THE Spymaster

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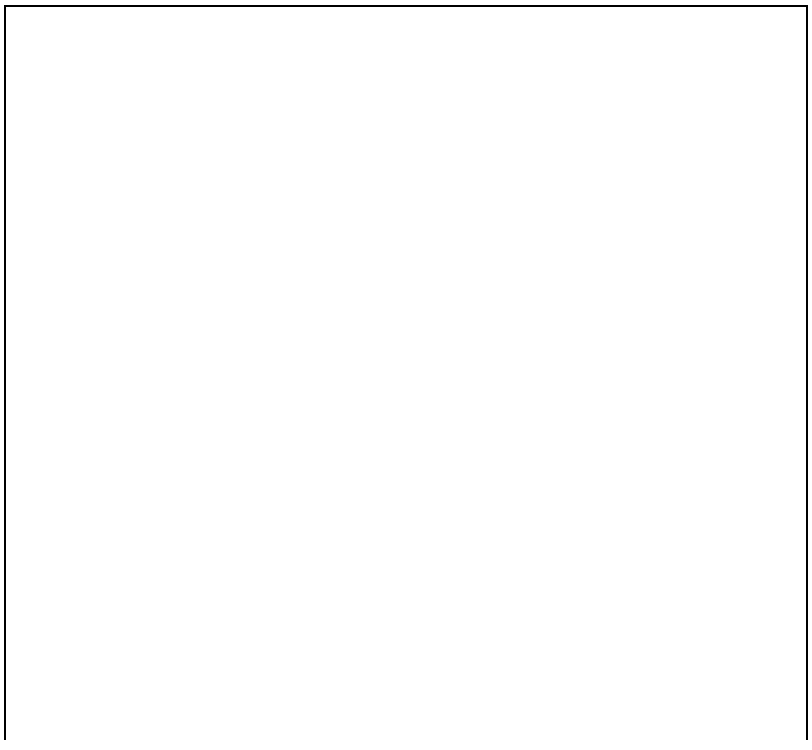

THE SPYMASTER

By
E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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CHAPTER I

Admiral Guy Cheshire, whose orders and decorations denoted an unusually distinguished career for a man of forty-five years, a very unwilling participant in the brilliant scene, was honoured by his old friend, Henry D. Prestley, host of the gathering, with a few minutes' tête-à-tête in one of the smaller reception rooms of the great house in Regent's Park. Prestley was a silent man; so also, except when he was talking nonsense, was the Admiral. A queer sort of friendship had sprung up between them during the last ten years. They played golf together at irregular intervals and bridge in the same little circle most evenings at the famous St. George's Club.

"I was thinking, as I came up the stairs," Cheshire confided, "that yours is really the first of the great diplomatic shows of the season. Sabine has evidently made up her mind to make the others seem like Cinderella dances."

Prestley shrugged his shoulders slightly. From where they stood they had a fine view of the larger rooms through which a continual stream of men and women was flowing. The old days of tiaras had returned. The brilliant uniforms of the men assisted in providing a wonderful blaze of colour. The ballroom was banked with a forest of flowers. The strains of an Austrian waltz, played by an orchestra unsurpassed in the world, reached their ears faintly. It was all a gay and marvellous whirlpool of gorgeous and scintillating life.

"We are doing it for the Ambassador of Sabine's country, of course," Prestley observed. "I felt a little uncomfortable about it but Sabine was dead keen. Broccia has been summoned back to a conference and Count Patani is, after all, a distant connection of hers. My wife loves entertaining for her people and if this sort of thing gives her pleasure, so much the better." [4]

"I ask myself sometimes," Cheshire meditated, "why you didn't go in for the diplomatic life yourself."

Prestley smiled. He had the fine delicate features, the long straight nose of all the men of his family, but he lacked the physique of his race. Notwithstanding his youthful successes at outdoor sports—he had played football for Harvard, and international polo—his complexion was pale and he had preserved the thoughtful air of a statesman or a man of great affairs. He was, as a matter of fact, head of the most famous banking firm in the world.

"Sometimes," he confessed, "I ask myself the same question. Then I answer it and I am satisfied. There were reasons, my friend. Sabine, I think, so long as she married an American instead of a fellow-countryman, is quite as happy in her present

position without the restraint of diplomatic life. The show to-night, of course, is given entirely for Patani. We can still unofficially step in, though, now and then, when we are asked to on behalf of our own people. Neither Broccia nor his wife have had any experience of this sort of thing. It gives Sabine pleasure and she has not the responsibilities."

"An amazing woman," Cheshire observed. "She knows as much about European politics as anyone with whom I ever talked—much more than I do. Then, of course, it isn't my job. I am only a sailor."

An urgent messenger came for the host. He departed with a little farewell nod to his friend. The latter, who was in a depressed frame of mind, had just decided to seek the solace of a glass of champagne when a very beautiful girl, with an only half-uttered word of apology, left her partner and came over to him. [5]

"What have you done with my young man, Guy?" she complained. "Have you put him on night duty or something of that sort?"

"Which of your retinue are you talking about?" he demanded.

"Why, Ronnie Hincks, of course. Is he not one of your A.D.C.'s or something, tucked up with you indoors at the Admiralty for a month or two?"

"Ronnie Hincks? Oh, yes. Isn't he here?"

The girl shook her head.

"I have been looking for him everywhere. Sabine was asking for him, too. We are both very sad. Godfrey Ryson is absent, also."

"They're pretty busy at the shop," the Admiral confided. "I've come straight from there myself."

"Heavens! No dinner?"

He shook his head:—

"I'm going to make up for it in a minute or two."

She glanced regretfully at her partner.

"I wish I could take you into supper," she sighed. "You know Tony Gresham, do you not, Admiral? Tony and I are going to forget all about our scrappy dinner. Come in with us."

The two men exchanged nods.

"Do come, sir," Gresham begged. "We would be delighted to have you."

"Just what I should have said at your age," Cheshire replied drily, "but I should have kicked myself for having to say it. No, I won't come, thanks, Elida. To tell you the truth, I have not really paid my respects to your sister yet. I got mixed up with a little tangle of Royalties and, being a shy man, I fled." [6]

"You know where to find her," the girl said as she rejoined her partner. "She is in what she calls the Tapestry Salon, taking a brief rest. She is easily got at, though."

"I will present my apologies at once," Cheshire declared as he took his leave.

Progress through the crowded rooms was difficult. Admiral Guy Cheshire was a popular man and found friends on every side. He came face to face with his hostess only when she was leaving her retreat. There was a touch of eagerness in her manner as she dismissed her cavalier and came towards him.

"I almost wondered," she said quietly, "whether you were not keeping out of my way."

He looked at her in very genuine admiration. He knew little about women's clothes, but her ivory satin gown, so exquisitely classic a garment, those marvellous Pelucchi pearls, her beautifully coiled and smoothly coiffured chestnut-brown hair, and the flash of her brown eyes, seemed to reproduce one of those Florentine pictures of the Renaissance.

"You flatter me," he remarked. "I have been laying my homage at the feet of the younger generation. Elida, too, looks beautiful to-night."

Her imitation curtsy was a trick of the old days.

"I have just a quarter of an hour before the formal business of supper," she confided. "I have not given you any special place, Guy. I know you are entitled to it but I also know that there is just truth enough in your affected shyness to make you like to look after yourself. Stay with me for a minute. Here—let us sit down inside this small room. Bring us some champagne," she ordered one of the footmen.

"We will sit on that divan away from this blaze of lights." [7]

"I am very much honoured," he murmured, as he followed her. . . .

"My friend," she said, as soon as they had settled down. "I am still your friend, am I not?"

"I hope so," he answered gravely. "Has my behaviour in any way led you to think differently?"

"No," she admitted, "but you come no longer to my At Homes. You have the entrée to my private sessions. You do not come."

“These are anxious times, as you know,” he reminded her. “So long as the wireless from the Continent works, my official duties keep me at my desk.”

