stretched himself as though with relief and went back to where the agent was completing his task of tying up the bale.

“All is well?” Dvorak demanded.

“All is well. And the two skins?”

“We will deal with them,” was the prompt reply.

The bale was rolled back into its original position. The two

skins which had been used as depositories for the messages Dvorak spread out upon the counter and carefully cut out the spots which had served as hiding-places. He went over to the stove and dropped the fragments inside. The two skins he threw behind a pile of others in a distant corner of the warehouse. Then he stood up, and on the faces of both men was an expression of relief.

“Is there news?” the agent enquired.

“There is news,” Paul admitted. “You are best to remain ignorant of it, my friend.”

“Things go well?” Stefan Dvorak asked anxiously.

“They go as we might wish,” Paul replied. “The news which I have just read will help the master to come to a great decision.”

The agent grunted.

“*Ach*, then we take a bottle of beer together, Paul.”

“It will be good for the throat,” the other responded.

The warehouse was locked up, a fresh card was pinned upon the door. The two men turned into Market Street and made their way to a public house. They sat in the saloon bar and they solemnly toasted one another in a mixture of Guinness’ stout and a local beer which was the favourite drink of the quarter. Then without anything further in the way of conversation, they passed outside and shook hands in farewell.

“God be with you,” Stefan Dvorak said earnestly.

“May your household be blessed,” Paul replied as he wrung his hand.

Paul retraced his steps as far as London Bridge Station. Here he entered the dining-room, ordered a huge steak and another tankard of mixed beer and stout. He exchanged amenities with the barmaid, selected his own steak from the grill, slipped sixpence into the hand of the white-hatted chef and established himself in a corner with a very black cigar of nauseous odour. After all, it was his day’s holiday.

Alexander, a little weary that afternoon after a medley of semi-official calls, a visit from the representative of the department of the *European Review* which had its private wire to Warsaw, a brief but harassing conversation with a very important though timid agent who hated the idea of taking any responsibility whatever, returned to his rooms at Buckingham Court to find Paul changed once more into the sober clothes of the perfect manservant, none the worse for his day’s vacation. Alexander’s eyes flashed a question and the response was swift and illuminating.

“There were two messages,” Paul announced. “Both of them I decoded and have clearly in my memory.”

“You have not put pen to paper?” Alexander asked quickly. “You have trusted wholly to memory?”

Paul was a little hurt.

“When have I been known to disobey the orders of my master? Not a sentence, not a word has been even spoken out loud.

Silently I decoded, keeping the words in my brain. In solitude and without utterance I committed them to my memory. Afterwards I opened the stove in Dvorak's warehouse. I saw all that had reached me disappear into ashes. Later on, the portion of the skins into which the letters were sewn was also burnt and the skins thrown with a pile of others."

Alexander smiled disarmingly.

"Forgive me, Paul," he begged simply. "This afternoon has been a weary time. Everyone in authority is restless and nervous. There is an idea that all is not well in Moscow. It disturbs one's ideas about this mission of Grodin's. You understand, I am sure."

"I never seek to understand," the man replied. "Yours is the brain, I am the machine. I do what I am told. Here is the position as outlined by the nameless one and forwarded to you."

Alexander turned the keys of the two doors, then he returned and listened.

"There is a rumour that Molonieff was arrested at midnight a fortnight ago by a strong company of the Dictator's private bodyguard and conveyed with the utmost secrecy to the Noblensky Fortress. No word of the arrest has been breathed in Moscow. There has been no announcement of any trial. There has been no news or message from the fortress into which, fifteen days ago, Molonieff is supposed to have been taken. The idea in our correspondent's head is that the Dictator's courage failed him and that Molonieff is still alive. The second message," Paul continued, "was from him whom we

do not mention. He reports that a deep unrest is spreading amongst the staff officers and the intelligentsia of the Red Army. Ten arrests have been made and many officers in high positions have been ordered to send in their resignations. The book-store secretly carried on in a cellar for the last year has been raided, twenty-five copies of the *European Review* were seized and destroyed. The owner of the store and every one of his assistants, seven in number, have been executed. The review of last year's recruits ordered by the Dictator has been pronounced impossible as the men are undisciplined and disaffected. A full Colonel, a man of great distinction who signed this protest, has been arrested and deprived of his post. A pamphlet boldly accusing the government of having themselves taken the place of the capitalists has been widely distributed within the last few weeks and has created an enormous sensation. Every man found with a copy of the pamphlet is sentenced to be shot at sight. Every café is filled with spies and, in the case of any political discussion arising, is closed at once. The streets of the city are filled with uneasy crowds who, if they could find a leader, are known to be in a dangerous mood. The Press censorship is redoubling its severity. Those were the last words of the messages."

"Great news to cross Europe in a bale of goat skins," Alexander observed.

Paul tapped his forehead.

"An addendum, if you please, Monsieur," he said. "This bale of skins was represented as being a sample of one hundred thousand now being collected in Georgia and the Ukraine. The local branches of the Russian government in those districts are

urgently in need of cash. The skins were represented as being saleable at once to rich English merchants, and they were collected and crossed Europe from our agents in less than twelve days. That enables one, Monsieur, to fix the date when the conditions described existed."

Alexander unlocked the doors.

"Prepare my bath, Paul," he directed. "I must consult once more with the Prince."

Paul hesitated for a moment with his hand upon the bathroom door.

"You excuse, Monsieur," he begged, "if I venture upon a word?"

"You know everything there is to be known, my friend," Alexander replied. "Speak freely."

"The messages, Monsieur, show us without a doubt that the hour of crisis for the present government approaches. What it dreads, what the great man himself dreads, is not an uprising of the people to smash the present organisation and distribute its assets, but the saner re-establishment of more moderate principles of government. That being so, is it likely that Grodin's proposal to you is a genuine one? I say myself that save for personal reasons the Dictator would welcome the return of any of the exiles before he would summon you to command his army. I believe, Monsieur, that you and those who are with you—but you especially—are the new force which is dreaded by the present government. I have fought in the Red Army. I am a deserter from it at this moment. I know what I think of those millions. Your touch upon the levers of their mentality

—and their enthusiasm might blaze up. They want nothing to do with anarchy. They want peace."

"You do not believe in Grodin's mission, then, Paul?"

"I do not, Monsieur. I am your humble servant and I beg you to listen to my conviction. I have mixed with the peasants of Russia as one of themselves and later as a spy. I am of peasant birth myself, but so is the Dictator. I can read his mind. I can realise his cunning. Evil events are crowding in upon him. It is you, as a representative of the old order and the new civilisation, whom he dreads."

"I have always found your counsel good, Paul," his master said thoughtfully, "yet here it seems to me that you might very well be misled. What I confess I do not understand is why, when every hour is bringing them nearer their moment of crisis, if your view of the situation is really correct Grodin does not throw international complications to the devil and come to me personally."

Paul had suddenly the appearance of a man who has received a blow. He hung his head.

"Monsieur," he murmured, "I admit my fault. Nothing but the burning conviction that is in my mind has kept me from my duty. Now I must tell you that Serge Orloff, the secretary and companion of Grodin, was here an hour ago. He knows that you repose some confidence in me. He was wishful not to make another visit. He asked for an interview, on behalf of his master, to-night."

"Grodin, Grodin himself!" Alexander repeated. "You kept this

from me, Paul?”

“Master, I am ashamed,” the man confessed, “but as God knows, it was to save your life.”

Alexander was silent for several moments. There was no anger in his tone when he spoke.

“Nothing can wholly excuse a breach of duty, Paul,” he said. “Never again forget that I am the master and am the guardian of my own destiny. Is that understood?”

“I will not offend again.”

“Did this man Orloff say in what way he wished me to communicate with him?”

“He wishes you to do so openly, Monsieur. Telephone to the Embassy and name your own hour to-night. Nicolas Grodin has, Orloff confided to me, a friendship for a dancer in the ballet—Mademoiselle Dubinski—who has a flat close-by. His presence in this part of the building, therefore, will pass unnoticed. She is not dancing to-night.”

“Make the engagement for eight, nine or ten o’clock,” Alexander directed. “And now quick,” he went on with a sudden change of tone. “A bath immediately. This is a time when things may happen.”

XX

At eight o'clock precisely Nicolas Grodin presented himself at Alexander's apartment. Paul answered his knock at the outside door and ushered him in. Alexander, who was standing at the opposite end of the room, contented himself with a nod and a motion of his head towards a chair.

"Good evening, Nicolas Grodin," he said, ignoring the latter's tentatively extended hand. "Will you sit down there? You are on your way to dine, I understand. Paul will offer you a cocktail in a moment."

Grodin accepted the chair and crossed his legs, leaning back with an assumption of being more at his ease than he felt. He presented himself entirely at his worst. His soft silk shirt already resembled a sponge and he seemed to have ignored the fact that diamond studs were scarcely a fit appendage to such a garment. His dinner coat was cut so long as to be almost grotesque. His collar lay flat upon his short thick neck and in its entourage the man's head, with his scowling mouth, his small inset eyes and rather protuberant ears, resembled the head of a frog. None of these drawbacks, however, interfered with a certain impression of strength which the man seemed to give out instinctively.

"I will drink a cocktail with you, Alexander," he said coolly, "although you do not offer me your hand. Perhaps you are right. A man who tries to steal another man's wife does best to refrain from pretension of friendship."

“My attempt having been unsuccessful,” Alexander observed, “it can, I think, be ignored. Your wife is nothing to me, Grodin. You are. You have brains, brains enough I should imagine to convince you that the truth is worth half a dozen falsehoods in your profession. Is this offer you bring me from your master an honest one or is it an attempt to land me before your execution squad?”

“It would give me immense pleasure to see you before that execution squad,” Grodin declared with enthusiasm. “Those who have sent me, however, think otherwise.”

“Who is responsible for your coming?”

“Not the great man himself,” was the surly reply. “He gave a reluctant, unwilling consent. It is Molonieff who will have you. There is trouble brewing over Russia. You are the man they think might avert the storm—you and Molonieff together.”

“But I have heard a rumour,” Alexander pointed out, “something more than a rumour, in fact, that Molonieff himself is in trouble.”

The conversation was momentarily interrupted by the entrance of Paul with cocktails and various *zakuski* upon a silver salver. Grodin fell upon the latter greedily. The cocktail he only sipped. He waited until Paul had left the room.

“You may disregard that rumour,” he said as soon as the door was closed. “If Molonieff is in a fortress it is at his own request and for his own protection. You yourself have been responsible for some of the mischief that is brewing,” he went on, “with your blasted *European Review* and your pamphlets. It is not the

workers in the mines, factories and timber forests you have succeeded in upsetting. The men who were serfs we have made into machines. They never lift their heads. They are safe. It is in the army where your poison has begun to tell."

"Capital!" Alexander exclaimed cheerfully. "The workers upon the land will join in, too, though. Nothing like fresh air for giving a nation a taste for liberty."

"No student talk, if you please," Grodin scoffed. "Our Dictator is no fool. Neither am I, nor is Molonieff. Neither are you, although you are a sentimentalist. You and I are both clever men and that is why we can talk together. Perhaps Communism does not work out in practice exactly as we had hoped. Too much variation in human nature. We are finding it out slowly. You and your kind are barking outside the gates all the time. Come in and see what you can do about it. That is the invitation I have brought to you in plain words."

"What about Molonieff?"

"He gives up his baton," Grodin announced. "You are to take his place, or work side by side with him. In any case, you are to be the lord paramount of all the armies. The execution squads, in future, will operate only when you give the word. You are to be the Czar of all the Russias in effect back again in your sheep's clothing. The army will trust you. You are to work hand in hand with the industrialists. Profit-sharing schemes are to take the place of the government appropriations. There are a few hundred millions in the secret exchequers which, when we have had our dig into them, can go back to the workers."

“This all sounds marvellously attractive,” Alexander reflected. “Have you any securities to offer? I should suggest,” he went on with a smile, “that you offer yourself as one of my sureties. Say you establish yourself for the next three months in my château south of Moscow, surrounded by my people. There are enough of them left to know how to treat you if anything goes wrong with me. What about that, Grodin?”

Nicolas Grodin grinned, disclosing an irregular row of teeth which had rather the appearance of fangs.

“No thank you, Alexander,” he said. “I shall be needed over here for some time yet before I say good-by to Russia and buy a province of my own.”

“Why did you send your wife to see me first and then come yourself?” Alexander asked casually as he lit a cigarette.

“For two reasons,” was the prompt reply. “One is that things have grown more desperate during the last few days and international proprieties need no longer be so closely observed. The next is,” he added with another of his unpleasant grins, “I thought that Olga might prove more persuasive.”

“Which shows how short-sighted you are,” Alexander told him. “I find your arguments much more to the point. Your wife is one of the most beautiful women in the world and one of the most seductive, but when I consider such an offer as this, only my brain and my perceptions—my instinct of self-preservation, shall we say?—come into the matter.”

“Well, you have the proposal,” Grodin said with all the blunt

directness of an honest man. “Make up your mind about it. We are all sick of words. You can take two aides-de-camp, English, American or Russian, whoever you choose, if after further consideration you think it necessary. You can fly to Berlin in your own plane, if you prefer it, and on from there to Moscow, where Molonieff will meet you. Your passport and safe conduct have been signed by the great man himself. I will not guarantee your life. I should think you are very likely to lose it in the long run. There is a lot of talk in your pamphlets of giving your life for your country. Here is your chance. Go and do it.”

Grodin stretched out his hand, grabbed at the dish of delicatessen and swept a couple of caviar sandwiches into his mouth. He ate them greedily and poured himself out another cocktail from the frosted shaker which stood in front of him. Alexander watched him amiably.

“You have made a good impression on me, Grodin,” he acknowledged. “I despise you at the present moment less than I have ever done before. You could never be a human being but you are a more tolerable brute than I should have imagined possible.”

“I do not want your compliments,” his visitor sneered. “Are you man enough to take on this job, and if so, will you start on Sunday? Would you like to look through your passport and safe conduct? We have them both at the Embassy. If it had not been for the German safe conduct you wheedled out of von Hertzfeldt in Berlin, you would have been sitting in chains by now whilst we made up our minds what to do with you.”

“I do not like chains,” Alexander admitted. “I have seen the

inside of one or two of your fortresses and I do not like them either. You see, the trouble is, Grodin, that notwithstanding your professed passport, your safe conduct signed by the great one, your promise that Molonieff will meet me, your hint at a triumphal entry into Moscow, I have to take all these things on trust, and I ask you, Grodin, what man in his senses would trust a swine like you?"

Grodin glanced greedily at the empty plate before him. He finished his cocktail and lit a cigarette.

"There is no trust about it," he said blandly. "You have your spies in Russia and you know what is happening there. Your brain, if you have any, will tell you that our offer is honest enough because it is merely our last attempt to save the situation, to get time to scuttle out. I would not trust us an inch, if I were you. I never indulge my feelings, but I cannot think of a single man on the face of the earth whom I would rather see hobble across the prison courtyard in chains to face the execution squad. All the same, you will never be there if I can help it. You will be busy clearing up the mess we have made."

"More and more I am beginning to tolerate you," Alexander declared. "It was Tolstoy himself who said, I believe, that there is some spark of virtue left in the vilest body if it can still appreciate the beauty of truth. Go and eat and drink and frivol with your little Dubinski. In other words, you can send me that passport and my safe conduct."

"What about those aides-de-camp?"

Alexander shook his head.

“Nothing for them, I thank you,” he replied. “I have thought it over and I have given up the idea of taking anyone else with me into the shambles. If I go, I shall go alone.”