“Is that quite honest with me—an old friend?” she asked. “You see, I, too, have information. I know that you occupy a wonderful post. I know that you are greatly engaged just now, but that is no reason why you should desert your friends altogether. It makes them just a little anxious.”

He smiled reassurance. He had thrown off some part of his dejection now. The sailor light was back in his eyes and some of the lines had gone from his sunburnt face. A cynical critic who knew him well might have declared that the mask was down.

“I flatter myself, really,” he told her, “when I pretend that my work is sufficiently important to keep me wholly from my pleasures. Thursday is your next day for receiving us who have the honour of being your intimates, isn’t it? I shall present myself.”

“And you will be very welcome,” she assured him. “The list grows no longer. I want to talk to you seriously.”

“A slight disappointment, that,” he smiled, “but it shall be seriously, if you will, so long as there are a few minutes for ourselves. I should like to talk of Washington with you—of Rome and the old days.” [8]

She shook her head.

“Not Rome now,” she objected. “Washington always. You remember when we used to ride in the mornings?”

“I remember losing my heart to you.”

Her little pout was a delicate gesture.

“You are a sailor,” she reminded him. “You always told me that no one else would have got you on the back of a horse and when I saw you there I almost believed you—and now you stay away just when I need you most.”

“Why do you need me?”

“I want to understand,” she said. “It seems to me that all Europe is drifting into something very serious. One wishes to help. One wishes direction. They say,” she went on, raising her eyes and looking at him directly, “that a good deal of knowledge lies behind that still face of yours, Guy.”

“Everything that I know, I will share with you,” he promised. “With a few trifling exceptions, of course.”

“Such as the size of your latest battleship, I suppose, and the

name of the little ballerina with whom you took supper last week?"

"Naturally, serious knowledge like that is kept in a secret chamber," he admitted. "Still, it is rather fun to part with the key, sometimes!"

"I wonder how much you have changed, really, Guy," she meditated.

"You shall ask me on Thursday."

She rose to her feet. She was either a wonderful actress or she was reluctant to go.

"Our few minutes have drifted away," she complained, "and there are heaps of things I really wanted to ask you, I really wanted to understand. On Thursday you must give me a whole hour. Listen, I will get rid of one or two people first. You shall come at seven o'clock. Everyone leaves about then to go on to cocktail parties. You shall have yours with me." [9]

He bent over her fingers.

"Nothing," he promised, "shall keep me away."

She summoned one of the young secretaries who had been waiting for her with a list in his hand, and passed out into the crowded room with him at her side. Cheshire watched her steadily, almost stonily. He watched her until she had disappeared, then he turned to the champagne which the footman had brought and which they had forgotten. He drank his wine thoughtfully. The wife of his friend Henry Prestley, the playmate of his own younger days, had given him something to think about. He found himself wondering. . . .

"Cheshire, the one man I was looking for!"

There was a note of eagerness in the tone of the very magnificent personage who had almost pushed his way through a little throng on the other side of the great staircase. General Lord Robert Mallinson, for many years considered the handsomest man in the British Army, presented still a fine figure, in his full-dress uniform with his long row of marvellous decorations. His black hair was streaked with grey but his movements and a certain innate alertness kept him well within the bounds of early middle age.

"Are you going to feed with the lions?" he asked.

Cheshire shook his head.

"Not I. I was prowling about looking for the buffet."

"I'm with you," the General exclaimed. "What a stroke of luck! Come along. I can show you the way. No one seems to have

found it out yet."

They descended to the ground floor and secured an absolutely retired corner in a huge room occupied for the moment only by a small crowd of attentive waiters. [10]

"Caviar, with cold chicken, ham and salad to follow, for me," the General ordered. "Not too much of that mayonnaise stuff. There's no champagne here that isn't good. We'll have a bottle, eh, Cheshire?"

"Rather!"

"A cocktail first," Mallinson insisted. "Look here, old chap, this is a stroke of luck. If I present myself at your bureau and ask for an interview, though I know your fellows are well trained, it is jolly hard work to keep it away from the gossip paragraphist. The same trouble if you came to see me. And to have a little tête-à-tête lunch in the coffee-room of the club would be madness. We are just the two men in London who ought not to meet, I suppose, and here we are doing it without a soul to wonder what we are talking about."

"What are we going to talk about?" Cheshire enquired.

Mallinson moved his chair slightly. They now commanded a view of the room but were themselves almost unseen. Anyone approaching would be visible whilst they were still out of hearing.

"I want you," the General proposed, "to come and see the Chief with me as soon as an appointment can be arranged."

"Anything fresh?"

"No, it's an idea," was the rather sombre reply. "I'll tell you what I based it upon."

The cocktails were brought and there was an interlude of several moments. Then Mallinson continued.

"We all know the position. A month or so ago it looked as though trouble were inevitable, and we are not ready for it, you know, Cheshire. We are not ready for it yet," he added emphatically.

"Go on!" Cheshire begged. "Don't shout." [11]

"The Chief, all on his own, took a bold step," the General said in a slightly lower voice. "He gave diplomacy and a certain prominent official the go-by. He personally approached the three countries who make Europe. He asked that they should each receive a Special Envoy from here to discuss some of these difficult matters and if necessary he offered a meeting with himself, supposing an impasse was reached. It meant trouble with some of the small fry, of course, and one or two of

them have had to go. Has anything struck you, Cheshire, about our progress since those offers were courteously received by the various great men concerned?"

The Admiral's eyes glittered for a moment.

"It has," he admitted. "I have come to the conclusion, within the last three days, that although every one of them is keeping the thing open, they are placing every possible obstacle in the way of these discussions. They are playing for time."

"God knows you're right," the General declared. "That's exactly the conclusion I have come to. You are with me so far, then?"

"Absolutely."

"Now I'm going to move a step further," his companion continued. "We neither of us talk about our jobs. There are millions of English people who do not know that I am the head of the real Secret Service so far as the Army is concerned, and that you occupy exactly the same position with regard to the Navy. We have exchanged confidences at various times during the last few years. Just lately we have not come together. It's time we did. I have something to say to you, Cheshire."

"Go ahead."

"They are playing for time, each one of these countries to whom the Chief addressed his appeal for discussions. They want to find out how much is true of all this mighty rearmament business that the papers have been full of. They want to know how we are getting on with it and how much of it is a bluff. You know what that means? They have doubled their spies in this country. I don't mind telling you we have had a horrible week of it—details we don't discuss, of course—but we have twenty-three men in prison at the present moment—some from Woolwich, one or two from Aldershot, half a dozen from the War Office itself—who will never see much of the daylight again. What about you?" **[12]**

"Almost the same story," was the grim reply. "My department is working day and night and I have eleven branches and four new travelling ones a secret to everyone except myself. Your idea is perfectly right, General. They are holding off until they know the truth and they are making a big drive to get to know it, too."

The supper was brought. They leaned back in their chairs. Mallinson lit a cigarette. They were served by a maître d'hôtel in plain clothes. Cheshire looked at him curiously as he bowed his greetings.

"I am managing this room, sir," the man explained. "I should like to give you gentlemen my personal attention. You seem to

have chosen a rather draughty corner. Would you like a screen? I can easily arrange one."

"Not on any account," the General replied. "What they call draughts I call fresh air. I welcome them myself at these crowded places."

The maître d'hôtel bowed and dropped the suggestion. He opened the wine himself and lingered round after having examined the dishes served.

"If there is anything you want specially, gentlemen, I hope you will send for me," he begged.

"Your face seems familiar," Cheshire remarked. "Tell me your name." **[13]**

The man produced a card and handed it over.

"Antonio Machinka," Mallinson exclaimed. "Machinka's Restaurant in Jermyn Street anything to you?"

"My property, General. I should be proud to welcome you or your friends any time. My restaurant is very popular, a little too popular at times, but I have several attractive suites if you should be requiring privacy."

There was not a ghost of a smile upon Machinka's face. His were the pale cheeks, the earnest manner, the pleasant voice of the Anglicized Italian. Mallinson thrust the card into his pocket.

"We will remember," he promised. "Just now, keep the waiters away as much as you can, there's a good fellow. The Admiral and I have not met lately and we have plenty to talk about."

"It shall be as you wish, sir," the man replied, departing with a little bow.

Cheshire sipped his wine.

"Mysterious chaps, these foreigners, sometimes," he remarked thoughtfully. "Know anything about him, General?"

"Nothing, and what I did know a year ago might not have been of any account to-day."

"He's on my list," the Admiral reflected. "You should have him on yours, too."

"You are well up to date, my friend."

Cheshire leaned over the table.

"I try to be. One of the mystery women in London for whom we watch most closely," he confided, "dined in a suite of **[14]**

Machinka's last week. We think we know with whom. We are not quite sure. We are waiting till next time. I don't mind telling you that the head waiter who looks after those suites is our man. We had hard work to get him there, as, although he is a foreigner, he is married to an Englishwoman. Queer his turning up. You heard how that submarine there was nearly such a row about was identified after she had been sunk in Spanish waters?"

"I only knew that she was identified and the fuss that they were trying to make had to be stopped pretty quick," the General replied.

"The information came to us from Suite A at Machinka's. A small world, General. We have compared notes. We agree. Now what are we going to do about it all?"

"We must see the Chief as soon as possible," Mallinson insisted. "Remember that, shrewd fellow though he may be, he has no personal outlook upon the details of what is going on. He can only see through the eyes of his satellites. It is up to us to ram the truth home to him as to what is happening, to try and make him see exactly the way one at least of our friends on the Continent is trying to diddle us."

"I will come," Cheshire promised, "and I will do my best, but I don't mind telling you, General, that the most difficult part of our task is not the work itself, is not the getting on the track of these people and hunting them down, it is getting the danger that they represent under the hide of the average British bourgeois statesman. In their hearts they don't believe in spies. That's where the modern fiction writer has done us such an ill turn. He has written these spy stories so long that they have become only humorous. They have ceased to be convincing. The British public does not believe in spies. If we were only to bring out a dozen of them, like our friend in Moscow, try them publicly and shoot them in the Tower, it would do us a thundering lot of good."

"Our bosses won't do it," Mallinson observed gloomily. "You are quite right, Cheshire. It is fantastic the way they smile, even when we can prove that we are up against real and serious trouble. There is another thing, too. Like every other profession, the profession of espionage is chockful of the worst lot of amateurs. We have shipped back to the Continent dozens and dozens of friendless young governesses and theatrical people of every description. It is the women that are the biggest nuisance. Not one out of twenty of them could ever do us any real harm, but the very fact that there are so many fools at the game makes it difficult for us to get one or two of these sentimentalists to realise the situation. I used to take a dozen or so of them into one of the departments as typists, just to see how far they would go. It was simply pitiful to penetrate their stupid schemes and to see the ghastly fright they got in when they were caught." **[15]**

"They are in the way, of course," Cheshire agreed, "but our great anxiety concerns those few who are in it, who know the game and who are playing it just about up to the limit."

The General looked at his friend steadily. They were silent while their glasses were refilled. Machinka's figure was always there in the background—suave and eager.

"That fellow will end with his back to the wall some day," Cheshire continued. "He was raided twice in Soho—faked-up charge organised by us. He was harbouring spies and it was a difficult locality. He bought his present restaurant with foreign money. Thinks he's safe."

Mallinson rose to his feet.

"Well," he said, "it's been a pleasant chat. See you to-morrow, Cheshire."

He made his way back into the crowd. Cheshire remained for a few minutes longer smoking a final cigarette in thoughtful solitude. For the second time in rather an interesting evening, he was hesitating. When at last he made his departure, he paused as he passed Machinka, who was preparing with a low bow to usher him out. **[16]**

"I was trying to think," he said slowly, "who it was mentioned your restaurant the other day, Machinka. Good chef you have, haven't you?"

"Excellent, sir. Excellent."

"Good service, too, I was told, and some real old Chianti. Ah, I remember! It was Captain Ryson of the *Devastation*—off his ship just now and acting as one of my assistants at the Admiralty. You remember Captain Ryson, Machinka?"

The latter's face wore the slightly worried expression of a maître d'hôtel who fails to recognise the name of a client.

"There are so many sometimes," he apologised. "One hears the names and forgets. A gentleman of your own age, sir?"

Cheshire smiled.

"He would not be flattered. It must have been someone else. Good night. Thanks for looking after us. Good night."

Machinka bowed with even more than his usual courtesy. Afterwards, he stood for a few moments without moving, gazing with an air of disquietude after his departing patron.

[17]

CHAPTER II

Four men on the evening of the following day, seated in heavy mahogany chairs around a bridge table within the sacred purlieus of the St. George's Club, leaned back with the relaxed air which follows upon the completion of a closely contested rubber. They were all men of some distinction. One was Henry D. Prestley, American banker, husband of the Princess Sabine Pelucchi and host of the previous night's great diplomatic reception. His partner was Sir Herbert Melville, Deputy Commissioner of Police. His two opponents were General Lord Robert Mallinson and Lord Fakenham, the latter a Press magnate, owner of half a dozen newspapers and many other periodicals.

"A cheap rubber for you fellows, considering your shocking overcalling," Fakenham observed as he rang the bell for a waiter. "I can have a drink now with a clear conscience. Join me, gentlemen. I can afford to treat you. I make it that I win forty-two pounds."

"You are too infernally lucky," Mallinson grumbled. "However, I'll drink a whisky and soda with you."

The orders were given. The door of the private room was quietly opened. Cheshire, alert and debonair notwithstanding a slight stoop, made his appearance. Fakenham drew a sigh of relief.

"Now if you fellows want to go on," he said, "you have a fourth. As for me—I am tired. The strain of Prestley's glorious party last night was too much for me."

Cheshire leaned over the table, reached out for one of the packs of cards, performed an amazing trick, threw another pack into the air and had apparently shuffled it before the cards came fluttering down. Finally, he calmly nominated the partner with whom he had decided to cut and succeeded in drawing him. **[18]**

"Why anyone plays cards with me I cannot imagine," he remarked. "Cards have kept me from penury throughout my life. You all know what I can do and yet you go on trusting me."

"The fact of it is, my dear friend," the Deputy Commissioner of Police remarked, "you will probably end your days in prison, but it won't be for your cheating at cards. Up till now I should say you were one of the most consistent losers in the club."

"I purposely handicap myself by making every obvious mistake known to man," Cheshire confided. "I also deliberately choose to play with a small circle whose appreciation of the

intricacies of the game is negligible. Even on an Admiral's half-pay, my losses mean no more than a snap of the fingers to me."

"You look very spruce and pleased with yourself this evening," the General yawned. "What have you been up to?"

"Work," was the prompt and emphatic reply. "Zealous and untiring work on behalf of an ungrateful country. Seven hours at a stretch at my desk at the Admiralty."

"I might play one more rubber," Fakenham decided. "We four cut. This intrusive newcomer, with the deplorable manners and the absurdly inflated ideas of his own capacity, is in, anyway."

The Admiral chuckled.

"I'm in all right," he agreed. "You couldn't have cut me out if you had tried. Try the seventh card from the middle if you want to play, Melville."

Melville did as was suggested and turned up a king. The others scowled at him. **[19]**

"Look here, you sea-faring charlatan," Fakenham observed drily. "You leave off these tricks in a respectable club. I'll choose my own card, thanks."

He hesitated for a moment, then drew a two.

"Play instead of me, if you like," the General suggested.

Fakenham shook his head.

"I'd sooner watch for a time."