Grodin glanced at the clock. He struggled to his feet.

“You are right,” he said. “Dubinski is one who grows impatient. If you go alone it will give us less trouble. The documents shall be sent to you before midnight. Send word to the Embassy after eleven o’clock when you have fixed upon the time of your departure. News must be sent to Moscow. You must be fittingly received.”

“See to it, then,” Alexander enjoined. “I offer you the farewell benediction of the Cossack warriors: ‘May you be shot before you are hanged’!”

Grodin took his leave, a lascivious smile upon his thick lips as he brooded upon the joys in store for him. Alexander summoned his faithful servant.

“Clear away all that stuff,” he directed, pointing to the table at which Grodin had sat. “Be careful to destroy the glass. Serve me with a cocktail in a fresh shaker. I must reflect for a few minutes.”

“Is it that we go to Russia, master?” Paul asked.

“It begins to appear like it,” Alexander assented. “I believe that probably for the first time in his life that man was speaking the truth.”

XXI

There was, without a doubt, a savour of comedy in the meeting of Anna Prestnoff and Olga Grodin next day. Unfortunately, there was no one present to appreciate it. They neither of them attempted any of the usual courtesies. Anna did not remove her hands from the little astrakhan muff she was carrying and Olga Grodin did not even trouble to rise from the divan upon which she was lying. She pointed to a chair.

"So you are the little scene painter whom Alexander took out to dinner the other night," she observed. "Sit with your face to the light, there, will you?" she added. "I should like to look at you."

"Fortunately," Anna replied cheerfully, "I can stand the light. It is better to avoid it when one reaches riper years."

Olga's eyes flashed.

"Youth has always the privilege of being impertinent," she remarked. "I consented to receive you because I was curious to see what you looked like in the daylight. I am more than satisfied. You can now tell me precisely why you asked for an interview with me."

"With much pleasure," was Anna's prompt acquiescence. "I bring you your death warrant. I hope you have lived a good life. It will be some satisfaction to you in your last hours."

Olga Grodin was momentarily bewildered.

“My death warrant? What rubbish are you talking?” she demanded.

“It is not rubbish at all,” Anna assured her simply. “I have all the papers in my possession. I am able to prove to your husband or anyone else you like that you have been in communication with a certain person from the time he left Russia until, say, the day before yesterday. You have supplied him with all the facts which have made him such a dangerous columnist and you are a member of his secret party established in Norway which plans to assassinate the present Dictator and bring him back to power.”

Olga, with a sudden leap, sprang to her feet.

“You are a lying drab!” she cried.

“Oh no, I am not,” Anna replied. “You are a member of the Circle, every one of which, known or anonymous, the Russian Courts have sentenced to death. Eleven of them have already been executed in the last two batches of prisoners brought up to stand their trial for undisclosed offences. There are not so many of you left, but you are one of them all right, and in plain English or American parlance, Olga Grodin, you are for it!”

“What do you mean by ‘for it’?”

“That you will discover for yourself before long,” was the quiet rejoinder. “I am not sure that plotting against the life of a ruler does not entitle him to demand your extradition, even though England and Russia have no more than a bowing acquaintance. But there is also this—there is a branch of the Russian Secret Police, no longer the Ogpu but Commissioners

of National Safety, established in London. They can take care of you quite well. You will just disappear and that will be the ugly end of you, Olga Grodin."

The woman shivered.

"Supposing this were true," she asked a little wildly, "why are you my enemy? Is it because of the man Alexander? You can have him. In these days he means nothing to me."

"Do not be too impetuous. I can tell you more about yourself which is interesting. You called yourself Frieda Wurtz during the war and in those days you were a German spy. You did some serious work then. One hundred thousand francs, I believe, was offered by the French government for Frieda Wurtz, and they were never claimed. They might be claimed now, if you escaped from your other troubles."

Olga was livid.

"You little hell cat!" she cried. "Where did you find this sackful of stale rubbish? I was only eighteen years old when the Treaty of Versailles was signed."

"But at sixteen," Anna reminded her with a pleasant smile, "you were doing excellent work for the Germans. The year afterwards, it is true, their bureau broke down. There was no more money, but your name was still on their list and you had done—oh, some quite excellent work. The French would be very pleased indeed, even after all these years, to hear of Frieda Wurtz. No more Chanel dresses then, you know. No more suites at the Ritz or Meurice's. A few feet of ground under the bricks of one of their fortresses. You would be very

welcome there, Olga Grodin. Nowhere else."

"You little devil!" the tortured woman exclaimed. "What is it you want—money?"

"No. I have money."

"Alexander? You can have him."

"Not as a gift from you," was the scornful reply.

"Then what is it you want?"

"Your famous husband's mission to London," Anna said calmly, "has been excellently camouflaged, but it has one object and one object only. That is to get Alexander back again into Russia. Any excuse, any pretext, any patchwork of lies or misrepresentations or appeals to his patriotism, any means whatsoever which can take him across that frontier, would make your husband stand first in the favour of the Dictator and would cancel all your own delinquencies. No wonder you have worked hard to bring this about."

"Listen," Olga Grodin cried, "I will be honest with you. We have tried to persuade Alexander to return to Russia. The Dictator has offered him the complete control of the army."

"And he will go?"

"He will go," was the eager assent. "Why should you wish to stop him? He will in due course be nominated Dictator. Even if Czardom is not re-established he will become the great man of Russia. He is a patriot—he will get what he

desires."

"He believes that?"

"He does, because it is the truth. All that has been promised to Alexander will be fulfilled. He will find the general staff ready to take the oath, he will wield more power than any man in Russia."

"Excellent," Anna said. "And now I will tell you why I have come, Olga Grodin. You had better pull yourself together for this is to be a matter of life or death. You have persuaded Alexander to go. It is necessary that I persuade him to stay, and I shall persuade him. Listen, my friend—look at me," she went on. "It is necessary that you hand over to me the secret instructions your husband has as to what really is to happen to Alexander after he has crossed the frontier."

Olga shrank back in her place. She was a stricken woman.

"Who are you, Anna Prestnoff?" she gasped.

"I am just a little scene painter for the ballet," Anna replied, a hard smile forming at the corners of her lips. "I am also, amongst other things, at the head of the Secret Service Intelligence Bureau established by a paper called the *European Review*, which carries on a great work, the details of which are unsuspected, some of them even by Alexander himself. We have a wonderful staff and we are well served, but what we do not know is the nature of these secret instructions. The very fact that you hold them is proof to us that your offer spells treachery."

“It is not so!”

“Alexander is determined to go—he is a truth-loving man and he is always hard to convince that others are trying to deceive him. That is why I must have those despatches.”

“I know nothing of them,” Olga protested violently. “I swear that I am speaking the truth. They do not exist. My husband would not deceive me in this manner. Alexander is to go straight to the barracks in Moscow and the army is his. It is a lie to say that there is treachery. Before the Holy Virgin I swear it. Something of religion has lingered in my blood ever since the days of the Convent. I swear before all the Saints that I know nothing of any secret instructions to bring harm upon Alexander.”

There was a brief silence. Anna’s eyes never left the anguished face of the woman whom she had come to visit. This was to be a difficult business, after all. Slowly and against her will she was convinced. This woman was telling the truth.

“Calm yourself, Olga Grodin,” she said. “Let us talk further together and let God judge between us if we fail to speak the truth. You have sworn that yours was an honest effort to induce Alexander to accept a genuine offer from the ruler of Russia to come to the help of his country. Do you believe me when I tell you that your husband deceived you?”

“I begin to feel that I must,” Olga replied unwillingly.

“You have convinced Alexander,” Anna continued. “He is making his plans to leave for Russia. Now what shall you do?”

Olga considered for several moments.

“I shall send for him,” she decided. “I shall tell him all that you have told me. I shall tell him that I believe you. I shall beg him to change his mind. I shall tell him what you tell me—that he will be going to his death if he crosses the frontier.”

“It is not enough,” Anna declared.

“What do you mean—it is not enough?” the other cried despairingly. “What more can I do? I will tell him that I was deceived. I will tell him I have since heard that it was an evil plot and that he must not go.”

“It is not enough,” Anna repeated.

“What more can I do?”

“You must possess yourself of the secret instructions your husband holds as to the disposition of Alexander the moment he arrives. You must give them to me or place them in Alexander’s hands yourself in my presence. Nothing less than that will convince him.”

Olga wrung her hands. She was in a state bordering upon hysteria.

“How can I possess myself of his secret papers?” she demanded. “We have just quarrelled. He believes that I am leaving him. He believes that I love Alexander and he would keep those documents away from me more than from anyone in the world. I do not know where they are. I am powerless.”

“No, you are not powerless,” Anna told her. “The man has still

a foolish passion for you. Then there is Serge Orloff, his secretary—he knows where those documents would be. Is it not true that years ago you were known as the Sorceress of Moscow?"

Olga shrugged her shoulders.

"It was folly, that," she declared. "Men have always been easy for me."

"Men have always been easy for you," Anna repeated. "Get to your task, then, Olga Grodin. I require those papers, or such of them as will convince Alexander, before forty-eight hours have passed."

"But it is impossible," Olga protested. "My husband will not give them to me. I cannot steal them because I do not know where they are."

"Within forty-eight hours," Anna insisted. "Otherwise you will find yourself, I fear, between two fires. The great man of Russia will know that you have been in communication with his mortal enemy since a fortnight after he settled in Norway and that you received from him a letter written with his own hand during last week. Furthermore, the French Secret Service will know that you are the woman who, as Frieda Wurtz, worked in their employ, deceiving them time after time and costing them the lives of many French officers."

"You are a devil!" Olga shrieked.

"I do not think so," Anna said quietly, rising to her feet. "I have a great affection for Alexander and if I fail to save him I shall

probably kill myself. I can only save him, it seems to me, through you. You know your task. If you fail and I fail—well, there may be another world for us to explore. I am inclined to doubt it but we shall very soon know.”

She laid a card upon the table.

“My studio number,” she concluded. “I go now. Think out your plans, please. Get to work quickly. Forty-eight hours is not an eternity, but after forty-eight hours eternity will seem a very long time.”

XXII

Nicolas Grodin, dining tête-à-tête with his wife that evening, had eaten too much. He had also drunk too much and the result was not a pleasant one. Olga, when the obsequious maître d'hôtel and his deft myrmidons had wheeled away the serving table and cleared the sideboard of its impedimenta, felt her courage waver at the task before her, and yet more terrible still was the thought of that cold-eyed, cold-tongued young woman who had spoken so calmly of death and many other ugly matters. She lit a cigarette and looked across at her husband pensively. It was on an occasion something like this that he had unlocked the coffer which he carried always with him and had given her at last the desire of her life—the emeralds stolen from the Crown Jewels. If anything, she knew that she had grown in attraction, even in his eyes, since those days. She had become the most desired woman in the secret circles of Russia. She had been, as a matter of fact, glad to escape for a while from the turbulent passions she had inspired in some of those men who had so little to offer. If she made no false step, she told herself, failure would be impossible. She turned to the maître d'hôtel.

"We will take our coffee a little nearer to the fire," she told him, "on the divan there. Draw up a small table, please. Monsieur will take his brandy there. Be sure that it is in a large glass, first frozen and then warmed gently. I myself shall drink Kummel."

"*Bien, Madame*," the man replied.

“Rather spoiling me, are you not?” Grodin observed uxoriously when the orders had been carried out and he had moistened his lips with the first touch of the brandy.

She smiled.

“After all,” she said, “London is a dreary city if one is left alone by a faithless husband. I do not wish you to be faithless, Nicolas. I do not like that little Dubinski danseuse under the same roof. You are sure that you dined at the Embassy last night?”

Grodin, who had been a trifle disappointed with Dubinski who, after all, was nothing at all compared with this magnificent wife of his, hastened to reaffirm his falsehood.

“At the Embassy, my dear, I assure you, to meet some interesting new arrivals. Prince Madziwill was there from Warsaw and the Czecho-Slovakian Minister. A dinner for men only. It was tedious but in its way interesting. There will be much movement, before long, in Eastern Europe.”

“One expects that,” she murmured.

She was leaning back in her place. Her eyes were fixed on the fire, her fingers were playing absently with his thick stubby hand.

“Would you like to hear a confession, Nicolas?” she asked.

He turned his head towards her. His small eyes were lit with jealous fury, his underlip was thrust forward.

“Last night—Alexander?” he demanded.

“Yes,” she murmured, drooping her head a little.

He became very angry indeed, and restraint was not amongst his good qualities.

“That is the sort of woman you are!” he shouted. “You can get nothing from a man unless you give. Another woman with a promise could have succeeded as well as you, but you—it is because you are faithless in your heart. At a time like this you must give—give what belongs to me. You think that I am easy. We will see. My God, we will see! So this is what happens while I am away on my business, working and planning that you may be rich, that you may have jewels and marvellous clothes. I beg for your help and you give it at the expense of my honour and yours. I think—I think I shall kill you, Olga.”

With difficulty he staggered to his feet. The veins of his forehead were swollen, his clenched fist, the hand which he had snatched away from her, was a horrible sight.

“You shall never be beautiful again,” he snarled. “Your lover __”

“Stop!” she cried. “If you say a word more you will be sorry. Mark that, Nicolas. You will be very sorry indeed. Calm yourself. My confession is bad enough, but it is not that.”

He stood there, dubious, breathing heavily, the victim of a consuming jealousy.

“Not that?” he repeated.

“I told you that I had a confession to make,” she continued. “Here it is. Nicolas, he was hard to persuade but at the moment when everything was in the balance, I—I was trying so hard that I think I lost control of myself. I held out my arms to him. A man like Alexander knows I was his for the taking then. I was unfaithful, Nicolas, but it was only in my thought, and it was for you. What happened then?—I can see your eyes asking me. What happened was this. I suffered the greatest degradation a woman can know. I was refused.”

“Alexander was not your lover?” he asked incredulously, yet with an undertone of exultation.

“I have told you. He refused me. Even as he spoke, as he moved away, I knew that what I thought was affection on my part was nothing of the sort. It was a lesser thing—a momentary impulse. It became, even as he spoke, hatred. It is hatred now. Nicolas, I must have my revenge on that man.”

He sank back again upon the divan. His arm went clumsily around her neck. Olga knew then that her battle was half won. It was only necessary to keep her head, to keep the loathing out of her eyes.

“Do you not understand, Nicolas,” she went on, “what that means to a woman? You have known so many and you have known them so well. Believe me, if the moment had come I should have hated it. I should probably have made my escape. He does not know that. He lives and he believes that I offered him everything that I had to give, and that he refused it. Nicolas, I must have my revenge upon that man. And you, too, should feel like that. I loathe him!”

Grodin drew from his pocket an over-perfumed handkerchief and wiped the drops of sweat from his forehead.

“You shall have your revenge, Olga,” he promised her.

“When? How?” she begged, drawing nearer to him. “Tell me, Nicolas—tell me, my husband. After all, then, perhaps something may happen to him after he has crossed the frontier?”

He smiled a slow, ugly smile. His words were grim, but the after-note of triumph was there.

“He will be met, as we promised, by Molonieff. They will both of them be escorted with great honour to the barracks. The guns will be booming in the city but they will enter by the private way. There will be a demonstration there. There will be wild shooting. There will be other shooting which will not be wild. Molonieff and Alexander will die. The great one will take then the army into his own keeping. His staff is already nominated. The danger will be past.”

Olga sprang to her feet. It was a magnificent effort of histrionics. Her face seemed lit with joy.