A long-drawn-out rubber finished some time after Fakenham had taken his leave. Cheshire glanced at a handsome clock which stood on the chimney piece. It was one of those modern creations fashioned to tell the time without any audible indication of progress. Everything in the room was made for silence, to enable the greatest brains in Europe to struggle more successfully with the problems of their latest diversion.

"Rotten time to finish a rubber," he remarked. "Half-past seven."

Sir Herbert grunted.

"An unpleasant reminiscence," he said. "If I were really a faithful servant of my country I should call in at the Yard on my way home and go through the evening reports."

"Digging up mares' nests," the General suggested chaffingly.

"Queer chaps, you Britishers," Prestley sighed. "I don't know why it is that directly a soldier retires he becomes a devastating critic of all military operations. A sailor takes you on one side and tells you that his country is at the mercy of anyone with half a dozen submarines up his sleeve."

"And a policeman?" the Admiral interposed. "Don't forget the policeman, Prestley." [20]

"He is worse than anyone else. He is always ready to assert that as soon as he gave up office and since he lost his job in one of the mysterious branches of the hidden service, the country is drifting into the hands of foreigners, every maître d'hôtel is a spy, and every Russian ballerina in the pay of some foreign country or other. You Englishmen are wonderful at your work," he concluded, "but when you do lay off for half an hour you are the most howling mob of pessimists I ever came across."

"What about another rubber?" Cheshire asked patiently. "It's better than being slated by this glib-tongued millionaire."

"Since the Navy took to revoking," Sir Herbert declared, "this game is getting too expensive for me. I'll play another rubber if I can be insured against cutting with Cheshire."

The latter's profanity for the next few seconds was both instructive and awesome. The Deputy Commissioner rang the bell.

"You are fined drinks round for using language like that," he said sternly. "Give your orders, gentlemen. The Admiral will sign the chit."

"Once in my life," Cheshire grunted, "have I revoked in this club and never shall I hear the last of it. It cost us precisely nothing at all. We won the rubber afterwards. However, I've told you what I think of you and I'll pay for the drinks with pleasure. Pink Gin for me, Brooks," he added, looking up as the waiter approached.

"Dry Martini," Sir Herbert murmured.

"Mixed Vermouth for me," Prestley chose after reflection.

"A glass of the Dry Amontillado for me," the General decided. [21]

"And what about me?" demanded a man who had opened the door a few seconds before. "Am I left out of this orgy? I warn you I am going to cut in."

"Who cares?" the Admiral exclaimed. "I'm paying for the drinks and you can have this crowd so far as contract bridge is concerned. They're over-cautious, George. That's what's the matter with them. They won't call their hands, they get left, and they grumble. A man revokes for the first time in his life and

they haven't the least idea how to treat the matter in a gentlemanly fashion. That's why I am paying for drinks."

The newcomer, George Marsden, a well-known permanent official in the Foreign Office, glanced at the clock. A smile parted his lips and his expression, always amiable but sometimes a little too serious, relaxed.

"The hour has struck," he said. "I'll take a Dry Martini."

The waiter departed. The five men were alone in the room. Marsden drew up a chair close to Sir Herbert's.

"No Continental news, I suppose?" the latter asked him.

Marsden shook his head.

"I am calling at the Foreign Office on my way home," he confided. "There will be the usual evening messages from the two capitals we are chiefly interested in. Nothing else has transpired."

The drinks arrived. Cheshire signed the chit and rose to his feet.

"I have a leaning towards domesticity," he declared.

There was a subdued jeer from everybody. The Admiral, more than once, had been said to be the least married man in the Service and his bachelor parties were famous. **[22]**

"You've got your four," he pointed out. "You don't need me, anyway. I must think of my country. All very well for you landlubbers, but I may be on the bridge of a battleship in a week's time."

"Swashbuckler!" Melville muttered.

Cheshire turned towards the door.

"It's a nice club, this," he remarked. "A warm, cosy little place for a dreary evening. All the same, it has its drawbacks. Less than a fiver that revoke cost you, Policeman, yet the memory still rankles. Good night, you others."

Cheshire stood for a moment or two upon the steps of the club considering the weather. The commissionaire, with an open umbrella, glanced up at him from the pavement.

"Nasty night, sir," he said. "Shall I call you a taxi or is your car here?"

"I think I'll have a taxi."

The man whistled. The taxi arrived. Cheshire was piloted

across the rain-splashed pavement.

“Where to, sir?”

“The Admiralty. The Arch entrance.”

Before they had gone a hundred yards Cheshire stopped the taxi.

“Drive down Lambeth way,” he ordered.

“Which end of Lambeth do you want, sir?”

“The post office.”

The man drove on. Arrived at his destination, Cheshire alighted and, with his collar turned up and his Homburg hat pulled over his eyes, entered the place and made his way to one of the counters.

“Letters for Henry Copeland?” he enquired. [23]

The clerk in attendance disappeared. When he returned he was holding a long typewritten envelope.

“Henry Copeland?”

Cheshire stretched out his hand.

“That’s right,” he said.

The young man went about his business. Cheshire, with the letter in his pocket, left the place and stepped back into the taxicab. For a moment he hesitated.

“The Admiralty,” he ordered.

They drove off. Twice Cheshire drew the letter from his pocket and each time he replaced it. Arrived at the Admiralty, he paid off the man, made his way along divers passages to a row of lifts, mounted to the top floor, traversed another long corridor, and paused before a door guarded by two commissionaires in uniform. They both saluted gravely as Cheshire entered the room. He passed a long line of clerks through a small chart room and finally opened with a key which he took from his chain a private office at the end. He closed the door behind him. A young man, who had sprung to his feet outside, followed him in.

“Do you require Captain Ryson, sir?” he asked. “He has just gone into the lower chart room.”

“Not at present.”

“Commander Hincks, sir?”

“No one for a few minutes.”

The young man disappeared. Cheshire opened a massive roll-top desk and pulled down the electric light. Slowly, and with a visible reluctance, he drew the letter from his pocket. He laid it on the blotting pad before him and fingered a paper cutter. For several moments he hesitated. A queer look of indecision seemed to have come into his face. He tapped the letter with the end of the cutter and then very slowly slit open the envelope and drew out half a sheet of foolscap and a folded slip of tracing paper. Word by word he read the contents of the note. He turned it over hastily and looked at some figures on the other side. Then he spread out before him what appeared to be a portion of a plan. He stared at it for several minutes. Afterwards he returned the letter and the tracing to the envelope and slipped the latter underneath the blotting pad. He leaned a little back in his chair. His fingers were interlaced. Something of the light-hearted humanity seemed to have gone from his expression, the lines to have sunk a little deeper, his eyes to be filled with something which seemed like a desire for escape from some hideous dilemma. So he sat for several moments without moving. Finally, he touched one of the buttons of a bell push on the top of the desk. A young officer in Naval uniform almost immediately hurried into the room. **[24]**

"Commander Hincks, sir," he announced. "We were not expecting you back to-night."

"These are the times when unexpected things happen," was the grim reply. "Is the door closed?"

"Yes, sir."

Cheshire opened one of the drawers by his side, drew out a metal box which he unlocked with a key from his chain, and took from it a small oblong key which seemed to be its sole contents. He handed it to the newcomer.

"The code word is 'Pernambuco'," he confided. "Open my private safe."

The young man took the key and approached the safe in a corner of the room. In a few minutes he turned round.

"Safe open, sir," he reported.

"Give me the folder with the 7XTY designs."

A folio in a green cardboard cover was produced and brought over to the desk. **[25]**

"Now close the safe," Cheshire directed, "and fetch Captain Ryson."

"There's nothing wrong, I hope, sir?"

"I hope not. Return yourself with Captain Ryson."

“Very good, sir.”

The young man left the room. Cheshire lifted the blotting pad and withdrew the typewritten letter and slipped it into his pocket. Then he unfastened the folder and drew out the plans. There were twenty-one in all, fastened together in threes, each three apparently being plans of the same vessel—fore, aft and amidships. He spread them out before him and drew the light a little further down. Presently there came a knock at the door. Commander Hincks reappeared, ushering in an older man.