“Show me the decree,” she cried. “Show me the decree, Nicolas, and I will be your slave for life. Let me see it down in writing. Let me see the seal.”

His air of superabundant triumph was a little crushed.

“You cannot see that,” he replied. “You must believe me. It is the truth.”

“But I must see it,” she insisted. “Of course I believe, but the joy is in seeing. If I could, I would be there at the top windows looking down to see them fall. That is impossible, so I must see the decree. Where is it, Nicolas? Do not deny me this.”

“You cannot see it,” he repeated stubbornly. “It lies—never mind where it lies.”

“I know,” she cried, “I know where it is. It is downstairs in the manager’s strong-room. You have the key to it, Nicolas. Let us go down together—you and I. You can show it me. We can read it down there, then you can put it back. I should be the happiest woman on earth. Nicolas, I shiver when I think what I shall be to you—my husband. You will give me the greatest joy of my life.”

“You must accept my word,” he begged hoarsely. “I never visit the strong-room. There are spies here in the flats. I tell you that the copy of the decree is there for my endorsement. Orloff will take it by the same plane. He knows what to do with it. There is no possibility of any hitch. Alexander is doomed to death. Soon he will be a dead man.”

Not a shadow of disappointment in her face, no anxiety, no fear. With every word he spoke she seemed happier.

“It is you who are the king of men,” she sighed. “Come, Nicolas, come, my dear husband. Fetch your keys. We will go down together to the strong-room. I will read the decree. What joy! The thought of it is ecstasy. Nicolas, hasten! I shall ring for my cloak. You will come as you are. We descend. Soon I shall be the happiest woman in the world and a little later—yes?—you

will be the happiest man."

Grodin struggled once more to his feet. He was like a man doped.

"The decree is there," he muttered. "Why is that not enough?"

"Do not rob me of half the joy," she pleaded. "I must see the great seal. I must see it in writing—that he is to die. Moura," she went on, turning to the woman who had come from the adjoining apartment, "a cloak, my cloak, the green one with the chinchilla collar. My bag, give me my bag. I will carry that—nothing else. We are not leaving the building, Moura. We shall be back in a quarter of an hour. Prepare my room. I shall retire early—soon after we return."

She flashed a swift glance at Grodin and those amazing eyes of hers called him to her side. She took his arm and clung to it.

"To the lift, Nicolas!" she exclaimed. "Come. I feel like singing. To-night, when the lights are out, I shall sing to you."

"All the same," he muttered uneasily, "it should have been enough when I told you."

She leaned over and stopped his lips with a kiss.

"I must see the seal," she cried.

The lift arrived. She stepped lightly into it but Nicolas remained immovable. It was obvious that he was thinking deeply.

"Come back," he ordered. "There is something to be said."

Olga obeyed reluctantly. He motioned for the lift to remain.

“Listen,” he said, “you are having your way with me, but this thing must be done as I direct. I do not wish that you and I should go to the manager’s office and descend together into the strong-room. He will have that against me for the rest of his life if there should be trouble. He will know that we made this expedition together. You will go back to your room and wait. In less than ten minutes, say a quarter of an hour, I shall be here and I shall bring the box with me and the keys. You shall see me open it and you shall see—aye, more than you expect. You shall see the warrant for the execution of Alexander. Will that suffice?”

“Suffice? It is a hundred times better.” She was full of secret exultation. Nevertheless, she merely shrugged her shoulders. “I only wished to come,” she told him, “because I was afraid that without me you might change your mind. If you swear to return with the box and the keys I will go back to my room.”

“I swear.”

Olga nodded, watched him step into the lift, then made her way to her room. She threw off her cloak and opened her marvellous toilette box which stood upon the dressing case. She lifted out the top tray with its bewildering array of gold-topped bottles and searched for a while underneath. Then she drew out a small bottle, shook two tablets into her hand, locked up the case and came back to the table where their two glasses were standing. She poured more of the brandy into his, some of the Kummel into hers, then dropped the two tablets into the brandy and stirred them a little to aid in their dissolution. To her joy the

spirit remained clear. She carried the glasses through into her room, set them on the table, sank into an easy chair and waited.

XXIII

It was barely a quarter of an hour after her husband's departure before Olga heard his blundering footsteps in the corridor and his knuckles upon the door. She threw it open immediately and stood there to greet him, a radiant figure. She drew him into the room, closed and locked the door behind him.

"Let me carry the case," she begged, taking it from his hand. "Why, how light it is, Nicolas, and yet it looks as though it were made of metal."

"It is a new preparation," he confided. "Our chemists discovered it working near the mines at Oblensk. It is harder than steel and lighter than aluminium."

He crossed the room to the other door and locked it, then he took the case from Olga and drew three curiously curved keys from his pocket, all on one ring. She followed closely the complicated unlocking of the case, how each numbered key fitted into a certain one of the three locks and was turned once, twice or three times. The lid flew open. The inside was lined with black cloth. There was apparently only one document inside—a document of stiff parchment, an enormous seal at the bottom. Pinned to it was an envelope on which was no address.

"Read," he ordered thickly. "There is my promise fulfilled. Read."

No need to tell her. The parchment was in her hands. There was

a single page of firm, marvellously clear handwriting. She read, gripping the stiff parchment on either side. When she came to the names a slow smile parted her lips. She gazed at the seal as though in transports. When she had finished she drew a deep sigh.

“You have kept your word, Nicolas,” she acknowledged.

She took his face between her hands and kissed him on both cheeks.

“One moment,” she begged. “One moment.”

She leaned over for their glasses. She gave him his brandy and lifted her own glass to her lips.

“We drink to my gratitude, dear Nicolas,” she said. “You will not be sorry that you did this for me. I drink to you as we Russians know how to drink.”

The sombre light was gone from his eyes. He gave a little grunt of satisfaction and followed her example. They threw the empty glasses into the fire, then she held out her arms.

“Nicolas,” she asked softly, the false glow already in her eyes, “you have not deceived me? There will be no reprieve?”

“There will be no reprieve,” he assured her. “This man will die. God, how close this room is! Help me off with my coat.”

Olga led him towards his bed. Already his speech was becoming confused. She pushed him for the last yard or two, lifted his legs from the floor and threw the counterpane

over him. He was already half comatose. She waited for a moment, breathing heavily after her efforts, then made her way back to where the box stood upon the table, seized the parchment and held it to her bosom. She looked around. His eyes were closed. She turned out the light. Already he had commenced the strangled snoring of a man of his build. She groped her way to the spot where she had thrown her cloak, covered herself with it, holding the precious parchment underneath, and stood by the side of his bed looking at him by the light of the fire. He lay perfectly motionless, his mouth open, his eyes fast closed. She stepped away with a little shudder, let herself out and fled down the passage.

When Grodin awoke, it was to the sound of the clatter of tea-cups. There was someone moving about the room. He opened his eyes. By his side was a small tea equipage, strong tea poured into a cup steaming hot, just as liked it. Bending over Olga's bed was Moura in her black gown and white linen collar. She looked up at the sound of his movement and wished him a happy good morning.

"Madame still sleeps," she remarked with a smile.

Grodin struggled into a sitting position. What a hell of a nuisance that he could never drink old brandy, which he loved more than anything else in the world, without these headaches! He drank the tea noisily and thirstily. When he set the cup down it was empty.

"What time is it?" he asked the maid.

"Ten o'clock," she answered. "Shall I wake Madame?"

“Yes,” he grunted. “Then go through to my room and turn on my bath. See that Stefan is there.”

He looked down in disgust at his clothes. To go to bed like that! He struggled with an effort of memory. Slowly it came back. He rolled out of bed.

“Wake Madame,” he ordered. “Wake her quickly.”

He stood up, grasping the brass framework of his bedstead. The box was on the table exactly as he had left it. He put his hand to his head. He could not remember for a moment having locked it.

“Wake Madame at once,” he repeated.

Moura bent over her mistress and touched her with light fingers. Olga sat up sleepily. She drew the silk bedclothes over her knees, shook out the crumpled pillow and gazed in puzzled fashion around her. She was one of those fortunate women who remain beautiful in the morning.

“Nicolas,” she cried softly. “You are still there? You remained all night like that?”

“It was that infernal brandy,” he muttered. “It was strong, that brandy.”

Looking marvellously fresh and well, she laughed at him mockingly.

“What gallantry!” she exclaimed. “Pass me my tea, Moura.”

She raised the cup to her lips and drank. All the time her eyes were following his movements. He was standing by the table now, bending over the box. The keys on their ring lay on the floor by his feet. He suddenly noticed them, stooped and picked them up. Olga set down her cup softly. Resting on the palms of her hands, she sat up in bed and watched him. He turned the keys and looked into the box. There was no exclamation, no word of any sort, not a movement of the head. He closed the box. Then he turned round to meet Olga's gently enquiring eyes. He was wide-awake enough, now—an ugly sight for the early morning, his low collar squashed up, both his studs parted company with the buttonholes, his white waistcoat merely a rag. His hard, spiky hair, lying in violent disarray, did nothing to conceal the bald spot on the top of his head. She waited for him to speak. His silence perplexed her. His gaze seemed to become more intense. He still said nothing and she felt a nervous fear creeping through her veins. Silence like this was worse than a torrent of words and questions.

"What is the matter with you, my dear Nicolas?" she asked.

Still no word. There was a telephone on the same table as the case. He turned slowly away and caught up the receiver.

"The reception office," he demanded. "Yes. It is Nicolas Grodin who speaks. . . . Yes, I am in my apartment—seventy. Be so good as to send at once to me the house detective. . . . Never mind—the house detective, I said. . . . In five minutes? Very well."

He laid down the receiver. Still he had not spoken one word to his wife. He started for the communicating door, holding the

case in his hand.

“Have you no morning greetings for me, Nicolas?” she cried.

He paused for a second, then retraced his steps. Olga was grateful at that moment for Moura, standing discreetly in the background. Grodin placed his foot on the side of the bed, laid the case across it and turned the keys. She looked into it and her scream rang through the apartment.

“The warrant is gone! What have you done with it, Nicolas? Do you mean to cheat me?”

He closed the case and returned the keys to his pocket.

“No,” he said, “I am not one who cheats.”

“What have you done, then, with the warrant?” she demanded.

There was a flicker of admiration in his eyes as he looked at her, but there was also something else far more terrifying.

“The warrant seems to have flown away,” he confided. “Some besotted fool must have turned the keys and disclosed its presence here to a person whom he trusted. It is a sad event, Olga. The end of the affair will also be very sad.”

“But—I do not understand,” she faltered.

“Then I have the advantage,” he replied, “for I do. I understand, Olga Grodin. I can only repeat that the end of this matter will be sad.”

He stumped away with the box in his hand. He asked no question, he uttered no threat, but the woman who was still sitting up in bed was afraid. . . . Presently she heard voices in the next room. The detective, then, had already arrived. She beckoned to Moura.

“My bath,” she ordered. “Leave the door open while you fill it. And Moura—”

“Madame?”

“Do not leave me unless I send you away. I myself am nervous this morning.”

“It is of Monsieur that Madame has fear?”

“It is of Monsieur,” was the softly spoken admission. “He thinks that I have stolen something.”

“How could Madame have stolen anything?” the woman replied. “She has not left the room.”

Olga followed her into the bathroom. Voices were still audible.

“Wait outside,” Olga enjoined.

She made good use of the half hour and composed herself. It was going to be difficult. It had all seemed so simple. When she had stolen downstairs and passed out into the courtyard in the trail of a little crowd of departing guests from a very Bohemian party, the concierge’s back had been turned. Coming back, too, she had met no one. She had run lightly up the stairs instead of ringing for the lift. Not a soul had been about on

her floor. She had stripped off her clothes and crept between her silken sheets. There had been no sound anywhere save the heavy snoring of her husband. It was like harsh music to her ears. She had closed her eyes. By degrees the trembling of her pulses had subsided. She had drifted off into happy slumber. . . .

The voices again. A knock at the door. She folded her *peignoir* about her and stepped back into her bedroom.

“What is the trouble, Moura?” she asked.

“It is the detective, Madame. He is waiting outside to speak to you.”

“He can wait, then,” she answered sharply. “Does he expect to interview ladies as they come from the bath?”

The knocking at the door was more insistent. Olga controlled herself with an effort.

“Tell him to wait in the salon,” she directed. “I will see him as soon as I have made my toilette.”

Again the knocking. Moura opened the door cautiously but not cautiously enough. A man’s foot was placed in the aperture. Moura was swung gently on one side. A small, neatly dressed man pushed unobtrusively past her into the room.

“Madame,” he said, bowing to Olga, “I offer you my sincere apologies. I am here by your husband’s instructions and in my capacity of detective of the flats I am forced sometimes to appear ill-mannered.”

Olga promptly but ungraciously capitulated.

“Give me a dressing-gown to put on over this, Moura,” she directed. “And now,” she went on, as Moura returned with a more voluminous garment, “what is this trouble, please? My husband left the room half an hour ago without a word of explanation. What has happened?”

“A serious theft, Madame,” the man replied. “A document of immense importance was abstracted from your husband’s despatch-case during the night.”

“And who does he suppose has abstracted it?” she asked scornfully. “No one has entered or left the room. I am a very light sleeper and it would have been impossible for anyone to have committed a theft in here without my knowledge.”

“It certainly would have been difficult,” the detective admitted. “But to satisfy your husband I must ask a few questions and look round a little. It is my unfortunate duty, Madame. I hope that you will realise that.”

Olga threw herself into a corner of the divan.

“Ask your questions,” she invited.

“Your husband tells me that he brought a metal box into this room last night and showed you a document which was in it.”

“That is true.”

“Afterwards you had a good-night drink together and your husband tells me that he slept in this room.”

“Quite true. He was not in a condition to hear anything but I was. No one has been near.”

“With reference to that drink,” the detective continued, “I do not see that there are any glasses here.”

“Of course not. The maid has been in the room with the tea. She naturally took out the used glasses with her.”

“But the maid who brought your tea denies that she did anything of the sort,” he pointed out. “I have already interviewed her. Those two glasses seem to have disappeared.”

She laughed contemptuously.

“Why not ask my husband what became of them?”

“I have done so, Madame,” was the prompt reply. “He has no recollection.”

“That is because he had drunk too much,” she scoffed. “He has no recollection! Ask him once more and he will probably remember that he followed an old Russian custom when one drinks a serious toast. We threw our glasses into the fire. Look, the maid has removed the ashes, I see, but in the corner there—what is that?”

The detective stooped down.

“It is a portion of the stem of a wine glass,” he admitted, picking it up.

“If you search amongst the ashes,” she told him, “you will find

the remaining fragments."

"I am sure it will not be necessary," the man said smoothly. "Your husband will remember the circumstances. You permit me to make a brief search of the room?"

"Certainly. Am I, by the way, a prisoner?"

The young man held up his hands in horror.

"How could you think such a thing, Madame? You are free to come and go as you will."

"Then I will have my coffee in the salon," she said. "Moura will unlock anything if necessary. When you finish rummaging about amongst my belongings perhaps you will let me know. I wish to leave the place shortly. I have an early appointment with my dressmaker."

"There is nothing in the world to prevent your leaving when you choose," he assured her.

Olga handed her keys to Moura, made her way into the salon and rang for her breakfast. The coffee tasted excellent. The tobacco in the cigarette which she lit afterward had never seemed more appealing. What a fool that young man was, even though he was a detective. Did he think it likely that she would conceal a paper of such great importance amongst her clothes? There came once more that little tap at the door. This time she answered fearlessly enough.