“Good evening, Admiral,” the latter said cheerfully.

Cheshire ignored the greeting and beckoned the two men to approach.

“You know what these are, I suppose?” he asked, touching with his forefinger the parchment.

“Rather,” was Ryson’s prompt reply. “They are the sectional plans of what is to be our 35-36 cruiser.”

“And you, Hincks?”

“Why yes, sir. You gave us a locked-door lecture on them only last week.”

The Admiral thrust his hand into his pocket and brought out the tissue slip.

“What do you make of this?” he asked.

The two men bent over it. There was a little exclamation from Hincks, something that sounded like a groan from the older man.

“It is a tracing of the hidden lower deck of the cruiser, sir. The secret deck that you were so keen about.” **[26]**

Cheshire returned it to the envelope and his pocket. The two men were staring at him, white-faced and mute. It was Ryson who spoke first.

“Where did you get that from, sir?” he cried hoarsely.

The Admiral’s voice was hard and stern now as he answered.

“It is I,” he said, “who propose to ask questions, but in case you are really curious, I will tell you that someone calling himself Henry Copeland collected it from Lambeth post office less than an hour ago and brought it here. Fortunately, we have an Intelligence Department with eyes in the back of its head as well as the front. Now listen to me. You know where the keys are kept, you two. You know sometimes the code word. Hincks knows where to find the key of this desk when I am away. You, Ryson, know where to find the key of the inner drawer. You

two between you form the only link between the contents of that safe and the outside world. You two together, I said. Now what about it?"

"Are we accused?" Ryson demanded, his deep voice vibrant with something which might have been passion or might have been fear.

"Where were you both last night? You were both invited to Regent's Park. You neither of you came."

"We were here, sir, according to arrangement," Hincks replied. "I stayed till midnight and handed over to Captain Ryson at that hour."

"I was here till six o'clock this morning," Ryson corroborated.

"You were here," Cheshire repeated. "Yes—the one night when you knew that I was away! What were you doing?"

"I was drafting, sir," Hincks replied. **[27]**

"I was in the model room working on my submarine," Ryson affirmed.

"Perhaps. Go away now. Sleep on it. See me here, both of you, at nine o'clock to-morrow morning, then I will tell you whether you are accused or not. Lock up the safe, Hincks. That will be all for to-night, Captain Ryson."

Both of them seemed about to burst into speech. Suddenly Cheshire raised his eyes. Something in his expression seemed to freeze the words upon their lips. Ryson swung round and left the room. Hincks busied himself with the safe and came back with the key.

"I shall be here for twenty minutes resetting the combination," Cheshire told him. "Remember what I said. I do not wish to see either of you again to-night. You will preserve absolute silence as to what has happened."

"Very good, sir."

"Convey my wishes also to Ryson."

"Yes, sir."

Admiral Cheshire was alone. He moved over to the safe and for a quarter of an hour he was busy. Then he closed it again and came back to his seat. He seemed suddenly to have aged. The lines about his mouth had grown deeper and deeper. He took the letter and the sheet of tracing paper and placed them in a leather case in his inner pocket. When at last he rose to leave, he looked around him and threw up his arms to the ceiling as though in mute protest. That was the end of it. Once more wearing that expression of complete detachment which he

carried with him always in the hours of crisis, he left the room.

CHAPTER III

At nine o'clock precisely on the following morning, Cheshire stepped out of a taxicab and, entering the Admiralty by a private door, made his way to the suite of offices occupied by his department. He passed through the outer room taking no account of many curious and furtive glances. In the bureau immediately before his own, however, he paused for a moment to exchange a word with Commander Hincks. The latter, who was obviously waiting for him, retained his self-control with an effort.

"You have heard the news, sir?"

Cheshire nodded curtly.

"I will discuss the matter with you later," he said.

"In the meantime, sir," Hincks ventured, "there is a representative from the Universal Press waiting here—he says with your permission. They sent him along from the Censor's Department."

"In ten minutes I will see him," Cheshire announced.

He passed on to his private office. His typist-secretary was sorting some letters at the table usually occupied by Commander Hincks. The Admiral nodded good morning and seated himself at his desk. One single letter already lay there. It bore no postmark and had evidently been sent in by hand. He slit open the envelope, read the few lines it contained, and laid it face downwards on the blotting pad. He turned to the young woman at the other end of the room.

"There is a messenger from the Universal Press in the waiting room," he told her. "Fetch him, please."

"Very good, sir."

The young woman disappeared for a few moments and returned ushering in Stephen Adams, a well-known figure in the journalistic world. Cheshire welcomed him with a brief nod.

"Sad affair, sir," the newcomer remarked. "The editor sent me round to see you. The early editions are waiting."

"Quite so," Cheshire replied, leaning back in his chair. "As it happens, Mr. Adams," he went on, "this tragedy explains itself. I am about to hand you over this note which I have just received. It was written by Captain Ryson evidently a few minutes before he shot himself."

The journalist's fingers were twitching already. Cheshire, however, preferred to read the letter aloud, which he promptly did. It was dated from a neighbouring hotel.

"Sir,

I ask your pardon for taking the coward's way out but I made a great mistake when I accepted your offer and devoted myself to indoor work for which I am entirely unsuited. I have made application as you know for a change and been refused. I was born a sailor and my father was born a sailor and every gift that we possess can be exercised only upon the sea. I am a stupid clerk and a blundering figure at the work upon which I am now engaged and which I detest. I can endure it no longer. Five minutes after I have signed my name to this letter I shall shoot myself.

I deeply regret that I have not been able to render better service to my country.

GODFREY RYSON.
Capt., R.N."

"A sad letter," the journalist murmured.

"Very sad," Cheshire agreed. "To tell you the truth, if the poor fellow had not been so impatient I should have tried to make arrangements for him shortly. The command of one of our new battleships would have been his if only he could have stuck it out for a time." **[30]**

"I may make use of what you are saying now, Admiral?" his visitor asked eagerly.

"Certainly. Ryson was temporarily off his head, no doubt. I have seen him looking worried to death over the simplest little affairs in connection with his present job and I felt at the time that I ought to have relieved him. He was doing no particular good here and he was a fine seaman."

The journalist scribbled down the sympathetically spoken words. Then he held out his hand for the letter.

"The original of this communication had better remain here," Cheshire decided. "You can copy it, though, and I give you leave to publish it. It is best that the whole world should know the truth. When a man who is in the Service, and actively engaged, chooses this way of chucking his job, there is always likely to be a little misunderstanding if anyone tries to cover things up. Let the public have what they want, Mr. Adams. They shall have the truth."

The journalist copied the letter rapidly. There was a thin smile

upon his lips even as he transcribed those tragic words. The truth! . . . It was not the first time in his life that he had had to deal with this sort of situation, and although he very much admired the way in which Cheshire was handling it, he took his leave without a word of comment. Before midday the whole world knew why Captain Ryson, at one time the commander of the battleship *Devastation*, now engaged in special research work at the Admiralty, had blown out his brains.

[31]

Cheshire glanced casually through the two piles of letters which his secretary had laid before him and waved her out of the room.

"Send Commander Hincks to me," he directed.

The young man entered the room a few minutes later. Already a subtle deterioration seemed to have taken place in his appearance. He was correctly and carefully dressed but he was ghastly pale and there was a little twitch of the features apparent now and then when he spoke. He stood at attention before Cheshire's desk. The latter passed him over Ryson's letter.

"Read that," he ordered.

Hincks read and returned it without comment. His fingers were shaking.

"That," his Chief said deliberately, "is the letter of a brave man. The last words he wrote were lies but they were written to make what amends he could for the harm he had done. Perhaps you are wondering why you are not under arrest?"

"I have not attempted to escape," was the quiet reply.

"You know quite well it would be useless. The reason why you are still at liberty is because the value of our work here would be destroyed and our prestige would suffer if the truth were known. It is important that there should be no whisper anywhere as to the fact that Ryson committed suicide because he was betraying his trust or that you are under arrest because you must to a certain extent be suspected of having aided him. He chose the man's way out but of course he has made it a little more difficult for you."

Hincks was obviously suffering tortures. His lips twitched but he remained silent.

"Now listen carefully," Cheshire continued. "You carried out your system of dual control, even to your method of parting with the information which one of you stole. A tracing of half the plan of my cruiser was posted by one of you to a person by the name of Henry Copeland at Lambeth post office. That man did not receive the letter—I did. He presented himself and asked for it a little later, but although I had two of my best men

[32]

on duty there, he gave them the slip. Who is Henry Copeland?"

The young man distinctly shivered. His questioner waited in severe silence. Hincks moistened his lips with his tongue.

"The Henry Copeland to whom the letter was addressed is a man whose real name is Florestan," he confided. "He is in the employ of a large firm of merchants in the City."

"Name and address?"

"Brown, Shipman & Co., 127, Holborn."

Cheshire scribbled down the few notes, then he looked up again.

"The tracing of the other half of the plan was to be disposed of, I presume, in the usual fashion? Answer me."

"Yes, sir."

"To whom were you delivering it?"

"If you will pass me your own revolver, sir, I will make use of it," was the firmly spoken reply. "It is impossible for me to answer your question."

"You are a fool," Cheshire declared. "I have not fully made up my mind, but my present idea is that you should live to make, at any rate, such atonement as you can. To whom were you to deliver it?"

For a single moment Hincks seemed suddenly to have become himself again. His voice was steady, his manner controlled.

"I have already been false to the Service, sir," he said, "and if I am to stoop to the degradation of answering that question, it would be impossible for me to continue alive for another five minutes." [33]

Cheshire stroked his chin and reflected.

"It is a reasonable point of view," he remarked coldly. "I will help you."

Commander Hincks stared. There was already a black line underneath those deep-set eyes of his. The Admiral scribbled carelessly upon a slip of paper and held it out in front of the young man. The latter read what was written there and a little moan escaped his lips.

"When was this pleasant ceremony to have taken place?" his torturer demanded, tearing up the fragment of paper and dropping the pieces into the wastepaper basket.

Hincks suddenly faltered in his attitude. He had been standing

stiffly to attention the whole of the time. His knees seemed to give way. He caught at the side of the desk, then quite suddenly he drew himself up again.

"I cannot answer your question because I do not know, sir," he said firmly. "I will confess that I have had my suspicions. I actually knew nothing."

"And what about this Henry Copeland, whose real name is Florestan?"

"I knew nothing of him, sir, except that there have been large transactions with his firm and other departments of the Admiralty. I was puzzled. I was suspicious. I failed in my duty by not making an immediate report to you. That is all that I have to say, sir."

"Hand me the other half of the tracing."

Hincks drew out his pocket-book and passed a folded slip of paper across the desk. A single glance was enough.

"It is my desire," Cheshire announced, "that for the moment you do not follow the illustrious example of Ryson. You will continue your activities here under my supervision and direct instructions. Any questions?"

"None, sir." **[34]**

"I need not tell you," Cheshire went on, "that any attempt on your part to telephone or to communicate with any of Ryson's friends will be looked upon as an aggravation of your offence. The Service will take the risk of publicity and you will promptly die in the dishonour you deserve, but from which I am endeavouring to save you. I am understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"I may take it, then, that I have your parole?"

"Yes, sir."

"You can go, Hincks."

The young man left the room. His passage through the outer offices was unremarkable. It was not until he reached his own quarters that the sob which he had smothered in his throat escaped him.

[35]

CHAPTER IV

One of the most distinguished and beautiful women in Europe, who, only two nights before, had entertained the whole diplomatic world of the Court of St. James's, entered at twenty minutes to eight that evening the plainly furnished little dining room through the folding doors which separated it from the back apartment—a shabbier sort of place altogether with a dreary view down into some seldom-used mews. She was carrying a man's hat in her hand and she began to talk before she had crossed the threshold.

"A perfectly horrible hat, Godfrey! Really, you are very careless about your appearance. I wonder—"

The man who had been standing looking down into the busy street with his hands behind his back turned slowly round. The hat slipped through her nerveless fingers. She stared at him in horror.

"Guy!" she faltered. "Why, what are you doing here?"

She looked wildly round. He watched the colour fading from her cheeks, the horror deepen in her eyes. He moved quite quietly towards her.

"Godfrey is not available," he announced. "I thought I would come myself."

She would have collapsed but for his firm clutch on her arm. He guided her to a chair.

"Don't faint, Sabine," he begged. "Come, we are old friends. There is nothing so terrible to be faced, after all."

His voice was icy but his effort at reassurance was obvious. He went on talking. Her eyes were fastened upon him. [36]

"These young fellows," he continued, "are getting all the fun nowadays. I'm not sure that they deserve it. They're rather bunglers. Try a spot of this wine."

He filled a glass from the sherry decanter on the sideboard and held it to her lips. Her fingers brushed his as she raised her hand. They were deathly cold.

"This is hideous," she gasped. "How did you know?"

He sighed patiently.

"No one gives my poor branch of the Service credit for anything," he observed. "Of course I knew. It is my business to

know. Sailors aren't all fools. . . . Drink that down. Nothing very terrible is going to happen."

She obeyed him, shivering. He took the glass back to the sideboard.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Because as soon as you are able," he went on, "I should like to ring for dinner, if you don't mind. I took the liberty of making one small alteration in the menu whilst I was waiting. Hot lobster never agrees with me. I changed it to grilled sole, but I am allowing you a sauce."

"You mean that you are dining with me here instead of Godfrey?" she asked in a bewildered tone.

"Of course. I thought you would have guessed that. I have even brought you the little document you were expecting," he concluded, producing an envelope.

The horror seized her once more.

"You are mocking me, Guy!"

"Not altogether," he assured her. "We may have to exchange a few more serious words presently. Just now let us carry on."

"What are you going to do about me?" she demanded.

"Depends upon yourself," he replied. "If you take my advice everything will be all right. We are used to spies—thick as locusts in this radius. We are learning how to deal with them." [37]

She shrank back.

"Not—"

"No, no," he interrupted soothingly. "Nothing of that sort at all. I will explain presently. What I should really like now is to see you sit up at table."

"Give me some more sherry, or better still a cocktail," she begged.

He refilled her glass.

"Cocktails are coming," he told her, "but sherry is better for your digestion. There—armchair for you, back to the light—not that you need it—and sherry. Shouldn't drink all of it. There's vodka coming along with the caviar."

"Is this the feast before the execution?" she enquired with a faint smile.

“There won’t be any execution,” he assured her. “You are a woman of the world, Sabine. You must take this little matter philosophically. You could not have expected to have carried through all the time. Besides Godfrey Ryson was the wrong person for you to choose, and Ronnie Hincks, after all, is young and too deeply imbued with a sense of discipline to question seriously the doings of his superior officer. Of course they are both my A.D.C.’s—that’s something—but Hincks is not really a schemer. Ryson made one or two mistakes, or we should not be having this pleasant party.”

“You may ring,” she told him. “I am quite ready.”

A maître d’hôtel, olive-complexioned, black-haired, typical, presented himself, followed by a waiter. He bowed and hurried on the preparations.

“Monsieur Machinka,” he announced, “has been called away on urgent business.” [38]

“Bad luck,” Cheshire commented coolly. “I am not altogether surprised, though. He will probably be back again in a day or two. We will trust you to serve the dinner, Luigi. Pretty well all foreigners here, aren’t you?”

“Italians and English, sir,” the man answered smilingly. “English and Italians always get on well together. No Germans here, very few French, no Russians. Always I say the same thing—even with the kitchen help—English and Italians. Her Highness is well?” he went on, turning to Sabine a little anxiously. “She is not feeling the room close?”