"Come in."

The detective entered, Moura protesting in the rear. He carried Olga's discarded opera cloak on one arm and held a pair of satin shoes in the other hand.

"Madame," he said, "I shall have to ask you to explain why your opera cloak is still damp with last night's rain and why your slippers here—new ones, evidently—are ruined and splashed with mud. You left Buckingham Court last night. It is quite useless to deny it."

Olga remained silent for several moments. Her eyes were fixed upon the ruined slippers and the opera cloak with the marks of the raindrops upon it.

"Where did you find those?" she asked at last.

"In your maid's room, Madame. It was naturally my first duty to examine the clothes you wore last night. Your maid protested but I followed her to her chamber. I regret the necessity, Madame, but the fact is now established. You left the building last night, probably with the document your husband has lost."

"What are you going to do about it?" she demanded.

"I must consult with your husband," he told her. "It is his affair."

"He will kill me," she said simply. "Go away, Moura," she added a moment later. "I will ring when I want you."

The woman obeyed. The young man stood immovable. His eyes were fixed upon the cloak. Olga stood with her back to him, her hands clenched. This was more terrible than anything she had imagined. Her fears were closing in upon her. If Nicolas

knew the truth it was the end. He was not one who forgave.

“Listen,” she implored, clasping and unclasping her hands. “I have very little money but I have jewels any quantity of them. There is my case in the room there. Moura has the keys. She is discreet. They are worth at least a hundred thousand pounds. Help yourself to what you want. I shall never complain. Leave me the cloak and the shoes and take the emerald necklace that belonged to the Czarina—or anything you like.”

She paused and listened for a moment. There was no reply. Silence. She turned round. She was alone in the room. She hastened to the door and opened it. Her bedroom, too, was empty. She heard the clang of the lift at the end of the corridor and knew that he had gone.

XXIV

For a man to whom self-restraint had become almost a habit, Alexander appeared to be in an unusually restless and uneasy frame of mind from the moment he entered Anna Prestnoff's studio that evening. Anna herself, on the other hand, had found in the quality of silence a new form of strength. She refused to smoke, she listened to her visitor's somewhat staccato efforts at conversation with grave but uncritical attention. She waited until he had arrived at the threshold of the one portentous piece of news he had come to disclose and then she stopped him.

"I have seen Baron Gurdenoff to-day, Alexander," she told him, "and I have been to headquarters and talked with Professor Leonard. They neither of them told me anything, yet they were neither of them able to deny what has been my great fear during the last few days. You have definitely decided to accept this invitation from Russia."

"I had to, Anna," he answered.

"You know the risk you run?"

"I know that there is a great risk," he admitted. "Anna, how can we proceed further in our work unless we run risks? How do you think it could become possible to liberate a country bound in such shackles as exist at the present moment without the sacrifice of lives? On the other hand, here is a distinct and definite issue to be considered with regard to this expedition of mine. There is a chance that Molonieff and I may

get in our blow before the plot against us—if there is one—has time to develop. I admit the danger. I accept it. Our country will never be set free by men who fear death."

Anna rose to her feet. His eyes followed her as she crossed the room, lingered upon her unhurried, graceful movements with an artist's appreciation. She opened a drawer and drew out a stiff roll of paper which had been pressed into her hands the night before by a breathless, terrified woman, the rain upon her face and cloak, the sound of her taxicab beating in the street outside.

"You had better read this, Alexander," she said. "You will know then that it is not a question of risk. It is a question of certainty. You are to go to your death a few hours after you have crossed the frontier. There will be no time for you to appeal to the army."

He read those cruel directions word by word. He read, as few men have had the chance to do before and live, the warrant for his summary death. He studied the signature. Some hidden sense told him that the document was genuine.

"Where did you find this, Anna?" he asked.

"It is from Olga Grodin."

"Good God!"

He was silent for a moment or two, clutching the terrible parchment in his hand.

"How exactly did it come into your possession?" he demanded.

“She gave it to me.”

“But why—why on earth should she?”

“The fear of death. She may die now, if her husband discovers what she has done. If she had been left to my tender mercies I should have given information in Paris which would have brought her, without the shadow of a doubt, to the secret scaffold. Olga Grodin never showed more clearly her genius than when she slipped out of her life as a dangerous spy and married Grodin, but, you see, I knew the truth. I gave her the choice of handing me this document or being denounced. I have the document. You have read it, Alexander. Now will you promise me,” she begged, raising her eyes to his, “that you will not go?”

He made no answer. She let him alone—watching intently. Word by word he read over again the directions to the chief of his escort. Word by word he read over the death warrant.

“Anna,” he said, “it is a great feat, this, which you have accomplished.”

“Let it not go unrewarded, then,” was the prompt reply.

“I must remind you of this,” he pointed out. “There is a difference between going blindly into the field of danger and entering it prepared with foreknowledge of what is planned against you.”

“There is no difference in this case,” she answered eagerly. “They have been too clever for that. The whole affair will be finished so soon. You will never have a chance to speak to those

million men, Alexander. You will never have the chance to light that torch you could have lifted to the skies. Death—ugly and sinister—is waiting for you there. Of what use is a dead man to a suffering nation? Cannot you see what this means, Alexander? The Dictator is weakening. He is tottering in his place. All that we have to do is to go on as we are doing, pour in our pamphlets, feed the list of officers and sergeants and that great mass of dissatisfied men with the manna of truth. The army is ripening for revolt. That we know. If you give your life fruitlessly before the time has come, there will be no one to lead them. The allegorical knout of the Dictatorship, which is worse than the knout of the Czars, will crack once more and they will shrink back into their old selves. They must have living men to lead them. You and Molonieff, alive, can free Russia. You will never do it by rushing upon your death like this."

He suddenly astonished her. He drew her into his arms, kissed her eyes and her lips. She yielded them tremblingly. It was such unexpected joy. Only a few moments before he had seemed so stern, so far-removed.

"It is you," he whispered, "who have reawakened in me the desire for life as other men see it and feel it—a human, joyous love for life. You, Anna, you have done this. I do not wish to throw away what you have made precious. For twenty-four hours I shall consider, but you must help me."

"If I help you," she smiled happily, "you will never leave me. We are twin souls in one thing at least, Alexander. I, too, love our country. It is because of that, as much as because I love you, that I will not let you throw yourself away in those shambles. Your life is too precious, dear one."

He pointed to the document.

“Meanwhile?” he asked.

She nodded. For a moment she listened attentively. It was only the sound, however, of a car which passed in the street below.

“The hue and cry amongst Grodin’s foxes will soon be started,” she admitted. “You had better take advantage of your opportunity.”

His hesitation was only momentary. He placed the document in the inside pocket of his coat.

“How did his wife come into possession of it?” he asked.

“She was barely here sixty seconds,” Anna told him. “She was shivering with fear. I think that she had teased Grodin into showing it to her, then drugged him, slipped from his arms, taken the document, stolen away from their rooms and brought it to me.”

“But why to you?” he asked, bewildered.

“As I have told you, because I had been to her and threatened her with certain disclosures of her past life,” she replied. “I told her that unless I had the document within forty-eight hours I should visit the Quai d’Orsay.”

“But how did you know,” he demanded, “that the warrant had been signed, that there was treachery in Grodin’s offer to me?”

She was silent.

“I will tell you that,” she said, “when Russia is at last a free country.”

He sprang to his feet and paced the room.

“Do not think that I am ungrateful,” he cried, “but remember what that document means to the man who has allowed it to be stolen from him.”

“I know,” she admitted.

“Olga may have paid already for her visit to you with her life,” he went on. “Grodin is a disciple of his master, at heart. A dozen lives would mean nothing to him. Supposing he learns the truth?”

“Nothing more probable, I should think,” she acknowledged. “I have no feeling one way or the other about the woman. I do not care whether she lives or dies.”

The sharp summons of an electric bell broke the silence. Alexander’s eyebrows were gently upraised he turned towards Anna.

“My outside door,” she told him.

“A caller?”

“Apparently.”

He glanced at the clock. It was twenty minutes to eight.

“You had better let me answer it,” he suggested.

She shook her head.

“Wait.”

She rang down on the telephone to the concierge. Fortunately he was in his office and answered at once.

“Tell me,” she said. “My outside doorbell has rung. Have you passed any visitor up?”

“It is the young artist, Mademoiselle, who dances in the ballet. He has visited you before, or I would not have let him pass.”

“Is he alone?”

“He arrived in a car with someone else,” the man told her. “The car is still outside. I think it is another gentleman.”

“Do not let anyone else up,” she directed, ringing off.

The bell of the flat rang again.

“It is Leopold,” she told Alexander. “Shall we hear what he has to say?”

“By all means,” he assented.

She went to the outside door which led up a little passage into the studio and by a door, on the right hand side, into her other apartment. Leopold was standing upon the doormat. He wore a silk hat and a black overcoat drawn in at the waist. His white muffler was beautifully tied. He carried a gold-knobbed malacca cane and there was a gardenia in his buttonhole.

There was an air of fatigue in his face and his tone was peevish.

“You keep me waiting, Anna Prestnoff,” he complained. “That I do not like.”

“I cannot for the moment remember having invited you to call here,” she replied.

“This,” he said, “is not an ordinary visit.”

She opened the inner door. Leopold removed his hat and followed her in. When he saw Alexander he stopped short.

“I did not understand,” he faltered, “that you were not alone.”

“Is it necessary for me to inform you?” she asked. “You say that you wish to see me. Come in. Let me hear what you have to say.”

“Before—your visitor?”

She laughed scornfully.

“Why not?”

“It is impossible,” was the uneasy reply.

Leopold turned to the door but Anna was standing with her back against it.

“I suspect,” she said quietly, “that you have brought me a message from Nicolas Grodin.”

He looked across his shoulder at Alexander.

“I have nothing to say to you, under the present circumstances,” he declared. “You should have told me that you were not alone.”

Alexander smiled good-humoredly.

“Come, come, Leopold Zadaruski,” he said, “you are wasting time. The young lady did not invite your visit. You came on your own account. You have a message to give her. She asks you to give it before me. Out with it, please. To tell you the truth, we are both of us anxious to get rid of you.”

“The message is a private one,” Leopold declared sullenly.

Alexander lounged slowly across the room. He towered over the young man. Anna remained with her back to the door.

“A pretty toy, that which you are carrying, my little ballet dancer,” he remarked. “Let me look at it.”

Leopold shrank away.

“Leave me alone,” he insisted.

With a turn of the wrist, Alexander possessed himself of the cane. He swung it gently in the air.

“Excellent,” he declared. “As good as a whip, this. Take off your overcoat.”

The young man was white with terror.

“How dare you?” he exclaimed. “Anna Prestnoff, stand away from that door. Let me go.”

He swung round, but Alexander’s hand was upon the collar of his overcoat. He shook him gently.

“I will be your valet,” he said. “See how easy it is.”

He caught one sleeve of the coat and with its soft silk lining it slipped from Leopold’s shoulders. Alexander kicked it into the corner.

“Now,” he declared, “we can proceed. Give the young lady your message.”

“The message is only from myself,” was the terrified reply. “I came to ask her to take supper with me.”

“That is a lie,” Alexander asserted. “Even you, I think, would scarcely have so much audacity. I do not wish to hurt you unless I am obliged, my little dancing man, but if you do not tell us from whom you came and give Anna Prestnoff the message you bear, I shall give you a thrashing with this cane of yours that will stop your dancing for many nights to come.”

“You dare not,” the young man shouted. “Do you realise to whom you are talking? I am Leopold Zadaruski. I dance at Covent Garden. The house is sold out for weeks. Thousands come there over and over again to watch me dance. If you lay a hand on me they will kill you.”

“Who?”

“My public. The worshippers of my art.”

Alexander laughed quietly.

“Do you know,” he said, “that you are quite the stupidest person I ever met? You are so stupid that I shall give you one more chance before I take off your other coat and give you a thrashing. It will be a shock to your admirers, when you are well enough to dance again, to see the weals underneath.”

Leopold was shaking all over. He turned frantically to Anna.

“Say something to this madman!” he cried. “He is out of his senses—he is mad!”

“I do not think that he is mad, Leopold,” Anna replied. “But listen. Tell us both who is downstairs in the car with you. Perhaps Alexander may be very kind and let you off if you tell us that instead of giving me the message.”

“Reinforcements downstairs,” Alexander observed. “Well, this poor little rat needs them. Who is your companion to-night?”

Leopold hesitated. Anything was better than the present situation. There was a terrible air of seriousness about Alexander notwithstanding the banter in his tone. Somehow or other, Leopold felt a conviction that he was very near indeed to that horrible torture.

“It is Nicolas Grodin,” he confided.

Alexander’s lips shaped themselves for a whistle.

“Downstairs in the car—he came here with you?”

“We came to invite Anna Prestnoff to sup with us,” Leopold announced, recovering a little of his courage.

“And where,” his questioner persisted, “is Grodin proposing to give this feast?”

Leopold moved uneasily upon his feet. Once more the subject was veering round towards danger.

“I have no idea,” he declared earnestly. “I know nothing of that. Nicolas Grodin wishes for a conversation with Anna Prestnoff in private. That is all I know.”

Alexander reflected for a moment; then he turned to Anna.

“I suggest,” he said, “that you telephone down to your hall porter and ask him to invite the gentleman in the car to mount.”

“I will go and tell him,” Leopold proposed hastily.

Alexander shook his head.

“No, I do not think that would do at all. Nicolas Grodin has courage of a sort, no doubt, but I think that the last person whom he would wish to see just now is myself. If you descend you will tell him that I am here and your car and both of you will vanish. I think that the hall porter will be the best one to give the message.”

Anna moved to the telephone and took up the receiver.

“Will you invite the gentleman who is in the car outside to mount to my apartment,” she said.

She waited a minute and then turned to Alexander. Her voice was steady but she was a little afraid.

“He is coming,” she announced. “You know, do you not, what sort of man he is?”

Alexander smiled.

“I am aware of his reputation. I have never been quite sure whether it was justified or not. In a few minutes we may know.”

From outside came once more the tinkling of the bell.

XXV

There was an air of suspicion about Grodin as he followed Anna into the room, but it was suspicion largely tempered with curiosity. The sight of Alexander lounging against the back of the divan was obviously a complete and amazing surprise. He stopped short, dumbfounded. His lips were parted but for the moment he had lost the power of speech. His shifty eyes darted restlessly from one to the other. Finally, they remained fastened as though against his will upon Alexander.

“What is the meaning of this?” he asked thickly.

Alexander waved his hand towards a chair.

“Is it such a shock to find me here, Nicolas Grodin?” he enquired with mild sarcasm. “Anna Prestnoff is an old friend of mine. Surely you remember seeing us together upon the steamer.”

“Why did you not tell me who was here before you asked me to mount, you blasted young fool?” Grodin demanded of Leopold.

“It was not I who spoke,” the other replied.

His voice seemed to have cracked. It had a falsetto note about it which was really the hallmark of a devouring fear. Grodin turned away from him with an exclamation of contempt. Like all cowards, he had a profound contempt for others who shared his weakness.

“I came to talk with Anna Prestnoff,” he announced. “I have warned the police of my visit. They are following me. They may be here at any moment.”

“Dear me, how inconvenient!” Alexander exclaimed. “I hope they will not arrive just yet. Such an admirable opportunity, this, for a little farewell conversation with you.”

“What do you mean by farewell?” Grodin asked suspiciously. “I am not going anywhere that I know of.”

Alexander sighed.

“That is just the worst of it,” he observed. “In these unsettled days we are never quite sure where or when we are going—whether to Paradise or the other place, when or how. I appreciate your situation, Grodin. I gather, then, that you are not accompanying me to Russia?”

“Accompanying you where?” Grodin demanded.

“To Russia. I thought you already understood that I am accepting your offer. I shall be ready to start to-morrow morning.”

Grodin was thunder-struck. His piercing little eyes flashed round upon Anna. It was not easy to read her expression. Perhaps—perhaps, after all, that detective had made a mistake, or the taxi driver or someone. Perhaps it had not been to Anna that his wife had brought that document in the middle of the night. It would seem almost too good to be true, but apparently this terrible Alexander knew nothing of the plot for his destruction. His faint hopes, however, received a sudden shock.

“Alexander,” Anna exclaimed, “what are you saying? Have you suddenly gone mad? Of course you are not going to Russia.”

Alexander looked mildly distressed.

“Now I wonder what gives you that idea, Anna,” he protested. “You, of all people, should know how I hate to change my mind. I have abandoned the idea of taking my own small staff with me, but—”

Grodin’s brain was working swiftly. Perhaps, even if Anna had received that stolen paper, she had not yet shown it to him, had not told him that the whole business was a trap. She had not even mentioned that death warrant, probably, with the signature of the Dictator scrawled across the seal. How to separate these two till he could find out the truth? It was obvious that Anna herself was bewildered.

“The plans remain unchanged?” he asked. “All is in order?”

“Certainly,” Alexander agreed. “I thought it was already understood that I was going. I warn you that there may be differences of opinion between my own views and those of the others when I arrive there. Everything may not go quite smoothly at first but in the end, ah well, I think that it may work out all right.”

Leopold coughed hysterically. He pulled out his thin gold watch.

“I must go,” he announced. “I have an engagement.”

“Do not break up our little party, Zadaruski,” Alexander begged.

“I was thinking of asking you all to supper with me. A farewell feast, you know. What do you say, Anna?”

“Anything you wish,” she answered tonelessly. “I should rather we were alone. At the present moment I do not entirely understand you.”

He scribbled a few lines on a page torn from his pocket-diary and handed it to her.

“Use the hall porter’s telephone,” he directed.

She nodded and hastened from the room.

“I cannot come,” Leopold declared, speaking in a tone that for him was unexpectedly firm. “Since Anna Prestnoff has engagements I shall keep my promise. I shall sup with the Duchess.”

“And you, Grodin?”

Grodin had a cunning brain but he was perplexed. He pulled out his underlip and stood for a few seconds in thoughtful silence. Alexander continued.

“You will come, of course, Grodin,” he said. “You must have some last messages to send, some final instructions to give.”

“You go to Russia, then?” Grodin repeated.

“Most certainly.”

Leopold picked up his hat.

“In any case,” he announced, “I take leave of you, my friends.”

Alexander shook his head with a smile. It was not a smile of pleasure—there was, in fact, nothing pleasant about it. He had changed his position slightly and was standing now with his back to the door.

“I have other plans for you all,” he said. “We are taking supper to-night with my friend the Prince de Chambordine and his daughter Simone, whom you, Grodin, will doubtless remember as the hereditary Grand Duchess of Georgia since her mother’s death. The Grand Duchess, whom we are to know as the Princess Simone de Chambordine, and her father, are anxious to have a few last words with us before we start on our perhaps history-making expedition.”

“This is not my affair,” Leopold cried. “I was once presented to the Grand Duchess at a dinner party. She was rude to me. I take my leave.”

“You stay where you are and do as you are told,” Alexander ordered.

“Why do you speak of ‘our’ journey to Russia?” Grodin demanded. “I have recently been appointed Minister here, as you know, and here I mean to stop.”

“Have I really omitted to mention the one condition under which I undertake the journey?” Alexander replied. “I apologise. It is that you accompany me, Grodin. I dislike travelling alone. I take you by plane to Berlin and on from there to Moscow. This is, I understand, what you had arranged.”

"I will follow you," Grodin assented after a moment's reflection. "It would not be possible for me to leave my post at the present time. I have work to finish and besides, you speak of starting to-morrow morning. I am not equipped. It would be necessary for me to obtain leave."

"All these things we shall discuss more easily at supper time," Alexander told him.

"I have no acquaintance with the Prince de Chambordine," Grodin protested. "There was even a time when he refused to make my acquaintance."

"That is of no consequence now," was the other's suave assurance. "He understands the great work you have accomplished on behalf of Russia. You will be a welcome guest."

Grodin's expression was that of a wounded animal driven into a corner.

"I am not going to be ordered about in this fashion," he declared sturdily. "Out of the way—I am leaving this apartment."

His quick step forward was checked. He was looking straight into the barrel of a very deadly-looking weapon.

"Please excuse," Alexander murmured. "My car is waiting below. We will leave together—the four of us. That will be very pleasant."

There was an awning in front of the great mansion of the Prince

de Chambordine, a footman on the kerbstone, a vague impression of luxury and splendour in the great hall beyond. Alexander, and Paul, who was in attendance upon his master, walked one on either side of Grodin until they had passed into the winter garden. Anna and Leopold followed a few yards behind, watched over by a servant. Anna, with a little wave of the hand, disappeared in the hall.

"*À bientôt*," Alexander cried. "A great supper party this is to be, Anna Prestnoff."

She turned towards him a little defiantly. She was still very pale.

"Before I join in such a ghastly celebration," she said, "you must explain."

"And if I cannot?" he asked wistfully.

"Then I, too, come to Russia," she declared.

He made no reply but turned away to his already suspicious companions.

"This way, Grodin," he announced. "The supper room is in the other wing."

Grodin was disturbed. He had whispered a word in Leopold's ear and the latter was shaking with fright.

"We must know the meaning of this festival," Grodin demanded. "Why are we dragged to the house of a man who we know is not favourably disposed towards us?"

“Compose yourself,” Alexander begged. “You are under the roof of one of the greatest noblemen in the world. What harm do you suppose is likely to come to you? It is only obstinate ones who look for trouble. If you insist upon it I shall use sterner measures, but I have no wish to do so. All will be well if you do as you are told.”

“I do not desire to accept hospitality from the Prince de Chambordine,” Grodin declared doggedly.

“Nor I,” Leopold echoed. “I wish to keep an engagement.”

“A taxicab is all I need,” Grodin insisted.

“I will share it,” Leopold cried eagerly.

The lights in the winter garden were suddenly lowered. The place seemed full of shadows. There was a hand on Grodin’s right shoulder and another on his left—the hands of a man of great strength. Alexander’s rather tired voice had suddenly lost its courteous inflection.

“No immediate harm is coming to you, Grodin, nor to you, dancing man, but whilst you are under this roof you must do as you are told. There are certain plans to be made for my journey to Russia which are not concluded. You are here to discuss them. In due course supper will be served. In the meantime you remain where you are.”

A door had opened in front of them. They were gently hustled inside a square, impressive-looking apartment suddenly flooded with light. It was handsomely furnished, the walls were lined with bookcases, but it had one peculiarity—the whole of the

illumination came from the ceiling. There was not a window in the room, no possible means of egress except by the door through which they had passed. There were comfortable easy chairs, books and magazines of all sorts upon a round table. There were also boxes of cigars and cigarettes.

"Unless you like to tear the books to pieces," Alexander continued, "there is no mischief you can perpetrate here, but you will have some little time to wait. Make yourselves at home, I beg of you. It is no use trying to bribe the servant whom I shall leave in a far corner of the room. He will only be angry and he is apt to be bad-tempered. Read and smoke and talk as you will. When the time comes, you will be fetched."

"It is outrageous!" Leopold cried. "I am due to take supper with the Duchess of Bodmin at the Ritz."

"A message shall be telephoned there," Alexander promised. "Excuse me now, if you please. I have important affairs of my own to attend to in connection with this journey ahead."

Notwithstanding his height, he had the gift of swift movement. Before they realised it the two were alone, save for that grim, motionless figure who stood with folded arms in the corner of the room. They heard the key turned in the lock. Leopold began to sob.

"Why did you ever drag me into your wretched bureau?" he moaned. "My art was enough for me. I hate politics. I should loathe to go back to Russia."

Grodin stumped across the room, thrust his hand into a box of cigars, drew one out, clipped and lit it. He turned his back upon

his companion.

“These are the cigars of a Prince,” he muttered, “although it is indeed the house of a madman.”

XXVI

Moura, dark, heavy-browed, sullen, stood in front of her mistress, a confection of black lace upon her arm.

"Madame should permit me to conclude her toilette," she urged. "It is useless to remain half-clothed. Monsieur may return at any moment. You heard what he said, Madame. It was only a brief visit of adieu to an old friend."

Olga Grodin rose wearily to her feet. She stretched herself and the *négligé* slipped from her white shoulders.

"Moura," she said, looking at herself in the glass, "I am too beautiful to kill. You think so, too? Tell me that you think so."

"No harm of that sort could come to Madame," the maid told her bitterly. "No men are brave enough to do more than lash with words the creatures they feed their desires upon, as Monsieur does with Madame. You are quite safe. You have only to smile. The movement of your little finger is sufficient. Monsieur would forgive even infidelity sooner than lose you."

Olga, in black lingerie, the design of a famous male dressmaker, suffered the gown to be slipped over her shoulders. For a moment or two her maid occupied herself in drawing the stockings up her mistress' long graceful legs. Suddenly she paused. The muffled telephone bell was ringing.

"Be careful, Moura," Olga enjoined. "The detective—I will not

see him again. I am ill—away. If it should be anyone else, you are not sure."

Moura lifted the receiver.

"It is the apartment of Madame Grodin," she said.

Someone spoke. She listened and held the instrument away.

"It is Monsieur Alexander, Madame."

Olga sprang to her feet. There was a new light flashing in her eyes.

"He wishes to speak to me? I come," she declared.

"He waits below," Moura announced. "He begs for a brief interview."

"Tell him to mount—to mount at once," her mistress cried. "Let him know that I am here alone."

The woman spoke and replaced the instrument.

"He comes, Madame."

Olga Grodin for a moment was like a woman expecting her first lover. She was round the room like a whirlwind—scented powder, a touch of a new lipstick, very faint.

"The gown, Moura. I think I will wear the *négligé*. Have I time to take this off?"

The woman shook her head.

“Madame is better as she is,” she advised. “The gown is ravishing.”

The bell of the outside door of the flat rang.

“Show him in here, Moura. Tell him I am engaged at my toilette but I will see him.”

The maid disappeared and a few seconds later Alexander stepped lightly into the room. A gleam of anticipation shone in his eyes but it was not the anticipation which she desired.

“Alexander,” she gasped, holding out her hand, “and I am alone! Where is—Nicolas? I thought that he was hunting you.”

“He is all right for the present,” he answered, “I have him locked up, waiting. I come to you for help, Olga, for help. With your aid I may succeed in some thing very dear to me.”

“My love!” Olga whispered passionately, her arms around his neck. “I am your slave. I would do anything in the world you ask me. I adore you now as I have done all my life. What can I do?”

He disengaged her arms gently.

“Olga,” he confided, “I am leaving in a few hours for Russia. When I get there, either your husband or I will be up against the firing squad.”

“Then let it be Nicolas,” she cried. “Alexander, I hate that man as I worship you.”

He was silent for a moment.

“You must do this thing,” he said, “for the sake of our country, Olga, not for my sake. I can give nothing, I can promise nothing.”

“But my love,” she whispered, “my dear love, is there no little corner in your life into which I could steal, for however short a time?”

“Olga,” he told her softly, “the engines of my plane are already beating. Everything is being prepared for a great effort. A few hours after I cross the frontier I shall either be dead or the great work of salvation will have commenced. I plead for your help, without conditions. I plead to you as a daughter of Russia.”

Her eyes were filled with tears. He bent softly and touched them with his lips.

“You see, Olga,” he went on, “I am not altogether of stone, but every second that passes is against us. I want Grodin’s—I want your husband’s—despatch case and the key. Without it I shall never drag him into Russia.”

“When he comes back,” she said quietly, “he will kill me. You know that the infamous paper is no longer there.”

“I know,” he answered, “but nevertheless I want the case and the key to it. Give them to me and you will have nothing to fear. Your husband shall not return without my permission. I pledge my word for your safety.”

“Give me your heart,” she cried passionately, “if only for a moment. You can keep your word. You can do what you like with Nicolas Grodin.”

He glanced at the clock.

“Every one of those seconds spells danger,” he reminded her. “Will you give me the case?”

Olga threw open the door and called to her maid.

“Moura—my cloak.”

She flung it over her shoulders.

“I will be as quick as possible,” she promised. “Wait here.”

Those were moments each one of them vibrant with anxiety, feverish desire to stretch them out, to hold back the clock. Yet Alexander, standing just as she had left him, was amazed at the swiftness of her return. She came into the room panting, a wonderful colour in her cheeks, the joy of a woman who risks everything for the man she loves shining in her eyes.

“Take it,” she cried, placing the metal box on the table by his side. “Here are the keys. You know how to use them?”

“Please tell me,” he begged.

She gave him the three keys on one ring which were stamped separately one, two and three.

“You see,” she pointed out, “the three locks. In lock number one you turn key number three three times; in lock number two you turn key number one once; in lock number three you turn key number two twice. If you turn more often the lock fastens again automatically. You will remember?”

“Perfectly,” he answered. “Olga, if I could only tell you—”

She pressed her lips to his.

“Do not try,” she whispered. “One moment—just one moment—”

He held her in his arms. She seemed almost to swoon.

“It is for you, Alexander,” she murmured. “God save my heart from breaking.” 277

There was silence in the room. She opened her eyes.

“I am happy,” she breathed.

XXVII

In the sitting-room of the apartment allotted to him in European House, Marc Zaritsch sat at work. With a queer staccato touch he was hammering into type, by means of a small portable machine, a chapter of the autobiography which was later to amaze and terrify an incredulous public. At the sound of the opening of the door he swung round in his chair. He peered at the newcomer through his heavy glasses, then he removed them and rose to his feet. He looked at Alexander in surprise. The latter was quiet and composed as usual but there was about his sudden entrance and his brisk clear speech a note of urgency.

"Put your typewriter away, Zaritsch," he ordered. "You have more important work coming to you."

Zaritsch's forehead was wrinkled, his small eyes were contracted, his head was a little on one side. He had rather the appearance of a listening ferret.

"There is one subject," Alexander went on, "which it has never been necessary for me to discuss with you, Zaritsch. There is no need for us to comment upon it even now. I have to remind you only of the six months you spent in the St. Petersburg branch of the German bank after you had completed your university course."

Zaritsch was a little frightened, more than a little puzzled.

“What have you to say to me about that?” he asked.

“You left that position,” Alexander continued, speaking more rapidly than usual, “at a moment’s notice. You disappeared. There remains to this day, or rather there would be if the books had not been destroyed, a memorandum of your marvellous work upon some foreign bonds.”

Zaritsch stiffened. Words left his lips with a certain quality of iciness.

“I was a forger,” he admitted. “You knew that when you gave me my place there. What of it?”

“You are going to put your very marvellous gift to a marvellous use,” Alexander told him, placing the despatch box he was carrying upon the corner of the table, drawing the keys from his pocket and calmly unlocking it. “You are going to make a certain alteration in a document I have here.”

Zaritsch’s neck was strained a little forward. There was a gurgle in his throat.

“By the Holy Angels, you have the despatch box of Grodin!”