“I am quite well, Luigi,” she assured him. “A few too many late nights, perhaps.”

The man smiled sympathetically.

“The English life is very gay,” he observed.

The satellites arrived with the caviar and the service of dinner continued smoothly towards its appointed end. Cheshire developed an unusual aptitude for small talk. Luigi, who had been more than a little nervous, was speedily reassured. He served the coffee and Italian liqueurs himself. The time came when his two guests were alone. Sabine was more like herself but the dark shade of anxiety was still there in the background. She leaned over the table and lit her first cigarette.

“Guy,” she asked hysterically, “what do you think of me?”

He sighed. He laid his hand upon hers and she clutched at his fingers.

“It has been a shock, Sabine,” he told her. “Yet one has to look at these things from the larger point of view. You are married to an American, one of the finest fellows in the world, but at

heart you have remained a foreigner. Your own country means everything to you. Is that not so?"

"Yes," she confessed. "Still, I know I have been very foolish." [39]

"You have," he told her brusquely.

"What are you going to do with me?" she pleaded. "Is there to be scandal—or worse? Am I to be deported? Is my husband to be told, or is it worse even than that? Are you going to treat me as spies were dealt with in the old days?"

"Never that," he assured her. "Whether you will choose to avoid the scandal and the deportation depends upon you."

"Tell me, then, how?" she begged. "How?"

"You will continue in exactly the same fashion, the only difference being that you will meet me either here or elsewhere and not—Ryson."

His slight hesitation before he uttered the latter's name startled her.

"What about Ronnie?"

He raised his eyebrows.

"Sabine," he said, "you ask too much. Commander Hincks was and is an Englishman. He has, either wilfully or through carelessness, betrayed his own country. You are betraying an alien country for the sake of your own. There is a difference."

"You mean that he will die?" she asked in an awed whisper.

"That depends largely upon you."

"Upon me?"

"Yes. If you answer the questions I may ask you from time to time, if you continue the work upon which you are at present engaged, his life and possibly his career will be saved. If not, he must pay the penalty for his folly."

She shivered. [40]

"And it was my fault!"

"Scarcely your fault," he murmured indulgently. "He was a very foolish young man."

"And his friend—Godfrey Ryson?"

"Even more foolish, because he was older and the instigator of this damnable business."

"What will become of him?"

“You read your evening papers?”

“Never.”

“That’s a pity,” he regretted. “It might have saved you a shock. Ryson committed suicide this morning at an hotel not far from here.”

“God!” she muttered. “And what becomes of me?”

“You remain as you are. You continue your excellent work. But I personally will supply you with the material.”

She was on the verge of hysteria. She pressed her hand to her side. Her bosom was rising and falling quickly.

“There is something terrible underneath what you say.”

“There is nothing,” he assured her. “You have your means of communication with your friends still open. We have not interfered with it, we do not propose to interfere, but we shall supply you with the material.”

An indignant light flashed in her eyes.

“You mean that I am to betray my country?”

“You are to continue to forward the information you derive from me. I have taken the place of Hincks and Ryson. I shall supply you with interesting facts. One of the next, I think, was to have been the marks and loading and size of five thousand torpedoes we bought last week, also to what port they are shipped.”

“How did you know that?” she asked.

He waved the question away.

“I shall give you the information,” he repeated doggedly. “You will forward it.”

She brooded over the matter for some moments. Suddenly she leaned forward and gripped him by the wrists.

“The information will be false,” she cried.

“That is not your affair,” he told her sternly. “As a matter of fact, all the information you have received and have passed on to your friends has been false the whole of the time. Do you understand anything about the papers Ryson brought you, do you understand these tracings of a cruiser, the second half of which I am placing in your hands in a few minutes? Of course not. You pass them on. It is your business. For anything you know, I, too, am a traitor to my country. Shall I put the matter more clearly still, Sabine?”

"Yes."

"You will pass on the information, the tracings that I bring you, exactly as before, without a word of explanation or doubt. You give no hint to your friends which reflects in any way on their genuineness. You do this and Hincks continues to live and remain in the Service. You do this and you remain Sabine Alexandra Margarita, Princess Pelucchi, first lady amongst the nobility of your country, married to one of the richest men and finest fellows in the world."

"But I cannot go on!" she moaned. "If I do I am a spy, I am a double spy. I am worse than anything breathing."

"That you do not know," he insisted. "That is not for you to know. You deal only in sealed papers. The only true thing you may take into your heart is this—that unless you do as I say, it is the end."

"You can say this to me," she cried passionately. "You, who once told me—more than once—that you loved me!"

"I told you the truth, Sabine. I shall continue to love you—and hate you. You will remain the only woman in my life." [42]

She threw her arms round his neck, leaning towards him with all the magical light flowing from her glorious eyes. Never had she felt more powerless. He returned her gaze coldly, with just that slight touch of polite interest which a woman recognises as an insult.

"I understand," she said, drawing away with a little shiver. "Give me what I came to receive from Godfrey."

He drew the long envelope from his pocket.

"One more question. It has come to my knowledge that a copy of these tracings from the Admiralty was being sent to a man called Henry Copeland at the Lambeth post office. I imagine that these were duplicates of the ones handed to you. Henry Copeland's real name is Florestan. Do you know anything of him?"

"By name only," she replied.

"Who is he?"

"Like myself, a spy," she answered bitterly. "A spy in the service of my country. It was someone in the Embassy who suggested that duplicates should be sent to him to compare with those I received and passed on. They compare the two and are satisfied."

He reflected for a few moments in silence. Then he placed the sealed envelope in her hand.

“Take great care of it,” he begged with gentle irony. “It is very valuable, very precious. There are some crafty fellows in your Embassy.”

She drew her cloak around her shoulders.

“Guy,” she said, “I never thought that you could be so cruel.”

“I have to be cruel to keep my senses,” he rejoined sadly.

The only word of consolation, of real kindness that he had uttered. She hugged the memory of it to herself as she passed down those dreary back stairs, along the bricked-up passage, and into the waiting taxicab. **[43]**

[44]

CHAPTER V

Cheshire, for reasons of his own, had chosen for his town quarters a comfortable but certainly not luxurious suite on the seventh floor of the Milan Court. His rooms were at the end of the corridor and he had his own little staff installed there—a valet, and a chauffeur and private secretary neither of whom were ever allowed to go near the Admiralty. The latter gave him rather a shock a few days later when he announced that a lady had telephoned up that she was waiting below and might she come up at once. Cheshire was more than a little annoyed.

"What the devil is the concierge about?" he asked. "He knows perfectly well how to deal with chance callers like that."

"The concierge was not to blame, sir," the young man explained. "He refused to say whether you were in or out and told the lady that you did not receive visitors here except by appointment. She went to one of the telephones, rang up again, and asked me to go down and get her card. She gave it me in a sealed envelope. I thought I had better bring it up to you. She assured me you would recognise the name, at any rate."

Cheshire tore open the envelope and glanced at the card:

Contessa Elida Pelucchi

"Better fetch her up," Cheshire ordered a little curtly. "Any other visitors due?"

"You told me to put them off, sir," the secretary reminded him. "I think you had an appointment in Downing Street which does not appear in the diary." [45]

Cheshire nodded and waved him away.

"Keep out of sight as much as you can," he enjoined. "You can bring the young lady straight in here."

Elida was not supposed to possess the superlative looks of her sister but she was still beautiful, and in a divinely simple grey afternoon dress and a black hat which did little to conceal the beauty of her hair, her appearance was sufficiently striking. She entered the room a little tentatively, almost shyly.

"Are you very angry with me for coming, Guy?" she asked.

"My dear," he answered as he led her to a chair, "I am honoured—flattered. But this sort of thing is all wrong, you know. If you had wanted me I would have hurried on my call of ceremony. Must go to Regent's Park within the week, you know. You ought not to come here. Even at my time of life I

daren't receive young ladies of your age and appearance at this classic hour."