“Quite true,” Alexander acquiesced. “It is the despatch box of Nicolas Grodin. I have had occasion to borrow it. I leave to-night for Moscow, Zaritsch.”

“Well?”

“Nicolas Grodin accompanies me.”

Zaritsch shook his head.

“That he would never do.”

“He may not be quite convinced of it in his own mind,” Alexander continued calmly, “but Nicolas Grodin accompanies me. Here is a document, Zaritsch, and an envelope prepared for its reception. The document is here. Read it.”

Zaritsch spread it out. It was not very long. He stared at that name and once more the little gurgle came from his throat. The palm of his hand was pressed upon the parchment. He turned round and looked wonderingly up into the face of the man by his side.

“You are carrying your own death warrant,” he muttered. “It is a triumph of melodrama, this. You carry your own death warrant to the escort who will meet you.”

“In a sense you are right,” Alexander agreed. “The only thing is that when you have finished with that document, Zaritsch, and you have obeyed my instructions with regard to it, it will not be my death warrant. It will be the death warrant of another man.”

Already Zaritsch was beginning vaguely to understand. His professional instincts of years ago were aroused. He passed his forefinger lightly over the surface of the parchment. He held it up to the light and spelt out the words to himself.

“You wish your name deleted?” he asked.

Alexander leaned over to the stationery rack, drew out a sheet of paper and scribbled a name.

"Exactly," he acquiesced, passing over the half sheet of notepaper, "and the name which I have written there substituted."

Zaritsch held the paper a short distance away. A start which seemed like an electric shock set his whole body quivering. He sat there, his lips parted, staring with fascinated eyes at the name which his companion had scribbled. Then with a sudden movement he folded his arms, leaned forward and drooped over the table. His shoulders began to shake. Alexander looked at him in wonder.

"You understand me, Zaritsch?" he demanded.

There was no answer. The man at the desk seemed to have become a prey to some uncontrollable emotion. His visitor grasped him by the shoulder.

"You understand what I wish?" he repeated imperatively.

Very slowly Zaritsch raised his head. The horrible gurgling noise was still coming from his throat, there was sweat upon his forehead, his mouth had taken a peculiar twist, he shook all over. Alexander suddenly understood. He was watching the most demoniacal exhibition of mirth it was possible to conceive. . . .

"Sit up, man!" Alexander ordered. "Time is precious. You can do it?"

Zaritsch wiped the moisture from his eyes.

"Of course I can do it."

“You are willing?”

“Happily—joyously.”

He spread open the parchment once more. He studied the signature. He nodded confidently.

“I need one or two little appliances and a chemical. I have them here in the drawer. There is no difficulty at all. I commence—yes?”

He was already fishing out a queer collection of knives and some powder from a drawer in front of him. He held a bottle of ink up to the light and then set it by his side.

“How long, Zaritsch?” Alexander questioned.

“I can fan my work dry,” Zaritsch meditated. “Half an hour.”

Alexander drew the evening paper and his cigarette case from his pocket. He threw himself into an easy chair.

“I wait,” he announced.

For forty minutes Zaritsch indulged in a breathless, silent orgy of concentrated effort. He had stooped lower and lower until his eyes were within a few inches of the parchment on which he worked. He had drawn down the green-shaded lamp until under its concentrated rays his features seemed ghastly and inhuman. He was breathing heavily as he swung round in his chair.

“It is finished!” he exclaimed.

Alexander rose quickly to his feet and looked down at the yellow sheet with its strange Russian characters, its flourishes, its concise and deadly brevity. When he had finished reading he uttered a word of approval.

“Your hand has not lost its cunning.”

Zaritsch grinned at him.

“It has been a labour of love,” he said.

With thin inhuman fingers he folded the parchment in its original creases and, with the envelope, handed it to Alexander.

“There is no living man,” he said, “who would believe that this had been tampered with. I wish you good fortune with it. It may bring you great success. It may bring to me escape.”

“You are not a prisoner,” Alexander reminded him.

Zaritsch wiped his eyes and spectacles.

“I am a prisoner of necessity,” he said. “You probably know what I know—that I have only to leave the shelter of this building for an hour and I am finished. Grodin is afraid of me. I know too much. I know far too much. I owe my life to the shelter of this place.”

Alexander locked up the document in the despatch case. He looked curiously for a moment or two at the speaker.

“You are a marvellous example, Zaritsch,” he confided, “of the philosophy of predestination. Many a time since the morning

when Leonard told me that he had given you quarters here I wondered why we should have been the instrument of your preservation. It was for the best, Zaritsch. However soon you may quit this world or however unpleasant your end may be, you have at least justified yourself to-night. Ring for some of your beloved vodka. Order what you will. You are free of the place, Zaritsch. In three days' time crawl out on to the roof and listen. Watch the sun rise over the river and listen. You can imagine that you hear either the joybells of deliverance or the deep-throated guns. Lift your head up that morning, Zaritsch. You are one of the few of the Russian intelligentsia of these days who have imagination. You might have done marvellous things with it. See that it does not play you false now that the great day is coming."

There was a momentary responsive flash in Zaritsch's eyes. Alexander left him there, passing along the silent but well-guarded corridors of the great building towards the outer world. Ten minutes later he was striding up the canopied way which stretched from the massive front door of Kensington House to the kerbstone. He crossed the hall with swift footsteps, passed that scattered line of sombre-looking servants solemnly springing to attention at his approach, and with the air of one familiar with the place entered a delightful little room filled with flowers. Anna and Simone were seated there alone. Simone threw him a kiss and disappeared through a door at the farther end of the apartment. Anna's dark eyes were full of questions as she half rose from her seat on the divan. He waved her back and took the place by her side.

"So far, I have succeeded," he announced quietly.

His tone knew little of triumph. In her expression there was something almost of terror.

“You mean, then, that you really go?” she asked, as though she had been clinging to a last hope.

“We leave in a few hours. We should arrive at the frontier almost at the scheduled time. Everything now will depend upon Molonieff. If I am in time, everything will go as it should. There will be no more savage beasts like Grodin gnawing away at the heart of Russia. She will become what she has never been yet—a free country. And that is all there is to be said, Anna, except that for these few moments we are alone together. You see, I am no longer the prophet. I am down on the earth. I am prepared to strike the great blow. If I succeed, and I shall succeed, there will be two prizes for me—the freedom of Russia will be the prize from heaven, and you, Anna, will be my prize on earth.”

She crept into his arms, her warm lips clinging to his; her long fingers wound feverishly around his neck. There was a sweet and memorable silence. Only the little French clock on Simone’s writing-table ticked gaily, the flames in the small open fireplace hissed around the pine logs they were devouring. Outside, in the rainswept streets, no one was stirring. Anna drew back a little. The fire of his firm lips, his smile with all it signified, filled her heart with deep and passionate content.

“You will succeed, Alexander. I feel it. I know it.”

Her voice was joyful, almost triumphant. Again she stole into his embrace. . . . Then he rose to his feet at the sound of voices

outside. He stooped from his great height and kissed her upon the forehead. The door had opened. The Prince stood upon the threshold looking in upon them. It was the end of one of his precious dreams but side by side with the great issues of these few hours his own disappointment seemed of small import.

“I think,” he suggested, “that the feast had better begin. That fellow Grodin is smoking all my cigars.”

XXVIII

Grodin, although shaking with terror, made some attempt at bravado when Alexander led him with Leopold into the great reception room. The Prince stepped forward and bowed. Simone came swiftly towards Alexander with outstretched hands. Anna, too, greeted him silently from the background.

"I appeal to you, Prince," Grodin said savagely. "I have been brought here against my will—I, an accredited envoy from a friendly country! And with a revolver pressed against my side the whole of the way. Is it you who give countenance to such Chicago gangster methods?"

"Calm yourself, Excellency," the Prince replied. "If my nephew chooses to bring you that way I am sure that he had a reason—and there is our young friend from the ballet, too. I look upon you, according to your desire, as unwilling guests. You see, I do not offer my hand. I beg, however, that you will join us at the supper which will presently be served."

"But why?" Grodin demanded. "I know very well that the sound of my name is loathesome to you. Why am I brought here?"

"And I," Leopold cried shrilly. "Why am I brought here a prisoner? I will not eat food or drink wine in this house."

"You will do as you are told, young man," Alexander said calmly. "Do you really wish to know why you are here?"

“If you do not tell me at once what you mean by this conduct,” Grodin threatened, “I shall appeal to the servants. I will insist upon telephoning to the police. You cannot keep me here against my will.”

“Well, we shall see,” the Prince observed. “There shall be no misunderstanding. I look upon you, Nicolas Grodin, as a dangerous traitor to your country and it would give me great pleasure to offer you poison instead of food. As to your companion, I know nothing of him except that he is an exceedingly unprepossessing type of young man whom I regret having to entertain. But the facts are these. My nephew finds it necessary to keep you both cut off from the world, safe even from the telephone, until a certain hour. He appeals to me, knowing the facility my household affords. These are the conditions under which I am receiving you. I beg that you will accept them, and I shall try my best to be a considerate host.”

“I refuse to accept them,” Grodin declared loudly, as the butler entered with a tray of cocktails. “I will not eat or drink here. Let the servants listen to what I have to say,” he added, looking round and standing a little more squarely on his feet as he noticed the two footmen following the butler. “I have been brought here against my will and threatened with assassination on the way. Someone will pay very dearly for this. The one who telephones to Scotland Yard and insists upon a detective being sent here at once will earn a hundred pounds’ reward and save his skin.”

“Dry Martini or vodka, Monsieur?” the butler asked as he presented the tray.

There was something in the man's voice, perfectly modulated and controlled, which had an instantly chilling effect upon Grodin's impulse of bravado. He looked at the other two menservants bearing sandwiches and various forms of savoury. There was not a flicker of interest, not a sign of their having heard. Grodin took a glass from the tray mechanically, but his fingers were trembling.

"You must understand, my reluctant guest," the Prince explained, "that every servant in this house is Russian, every one of them realises only too well that it is renegades of your type who have been responsible for their position here as servitors and exiles. I am not proposing that you should come to a violent end under my roof, unless your behaviour asks for it, but amongst the twenty or thirty of my people by whom you are surrounded, there is not one who would not gladly facilitate your departure from this world if he were permitted to do so."

Grodin listened to those icy words and he knew that he was listening to the truth. There was a chair behind him and he sank into it.

"Do you mean that you are keeping us in prison here?" he asked. "The thing is absurd. You will have to let us go sometime. What then?"

"What your young friend may care to say or to whom he may care to say it really does not seem to me to matter very much," the Prince observed as he lit a cigarette. "He would find it, I think, a little difficult to obtain a hearing from anyone of importance. What you will say will make even less difference, because I imagine that in a little over thirty-six hours you will

be across the frontier of Russia. From what I heard to-day, it is extremely improbable that the passport authorities will welcome your re-entrance into the country."

"Quite right," Alexander said. "They censored one of your last letters to a banker in New York."

Grodin set down his caviar sandwich. He had temporarily lost his appetite.

"Is there a private plot behind all this?" he demanded. "Do none of you understand that I am the accredited representative to this country of one of the strongest nations in the world?"

"There is no private plot at all," the Prince answered. "The Grand Duke Alexander here, in whom are vested all the hopes of exiled Russians, is risking his life at your instigation. We want to be perfectly certain that if anything happens to him someone will remain who will be held responsible. In other words, you are travelling with him as his hostage. If the situation should develop exactly as you have explained it, all will be well, but if there should be a trap of any sort, if you should be found guilty of an attempt to hand him over to one of those firing squads, you will find your future position here somewhat involved."

"And what about me?" Leopold demanded, his voice reaching a higher note still as his fear became intensified.

"Oh, you are a person of no importance," the Prince remarked pleasantly. "The only trouble about you is that you are an informer of the lowest grade. That, however, is not our affair. The only way in which you might make yourself a nuisance is by

publishing the fact that Nicolas Grodin has been kept here for a few hours against his will."

"I shall do that, anyway."

"Perhaps, then, we may have to keep you a day longer," de Chambordine continued. "Disagreeable for us, of course, but necessary. When Grodin has reached Russia you can bark away to your heart's content."

The servants were throwing open the folding doors at the end of the room. Grodin buried his face in his hands.

"I do not wish to eat," he declared.

"It will do you no good to remain here," the Prince assured him. "The servants will be left to guard you, and my servants, although they appear well-mannered, let me warn you, have something of the Tartar underneath their suaveness."

Grodin rose to his feet and followed the others into the supper room.

Even to a man of Grodin's lack of sensibility, there was something dramatic, almost awesome, in that leisurely, luxurious meal with its epicurean setting and its grim background of sombre magnificence. The servants moved like ghouls in the shadow-land beyond the table, upon which the whole of the illumination of the room seemed to be directed. There was something menacing in the atmosphere. Grodin could feel that, for all his thickness of hide. Yet it was a madman's threat which had been made. Every moment he felt more light-hearted as he

realised the absurdity of the situation. It was not possible that he should be conducted from this well-known mansion through the streets of London into the plane, kept silent during the change at Berlin, silent on the long journey to Moscow. He watched the face of the man seated between Anna and Simone, talking in turn to both of them, speaking now and then with the careless levity of one about to take a brief expedition into an adjoining country. He watched, also, his host, seated in an enormous high-backed chair at the head of the table, so far away that his fine patrician face, in the shadowy illumination, seemed more like a waxen impression than the face of a human being. He broke through the silence, however, as the meal progressed.

"Tell me, Nicolas Grodin," he said, "to what do you attribute this weakening of the present Russian régime?"

"I do not admit that it is weakening," was the brusque rejoinder. "The Dictator would welcome a pause. This application of the new scheme of life has left the nation a little breathless. Thinking men and women, even of the lower orders, are beginning to ask inconvenient questions."

"And a good many of those who have ventured to put those inconvenient questions into print," Alexander observed, "have had to creep out of the country or face the firing squad."

"The Dictator has his own methods," was the sullen reply.

"He has shown us what a peasant can do in the way of barbaric ruthlessness," the Prince reflected. "Before we are many years older, Nicolas Grodin, we may hear the cry of those peasants again. This time the cry will be worse than any that has gone

before. It will be the cry of a people hungering for revenge upon those who have betrayed them."

Grodin moved uneasily in his seat. He drank a full glass of champagne.

"If you think that the time has not yet come," he demanded, "why do you encourage Alexander to go? I simply delivered my message. It was a great offer."

"Is it a genuine one?" the Prince asked.

"No man can read the mind of another."

"A discreet answer," the Prince acknowledged, "but remember, I know my nephew well. He is taking his life into his hands. He is not letting you out of his sight until he has met Molonieff. You do not seem to me the type of man likely to commit suicide."

Grodin was visibly shivering.

"If he is afraid," he muttered, "he had better not go. I will cancel all the instructions. I will tell the Dictator that I have failed."

"Too late," de Chambordine sighed. "Alexander is an obstinate man. He has set his heart on going. They tell me that you have an espionage system here, but I do not think it is as good as the one we have been conducting under the auspices of the *European Review*. It is the nature of our reports which has induced us to consider your offer so seriously. We do believe that Russia is on the verge of a new upheaval."

“It is comprehensible, that,” Grodin confessed. “Mistakes have been made. The Chief has made his share of them. Some of Russia’s most hopeful sons have been sentenced to the firing squads. Hence this mission to your nephew. If he is afraid, it is not too late even now. No man can carry through a great work with fear in his heart.”

The Prince laughed quietly. The voice of Leopold, shrill and petulant, was like a sudden discord.

“Grodin,” he called out, “why do you not assert yourself? You are an ambassador, you have diplomatic rights. There is some evil in this house. We must leave.”

Alexander rose quietly to his feet. He called the butler and whispered a word in his ear. With expressionless face the latter approached Leopold.

“Permit me, Monsieur,” he said. “If you will please come this way.”

The young man stood up.

“Where are you taking me?” he asked suspiciously. “I wish for a taxicab.”

There was not even a scuffle, for the servant was a giant and Leopold, except for his marvellous legs, an infant. He was borne passively from the room, speechless with fright. The Prince made a sign to Simone. She rose and led Anna away. The two men closed around Grodin. In the background, like grim sentinels, two of the waiting servants stood by the door.

“Grodin,” Alexander began, “I am taking you from here to a flying ground into my plane and we shall start in a short time for Berlin. You will not leave the flying grounds. We shall go on again to Moscow as soon as the plane has been filled up and prepared. I ask you—are you willing to go with me without making a disturbance either here in London, the flying ground or in Germany? Are you willing to give me your parole?”

Grodin drank down another glass of champagne and felt something which passed for courage in his veins.

“I do not wish to go to Russia,” he replied. “I refuse to accompany you. I shall shout for help at every street corner, to every policeman I see. You bluffed me in that short drive from Chelsea. You would not dare to use any weapon against me. This is a law-abiding city.”

“It would be better,” Alexander meditated, “to make a friendly arrangement with you, Grodin. I do not care about a corpse as a fellow passenger, or a man so deeply drugged as to resemble one. Still, you are going with me to Russia.”

Grodin had another thought.

“It would be useless my attempting the journey. I have no passport. If I left behind me the papers which I have collected on behalf of the Russian government which are now in my despatch box I should myself be arrested.”

Another of those mysterious figures was standing in the background and he hurried forward at a signal from Alexander. He carried in his hand a metal despatch box. Grodin stared at it for a moment in stupefaction, then he leaped forward and there

was such vigour in his movement that his coat was ripped. He very nearly broke away but he just failed. His behaviour was that of a madman.

“I must have that case!” he cried. “If anyone tampers with it there will be war. I must have my papers. My passport is there.”

“Compose yourself,” Alexander begged. “The case shall be yours when we arrive at Moscow.”

Grodin suddenly ceased to struggle. He took off his spectacles, covered his eyes with his hand and leaned forward. His was the attitude of a man praying. His body was still quivering, his breath coming heavily.

“Well?” Alexander asked.

Grodin stood up. He replaced his spectacles. His voice was weak and faint.

“Where did you get that despatch box?” he demanded.

“A simple form of burglary,” Alexander admitted. “It came from your room at Buckingham Court. It shows my consideration for you, Grodin. I felt sure that you would not care to travel without it. I wrote a note to your wife and applied for it on your behalf, explaining that you were making the journey with me. There you are.”

Grodin strained forward.

“Turn it round,” he directed the servant who was holding it.

The man glanced at Alexander, who nodded assent.

“Let him examine it,” the latter said. “He may do everything but touch it.”

Grodin stared hard at the box with blank eyes. He motioned with his hand and the man turned it so that the three locks were exposed. The box was, to all appearance, intact. There was not a scratch upon the locks.

“You are hard to convince,” Alexander continued. “I will go even further with you to show how little I fear anything that you can do. You may open the box. Here are the keys.”

Grodin shrank back.

“Open it here?” he asked harshly.

“It is permitted,” Alexander consented. “Satisfy yourself with your own eyes that all the papers you have in your mind are there. Touch nothing, but see for yourself.”

Grodin’s right hand was trembling to such an extent that he could scarcely fit the keys into the locks.

“Calm yourself, Grodin,” Alexander advised. “You will see nothing unexpected.”

Grodin bent over his task. The lid of the box flew open. He leaned over it, stared and stretched out his hand. Alexander gripped his wrist in a clutch of iron.

“I told you that you might look, Nicolas Grodin,” he said. “No

more. You may not touch. There is what seems to be your passport. There is a very official-looking document. I give you my word that nothing has been stolen."

Grodin thought hard. His face was distorted with evil imaginings. He drooped his head so that the cunning light in his eyes might not be seen. There, without a doubt, was the long envelope, and the document with the chocolate-coloured seal. It was still there. Olga must have lost her nerve!

"All seems to be there," he acknowledged. "If I go with you quietly to Russia that box will be handed to me or to the authorities upon arrival?"

"That is my promise," Alexander replied.

Grodin stood for a moment deep in thought. He was still breathing unpleasantly but he had the appearance of a long confined prisoner who suddenly sees the daylight.

"I do not wish to make the journey," he said. "I shall have to face trouble when I arrive, but on your terms I will come. If we are to start now, give me first some brandy."

At a sign from Alexander the servants fell back. They returned to the table. The butler approached from the sideboard with a beautifully shaped glass half-filled with golden liquor.

"It is 1878 Armagnac, Monsieur," he announced.

Grodin tasted it. He was free again. It was true that the doors were guarded, but he was free. The word had been passed—on arrival at Moscow the box and its contents would be handed

over to the authorities, would be theirs to open and read. There was the faint commencement of a Satanic smile at the corners of his full lips.

“This is good,” he said as he twisted the liquor round in his glass and lifted it once more to his lips. “If it is to be, then, I will go with you to Russia.”

XXIX

Alexander, bent double and a little breathless, slammed the door behind him and stumbled back into the small, oak-panelled saloon of his famous plane. Grodin, fast asleep, lay back in one of the fixed easy chairs. Paul, from the other side of the aisle, watched him ceaselessly.

“The wireless?” Paul asked.

“Official only,” his master replied. “There is a new landing place for planes. We are to descend almost at the entrance to the barracks. Look below, Paul.”

Paul rubbed the glass with his sleeve. He gave a little gasp. It seemed as though the heavens had been turned upside down, with every star shining. As far as he could see on that great plain below, pinpricks of fire were burning. Grodin stirred uneasily in his place. He sat up with a start. He needed shaving. His hair was unkempt. There was an empty brandy bottle upon the table.

“Where are we?” he demanded drowsily.

“The air you are breathing,” Alexander replied, “is that of Russia. We are dropping now about a hundred feet a minute. We are to descend, according to wireless instructions, close to the new barracks.”

“It is important,” Grodin declared, “that we land at the

Kronsmeer Flying Fields. A patrol will be looking out for me there."

"That is precisely where we are bound for," Alexander confided. "We will probably find the patrol waiting for us."

They were sweeping now in vast circles. From where Alexander stood looking downwards he watched the rockets rising like toy fireworks from the earth. As he counted them he smiled.

"You had better get ready, Grodin," he advised. "The weather is clear and if our landing is perfect we should be outside in ten minutes. What about your passport and papers?"

Grodin's arms encircled his despatch box. He drew it nearer to him, clutching it jealously.

"It is our bargain," he reminded him. "I open it only upon landing."

"A bargain is a bargain," Alexander assented. "I am simply warning you to be prepared. We shall have to pass into the inspection yard before we enter the barracks proper."

Grodin chuckled grimly.

"I shall be prepared. They will not keep me long."

"Are you not going to tidy up at all?" Alexander asked, looking at him distastefully.

Grodin shook his head.

“In an hour I shall be at my flat,” he explained with an added truculency already in his tone. “There I have servants, a warm bath, a *coiffeur*—ah, that will be good!”

With scarcely a jerk they touched the ground, ran smoothly along and came at last to a standstill. The three men looked around in wonder. The whole square, as far as one could see, seemed thronged with soldiers drawn up in close formation. Alexander stood for a moment upon the steps. A little group of men in uniform was waiting for him. Close behind him was Grodin, gripping his despatch box. There was a curious silence everywhere, an almost sinister silence, although the smile never left Alexander’s lips. He returned the salutes of the two officers who had stepped forward to greet him. Grodin would have stood by his side but was drawn firmly back. Words passed backwards and forwards between Alexander and the officers of the guard. Alexander nodded acquiescence. They turned and walked to the great shed barely fifty yards away. The doors were flung wide open. Again there were salutes. Grodin looked about him irritably. He spoke to the officer who seemed to have appointed himself his guard.

“I am Nicolas Grodin,” he announced. “I carry despatches. Is it known who I am?”

“The Colonel on duty will salute you, Nicolas Grodin. He will also examine your papers.”

The hall, too, was crowded with soldiers. At a table at the far end a man was seated whom Grodin obviously recognised. His expression had changed. He smiled and carried himself with more confidence. They arrived at the table. He greeted genially

the officer in charge, drawing his keys from his pocket and unfastening the despatch box. Alexander and Paul had fallen a little behind.

“Here,” Grodin declared, throwing it open, “is my passport. This,” he went on, raising his voice and passing over the document with the huge seal, “you will know how to deal with.”

The officer brushed the passport to one side. He had risen to his feet. He spread out the parchment and read it through. When he had finished he frowned slightly and looked at Grodin’s evil, expectant face.

“Do you know what this document is which you have passed into my hands, Nicolas Grodin?”

“I do,” was the triumphant reply. “It is an order signed by the Dictator for the prompt shooting, immediately he arrives upon Russian soil, of Alexander, nephew and heir of the Grand Duke Nicolas, arch enemy of Russia, the last of the aristocrats who has ventured here, Colonel. I have brought you the order under his own nose, in his own plane. The warrant dealing with General Molonieff you have already received. It is for you to act.”

There was a long pause. The man in the uniform of a Colonel looked at Grodin with cold disdain. Then he summoned an officer who stood close by.

“Nicolas Grodin,” he said, “the order you have passed me is one for the summary death not of the persons you mention but of Nicolas Grodin immediately he sets foot on Russian soil.”

Grodin, for a moment, seemed dazed. Then he tried to snatch at the document but firm arms were restraining him.

"It is a lie!" he cried out. "The order came to me. It has never left my possession. I have read it word by word. It is Alexander who is to be shot. It is to secure his death that I have brought him back."

"Quite a mistake, my friend," Alexander intervened with a quiet smile. "Not even a matter for argument. Now that this little affair is concluded," he went on, turning to the officer who stood by his side, "you can conduct me, if you please, to the quarters of General Molonieff."

A horrible cry rang out from the shed, silenced almost immediately. An officer to whom the Colonel had spoken gave the word of command. The footsteps of the platoon of soldiers marching back into the square broke step for a moment. They were obliged to half carry their prisoner.

Molonieff's quarters were bare enough but to Alexander they were as a chamber in Paradise. There was Molonieff, the great Molonieff, his hand extended. There was warmth, there were lights, a further forest of extended hands, a roar of voices. He was amongst his friends. There was more than a sprinkling of the old régime, who had struggled for their places and kept them. Their shouts filled the room as one by one they saluted. Soon that changed. It was all handshakes—joy.

"Eight hundred thousand men," Molonieff told him with his arm around his shoulder, "have taken the oath to serve

the new Russia. By to-morrow there will be a million. There has not been a shot fired. To-morrow you will hear the cannons roar, but in salute only. You will see the bonfires all round the city. There will be rejoicings, not battle."

"And the Dictator?"

"He sits in his room," Molonieff continued sternly. "Half his bodyguard have deserted him. A few remain. Escape is impossible, but we waited for you."

"You did honourably and well," Alexander said with emphasis. "Let him stay there till after the meeting you have called. The army must be supreme, but for a few days only. There are statesmen still left to mingle with us. Russia has been an autocracy too long. Soon we will show the world the meaning of true liberty."

Alexander asked one more question.

"How is the Dictator occupying himself during these hours?"

Molonieff smiled.

"Indulging in a rare bout of common sense," he replied. "He has called a meeting of the professors and his economic advisors. He is over there," he added, pointing to the dome of a building close at hand. "We shall hear the results of that meeting before long. Meanwhile, we are as safe as though we were in England. So far as you can see, every house and building is occupied by soldiers. Practically the whole of the western army is encamped around this square. There is no hurry, my dear friend— the people are waiting. I propose that we, too, wait.

Before long we shall hear something from this conference."

The conference, although it was a dreary proceeding, had its dramatic side. The Dictator sat alone behind the bare table in the chamber from which he had ruled his country. The auditorium was filled with a nervous, hustling group of men who only a few days before had thought themselves the favoured ones of the earth. Their master, in a voice which rang through the building, was calling them up, one by one, pelting them with a rain of questions fast and furious. By the side of him was one of those confiscated copies of the *European Review*. Every now and then he referred to it.

"Professor Comrade Dennikoff!" he called out.

A pale-faced young man with brown hair already streaked with grey rose to his feet. The Dictator pointed with thick forefinger to where he was standing.

"The Council of Agriculture," he barked. "Fourteen million peasants have been at work in the various states. What are the results?"

"The poorest crops since before the Revolution."

"Where is the money?"

"The State has it."

"What is the condition of the peasants?"

"Mostly starving."

“Why was I not told of their condition? Here it seems the report is published in this magazine which is read by all Europe and I was kept in ignorance.”

“Those were the orders of the Council,” was the brief reply.

The Dictator moved menacingly in his chair and waved the young professor aside.

“Professor Comrade Sorloff!”

A short, alert-looking man sprang to his feet.

“You are responsible for a large section of the mines,” the Dictator said. “What is the situation?”

“Production has been on an enormous scale,” was the prompt reply. “The estimated value of metals brought to the surface ready for home use or for export is something like two hundred millions in excess of the cost of production.”

“And the miners?”

“The medical report declares that they have lost twenty-five per cent. of their physique through either living underground or without sufficient shelter in the sheds and huts provided. A hundred thousand of them, at least, are practically starving.”

“Your report,” the Dictator said, “was published in this review for all Europe to read. Why was it not sent to me?”

“My Department knows nothing of that.”

The Dictator waved him away.

“Professor Comrade Dassen!” he called out.

An unkempt, haggard-looking man rose to his feet.

“What about the timber?” the Dictator demanded.

“The timber results show enormous profits and vast stocks,” was the dismal reply, “but thousands of the workers have died, unable to bear the hardships of climate and production or poisoned by the poor food supplied by the State commissariat.”

The Dictator called to a man who had been standing gloomily with folded arms a little outside the circle. He tapped the copy of the *European Review*.

“Comrade Prossop,” he said, “have you read a copy of this?”

The man pushed his way to the front. He was tall and scraggy with masses of long, untidy hair. He had a lean face and a hungry look in his eyes.

“Yes,” he acknowledged, “I have read it. That is the journal which has spread the knowledge of our miserable state throughout the world. The damnable part of it all is that it speaks the truth.”

The Dictator was moved to fury. He crashed his fist upon the table.

“Do you mean to tell me,” he shouted, “that you who have preached the doctrines of pure Communism since the building of

your university, that you who have been a worshipper of Karl Marx, cannot explain these failures?"

"Easily," was the scornful reply.

The Dictator leaned forward, moved to one side a pile of papers and disclosed the revolver lying on the table. He caressed it as a child might play with a toy.

"Get on with it, then," he ordered.

"Bad administration; evil-thinking, ignorant committees; carelessness, greed, rapacity everywhere. These peasants and miners and tillers of the soil have dragged up the wealth of our country for idle loafers to dissipate or store in your coffers. The bogey of the old world was Capitalism. Capitalism is a shining virtue compared with present-day administration."

The Dictator rose to his feet. The man to whom he had been listening laughed as he watched the revolver gripped in those swarthy fingers.

"One more or less—what good will it do?" he sneered. "If you had sought the truth earlier you could have found it. If it stings now that you hear it you will gain nothing by bringing yourself a little nearer hell."

A door in the distance banged. A touch of his old authority seemed to come back to the Dictator. Still brandishing the revolver in his hand, his voice, harsh and penetrating, rang through the room.

"Away—all of you," he ordered. "To-morrow I shall call a

meeting of the General Council."

There was no disposition amongst the little body of men to linger. As the room became clear, servants and clerks streamed in from unseen places. The Dictator's secretary approached the long table, carrying an official-looking envelope in his hand.

"A letter from military headquarters, master."

"Read it to me," the other snapped. "Tell me what it says."

The secretary cut open the envelope. There were only half a dozen lines written on the strip of paper he drew out. He shook his head gravely as he read.

"Your bodyguard, master, has been disbanded and disarmed. They are confined to barracks but will be released on taking the oath of allegiance to Alexander and General Molonieff."

"What else?"

"General Molonieff reports that the city is under martial law from six o'clock. He requests your abdication. A train is being prepared which will transport you to Georgia at midnight."

"Repeat that," the Dictator ordered.

The secretary read the words slowly once more, then folded up the paper.

"A committee from the army is in possession of the State premises," he announced. "The appointments are signed by

Alexander, as Commander-in-Chief of all the Russian forces under arms, and Molonieff, as Chief of the Staff. The orders are that not a single shot is to be fired except in cases of dire necessity."

The Dictator leaned forward. His voice was hoarse and eager.

"I agree to abdicate," he declared. "Tell me the conditions."

"This paper says that you are free to go into Georgia," the secretary continued. "Every officer of your personal staff except three has been discharged. The Chief of the Police is missing. There is no disorder in the city. A verbal message from Alexander and Molonieff to you and a proclamation already upon the walls of the cathedral announce the formation of a new government with a free Press and the frontiers open to correspondents from every country in the world. Those of us who are left of your late supporters implore you to sign."

The Dictator took up the pen and scrawled his signature across the parchment sheet. He glanced around him, then beckoned the secretary a little closer.

"Stradinoff," he muttered, "you remember it is only a fortnight ago that I signed the death warrants of Alexander and Molonieff. What has become of them?"

The secretary shook his head.

"I fancy, master," he replied, "the answer to that question will become part of the unwritten history of the world. The staff officer of the day refused to receive the death warrant of

General Molonieff and at his order it was destroyed. The death warrant which was presented this morning and had your signature upon it bore only the name of Nicolas Grodin, who arrived in the plane with Alexander. The warrant was executed ten minutes after Grodin himself had handed it to the patrol specially appointed a week ago."

A curious change suddenly took place in the Dictator's overwrought features.

"Grodin was shot?" he cried.

"Your own warrant, master," the secretary answered. "The last, I fancy, that you will ever sign." . . .

There was terror outside in the streets, rapidly abating but still terror. In every room of the Palace were little groups of shivering servants and employees. No one knew what was to come. Fear had hung so long about the place that it had become like a pestilential fever. Even the secretary, who was blotting his master's signature, was as pale as death. He looked up with a start. It seemed to him that the man who had once been great was calling out as though in some paroxysm. Then he realised the truth. Amidst all the wild upheaval by which he was surrounded, the man who had just signed away what he had boastfully called his destiny was laughing softly to himself as at some huge joke.

"Nicolas Grodin shot!" he choked. "Tell me, Stradinoff, how did he face the firing squad?"

The secretary held out his hand, shook his head and hurried away shivering into the shadows.

All over the world the wireless was flashing and crackling, the amazing news was pouring from every loudspeaker. The long-distance telephones were besieged, the newspapers were frantically issuing special editions bespattered with headlines in italics. A veritable orgy of news seemed to have descended upon the world which turned every house and hotel, railway train and even the streets themselves into a rustling chaos of journals scarcely dry from the press.

"RUSSIA DISCARDS HER GOVERNMENT" . . . "DOOM OF THE PRESENT DYNASTY" . . . "THE BLOODLESS REVOLUTION" . . . "THE DICTATOR PLEADS IGNORANCE OF PRESENT CONDITIONS AND ACCEPTS BANISHMENT TO GEORGIA" . . . "THE ARMY IN CONTROL" . . . "THE GRAND DUKE ALEXANDER AND GENERAL MOLONIEFF TWIN DICTATORS" . . . "ALL EUROPE INVITED TO SEND NEWSPAPER CORRESPONDENTS" . . . "A HUNDRED MILES OF TRAINS EN ROUTE FOR THE RUSSIAN FRONTIER" . . . "THE SKIES BLACK WITH AEROPLANES" . . . "PROCLAMATION ISSUED BY NEW RULERS ESTABLISHES FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND PROMISES RETURN OF HUGE HOARDS OF CAPITAL AMASSED BY LATE GOVERNMENT TO THE WORKERS"

"PEOPLE TO ELECT A GOVERNING ASSEMBLY NEXT MONTH" . . . "GOVERNMENT PRESSES WORKING ON VOTING PAPERS" . . . "ADVISORY COMMITTEE OF MODERATES ALREADY BEING FORMED" . . . "MOLONIEFF DECLARES THAT LATE GOVERNMENT

HAS ROBBED THE PEASANTS OF COUNTLESS MILLIONS ALL OF WHICH WILL BE RESTORED” . . . “FIRE OF REJOICINGS THROUGHOUT RUSSIA” . . . “LATE GOVERNMENT LEADERS RECEIVING EXILE PAPERS BUT NO EXECUTIONS” . . . “COURTS OF JUSTICE THROWN OPEN” . . . “A NATION IN HYSTERICS” . . . “LATE DICTATOR BELIEVED IGNORANT OF MANY OF THE RECENT EXECUTIONS LEAVES FOR GEORGIA TO-MORROW”

“FURTHER NEWS OF THE BLOODLESS REVOLUTION” . . . “GRAND DUKE ALEXANDER THE IDOL OF THE PEOPLE” . . . “IN BRIEF PROCLAMATIONS HE ANNOUNCES THAT NEW GOVERNMENT WILL BE FRAMED ON LIMITED MONARCHY LINES AND WILL COMMENCE BY OFFERING TO WORLD A SCHEME FOR UNIVERSAL PEACE” . . . “NEW GOVERNMENT ALREADY DISPLAYING MARVELLOUS POWERS OF ORGANISATION” . . . “NO SCENES OF VIOLENCE OR EXCESS” . . . “CROWDS HYSTERICAL WITH JOY THRONGING STREETS AND SINGING ANCIENT HYMNS” . . . “CHURCHES AND CATHEDRALS PACKED WITH SOBBING MULTITUDES” . . . “CENSORSHIP OF PRESS ENTIRELY REMOVED” . . . “NAVY UNANIMOUSLY ACCEPTS NEW GOVERNMENT”

Simone drove down to Chelsea on the evening of the third day. Anna and her maid were both on their knees before trunks and the room was strewn with clothes.

“What does it mean?” Simone exclaimed. “What are you doing?”

Anna looked around with a radiant smile. A wireless message fluttered between her fingers.

“Packing,” she answered happily.

THE END

BOOKS BY E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Mr. Oppenheim’s published books, including the four omnibus volumes, total 149. Some of them have never been published in the United States. All those which have been issued here (by Little, Brown and Company) are starred. Titles now in print in the United States, either in the regular editions or cheap editions, are double-starred. Some others are available in English editions. Dates refer to *first* publication in book form, whether in England or the United States.

NOVELS

Mr. Oppenheim has published in all 108 novels, of which 12 have not been published in the United States (unless in pirated editions). Five of his novels appeared under the pseudonym “Anthony Partridge”; these are marked †.

Expiation. 1887
A Monk of Cruta. 1894

The Peer and the Woman. 1895
*A Daughter of the Marionis. 1895
False Evidence. 1896
A Modern Prometheus. 1896
*The Mystery of Mr. Bernard Brown. 1896
The Wooing of Fortune. 1896
The Postmaster of Market Deighton. 1897
The Amazing Judgment. 1897
*Mysterious Mr. Sabin. 1898
A Daughter of Astrea. 1898
*As a Man Lives. 1898
*Mr. Marx's Secret. 1899
*The Man and His Kingdom. 1899
*The World's Great Snare. 1900
*A Millionaire of Yesterday. 1900
*The Survivor. 1901
*Enoch Strone. 1901
(English title A Master of Men.)
*A Sleeping Memory. 1902
(English title The Great Awakening.)
*The Traitors. 1902
*A Prince of Sinners. 1903
*The Yellow Crayon. 1903
*The Betrayal. 1904
*Anna the Adventuress. 1904
*A Maker of History. 1905
*The Master Mummer. 1905
*A Lost Leader. 1906
The Tragedy of Andrea. 1906
*The Malefactor. 1906
(English title Mr. Wingrave, Millionaire.)
*Berenice. 1907

*The Avenger. 1907
(English title The Conspirators.)
*The Great Secret. 1908
(English title The Secret.)
*The Governors. 1908
†The Distributors. 1908
(English title Ghosts of Society.)
*The Missioner. 1908
*†The Kingdom of Earth. 1909
(English title The Black Watcher.)
*Jeanne of the Marshes. 1909
*The Illustrious Prince. 1910
*†Passers By. 1910
*The Lost Ambassador. 1910
(English title The Missing Delora.)
*†The Golden Web. 1911
*The Moving Finger. 1911
(English title A Falling Star.)
*Havoc. 1911
*†The Court of St. Simon. 1912
*The Lighted Way. 1912
*The Tempting of Tavernake. 1912
*The Mischief Maker. 1913
*The Double Life of Mr. Alfred Burton. 1913
*The Way of these Women. 1914
*A People's Man. 1914
*The Vanished Messenger. 1914
The Black Box. 1915
(Novelization of photoplay, published by Grosset & Dunlap.)
*The Double Traitor. 1915.
*Mr. Grex of Monte Carlo. 1915
*The Kingdom of the Blind. 1916

*The Hillman. 1917
*The Cinema Murder. 1917
(English title The Other Romilly.)
**The Pawns Count. 1918
*The Zeppelin's Passenger. 1918
(English title Mr. Lessingham Goes Home.)
**The Wicked Marquis. 1919
**The Box with Broken Seals. 1919
(English title The Strange Case of Mr. Jocelyn Thew.)
*The Curious Quest. 1919
(English title The Amazing Quest of Mr. Ernest Bliss.)
**The Great Impersonation. 1920
**The Devil's Paw. 1920
**The Profiteers. 1921
*Jacob's Ladder. 1921
*Nobody's Man. 1921
**The Evil Shepherd. 1922
**The Great Prince Shan. 1922
*The Mystery Road. 1923
*The Wrath to Come. 1924
*The Passionate Quest. 1924
*Stolen Idols. 1925
**Gabriel Samara, Peacemaker. 1925
*The Golden Beast. 1926
*Prodigals of Monte Carlo. 1926
**Harvey Garrard's Crime. 1926
**The Interloper. 1927
(English title The Ex-Duke.)
**Miss Brown of X. Y. O. 1927
**The Light Beyond. 1928
**The Fortunate Wayfarer. 1928
**Matorni's Vineyard. 1928

**The Treasure House of Martin Hews. 1929
**The Glenlitten Murder. 1929
**The Million Pound Deposit. 1930
**The Lion and the Lamb. 1930
**Up the Ladder of Gold. 1931
*Simple Peter Cradd. 1931
**The Man from Sing Sing. 1932
(English title Moran Chambers Smiled.)
**The Ostrekoff Jewels. 1932
**Murder at Monte Carlo. 1933
**Jeremiah and the Princess. 1933
**The Gallows of Chance. 1934
**The Man without Nerves. 1934
(English title The Bank Manager.)
**The Strange Boarders of Palace Crescent. 1934
**The Spy Paramount. 1934
**The Battle of Basinghall Street. 1935
**Floating Peril. 1936
(English title The Bird of Paradise.)
**The Magnificent Hoax. 1936
(English title Judy of Bunter's Buildings.)
**The Dumb Gods Speak. 1937
**Envoy Extraordinary. 1937
**The Mayor on Horseback. 1937
**The Colossus of Arcadia. 1938
**The Spymaster. 1938
And Still I Cheat the Gallows. 1939
**Sir Adam Disappeared. 1939
**Exit a Dictator. 1939

SHORT-STORY COLLECTIONS

Of these 36 collections of short stories, 25 of which have been issued in book form in the United States, most of the volumes are series with sustained interest in which one group of characters appear throughout the various stories.

*The Long Arm of Mannister. 1908
(English title The Long Arm.)
**Peter Ruff and the Double-Four. 1912
(English title The Double-Four.)
*For the Queen. 1912
*Those Other Days. 1912
Mr. Laxworthy's Adventures. 1913
The Amazing Partnership. 1914
*An Amiable Charlatan. 1915
(English title The Game of Liberty.)
Mysteries of the Riviera. 1916
Aaron Rodd, Diviner. 1920
Ambrose Lavendale, Diplomat. 1920
Hon. Algernon Knox, Detective. 1920
*The Seven Conundrums. 1923
**Michael's Evil Deeds. 1923
**The Inevitable Millionaires. 1923
*The Terrible Hobby of Sir Joseph Londe. 1924
*The Adventures of Mr. Joseph P. Gray. 1925
The Little Gentleman from Okehampstead. 1926
*The Channay Syndicate. 1927
**Mr. Billingham, the Marquis and Madelon. 1927
*Madame and Her Twelve Virgins. 1927
**Nicholas Goade, Detective. 1927
The Exploits of Pudgy Pete. 1928
Chronicles of Melhampton. 1928
The Human Chase. 1929

Jennerton & Co. 1929
**What Happened to Forester. 1929
*Slane's Long Shots. 1930
**Gangster's Glory. 1931
(English title Inspector Dickens Retires.)
**Sinners Beware. 1931
**Crooks in the Sunshine. 1932
**The Ex-Detective. 1933
**General Besserley's Puzzle Box. 1935
**Advice Limited. 1936
**Ask Miss Mott. 1936
**Curious Happenings to the Rooke Legatees. 1937
**A Pulpit in the Grill Room. 1938

OMNIBUS VOLUMES

**Clowns and Criminals: The Oppenheim Omnibus. 1931
containing
Michael's Evil Deeds
Peter Ruff and the Double-Four
Recalled by the Double-Four
Jennerton & Co.
Aaron Rodd, Diviner
[The cheap edition contains only the first four books]
(English title The Oppenheim Omnibus: Forty-one Stories
containing
Michael's Evil Deeds
The Double-Four
Mr. Billingham, the Marquis and Madelon
Aaron Rodd, Diviner)
**Shudders and Thrills: The Second Oppenheim Omnibus. 1932

containing

The Evil Shepherd

Ghosts of Society

The Amazing Partnership

The Channay Syndicate

The Human Chase

Secret Service Omnibus. 1932

containing

Miss Brown of X. Y. O.

The Wrath to Come

Matorni's Vineyard

The Great Impersonation

Gabriel Samara, Peacemaker

**Spies and Intrigues: The Oppenheim Secret Service Omnibus. 1936

containing

The Wrath to Come

The Great Impersonation

Mr. Billingham, the Marquis and Madelon

Gabriel Samara, Peacemaker

TRAVEL

**The Quest for Winter Sunshine. 1927

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- Copyright notice provided as in the original—this e-text is public domain in the country of publication.
- Silently corrected palpable typos; left non-standard spellings and dialect unchanged.
- Only in the text versions, delimited italicized text in _underscores_ (the HTML version reproduces the font form of the printed book.)

[The end of *Exit A Dictator* by E. Phillips Oppenheim]