"I had not forgotten," she admitted hopefully, "that it was about the time you took your first cocktail."

"A quarter of an hour too soon," he told her, "and before that, Elida, I think I shall have sent you back. What do you want?"

"To know about Ronnie Hincks, for one thing."

"There is nothing to tell you."

"Nothing—terrible has happened to him?"

"He is still at work. That is about all I want to hear from you, young lady. Now tell me the other thing."

"I really am very fond indeed of Ronnie Hincks," she declared, leaning forward. "The other thing I have come to see you about, though, is even more serious."

He seated himself in a high-backed chair, his fingers drumming faintly upon the table, his expression entirely impassive. He said nothing to help her, he was exercising his gift for assuming a mantle of reserve which made him very unapproachable. Her beautiful eyes pleaded with him in vain. He refused to respond in any way to their appeal. [46]

"Well?" he said at last.

She played with her vanity case nervously. If there was a fault in her appearance, however, she decided not to remedy it at the moment.

"Guy," she began, "this is really a terrible business. I have come about Sabine."

"A terrible business?"

"You must not mind," she went on. "Sabine tells me everything. We trust one another. I should also like you to trust me. I am as safe from speech, from any form of breaking confidence, as any human being could be."

"You have character, I know," he admitted, "but what is all this leading to?"

"You gave Sabine the other evening a most awful shock."

"So she told you about it."

There was nothing in his tone to denote anger, but she understood.

"You must remember this, Guy," she pleaded. "Sabine and I

are one. There has never been a secret between us of any sort. I know that she had turned the head of that stupid man, Godfrey Ryson, and that he was giving her documents and tracings of plans which she passed on through the Embassy here to officials of her own country. A terrible thing to do, perhaps. I am not here to defend it, Guy. I shall only ask you to remember that Sabine is not an Anglo-Saxon and she loves her country passionately. She believes that that country is being rashly led and may soon be engaged in what might be a mortal struggle. Sabine felt her old patriotism in her blood, in her heart, everywhere. She was forced to do something. She did what she could."

"I am not arguing," Cheshire said. "I am not complaining. What next?" [47]

She looked at him with wonder in her eyes.

"You are changed."

"Danger changes everyone. I, too, have a country."

"We spoke of that, Sabine and I," she went on eagerly. "Believe me, we are not unsympathetic. We realise your position entirely. I am here only to ask one thing, and that can make little difference to you. The price of your silence with regard to Sabine, your attitude towards Henry, who is the dearest person on earth, and to your British Government, to whom your honour is pledged, is, she tells me, that she continue to be the intermediary for these communications which, I presume, will be deceptive and which you will supply."

"Well?"

"I am here, Guy, to beg you to let me take her place."

"So that's it," he murmured half to himself.

"It is reasonable," she pleaded. "Sabine, apart from her illustrious name, which is also mine, holds a great position in life. She is the wife of Henry Prestley and even I know what that means to-day. If anything happened to her it would break his heart, it would shock all Europe."

"What do you mean by anything happening to her?"

"My dear Guy, you will not pretend that these secret meetings, this interchange of letters, does not involve her in danger."

"No," he admitted. "I do not deny that."

"Then please think, and think fast. I wish to take her place. I have little to lose. I am not married. I am not even betrothed. There are reasons why I should take her place, Guy. Do not ask me what they are, but they are sufficient. If one of us must do it, [48]

and I can see no other way, let it be me."

"I don't believe," he said, "that your sister would allow you to make the sacrifice."

"She will. She has already consented. The final decision remains with you."

"Does she realise," he asked quietly, "that if this business came to the knowledge of the outside authorities you might possibly be shot?"

"As though that mattered!" she scoffed. "Read the history of my country and you will discover that a Pelucchi has never feared death. Please agree to what I ask. I will come where you wish, when you wish. I will tell you how to communicate with me like Godfrey used to with Sabine. I will be absolutely faithful to my word. I, too, love my country but even if what I do were to hurt her mortally, I would rather it were I who did it than Sabine."

"Think carefully," he advised. "You are a very young woman, Elida, and you have a brilliant life before you, perhaps—"

"What do you mean—a brilliant life?" she interrupted scornfully. "Every one of the Pelucchis are as poor as rats. I do not mind telling you that Sabine dresses me. Of the men who have asked me to marry them there is not one at whom I would look, and twenty-six years old, let me tell you, for a girl of my country, is the beginning of the end."

"I shall not attempt to flatter you," he said with a faint smile. "I will not even tell you that you are as beautiful from the world's point of view as Sabine, but I shall still say that there is no other woman to compare with you in appearance and vivacity and charm in this country or any other. You will marry, of course. Remember that you risk possibly making a very great match if a whisper of this gets about. There might even be a scandal about our meetings. You risk a great deal, Elida, for your sister's sake."

"Not only for her sake," she reminded him. "It is also to save Ronnie."

"Let me test you," he insisted. "More than anything else your country wants to know the range and speed of our new bombers and the guns we are mounting upon our fast cruisers. Probably within the next few days I shall be handing you this information to pass on, only it will not be strictly true. You understand what that means—the possession of it so long as they believe in its truth is likely to do your country more harm than good, a great deal more harm than good. Furthermore, if they ever discovered what you have done you would never be able to revisit your country and your life would be safe nowhere."

She laughed bitterly.

"You cannot frighten me," she said. "As to my patriotism, however strong a force it might be, I have this to think of. If I do not do it Sabine will. I would rather it were I. Guy, you consent?"

"Yes," he promised. "I consent."

He touched a bell.

"Now I must send you away," he continued. "My secretary will take you down. You will hear from us when we need you."

She took his hands.

"I am so grateful, Guy," she confided, looking at him earnestly. "I cannot tell you how much Sabine means to me and how I love Henry. I feel now that they at any rate will be safe. Ronnie, too—well, Ronnie counts for something." [50]

He studied her curiously.

"Well, we may be at war in less than a week. That will settle everything."

"You really think that war is coming?" she asked with a distressed frown. "Oh, Guy, I hope not. I hate war or rather the thought of it. When Patani told me—"

"What did he tell you?" Cheshire interrupted abruptly.

She hesitated.

"He told me that he thought there would be war. He told me that if only they could get certain figures they were waiting for as regards your preparations, war would be a certainty. It might come any day."

Cheshire smiled.

"Perhaps we may be able to oblige your friend," he remarked as his secretary knocked at the door and Elida took her leave.

Sabine, very beautiful in her gold-coloured negligee, was resting when Elida came softly into her room. She made room for her sister on the couch by her side.

"Sit down for a moment, child," she begged.

Elida looked round the boudoir.

"Where is Marie?" she asked.

"Having her dinner. I'm dressing early for the opera. No one will disturb us. Henry is at the club. Tell me—what did he

say?"

"I thought at first that he was going to be difficult," Elida confided. "He was so stern—such a different person altogether. In the end, though, he consented."

Sabine raised herself on the couch. Elida, who knew her sister so well, was a little surprised. It might have been evil news that she had brought.

"You are glad, Sabine?" she asked anxiously. **[51]**

Sabine gazed dreamily up at the frescoed ceiling.

"Of course I'm glad," she said, holding her sister's hand. "It is a great relief—a great joy. But you, Elida, have you counted the cost of this?"

"I have," the girl answered. "I am happy, Sabine, because I know now that nothing can disturb your happiness and Henry's. No one will ever guess that you had anything to do with this, even if trouble should come. For me it does not matter. . . . But really," she went on, "I do not think that anything will ever happen. Guy seems so confident, so sure, so successful in everything he does. He talks and looks like a man of power. I think he will make quite a good spy of me before we have finished."

"I wonder whether he was sorry," Sabine meditated.

"He should have been glad," Elida declared severely. "He has worshipped you so long and with such fidelity. He was your friend when I was a child. He must be glad to know that you are safe."

Sabine made no reply. Elida was watching her anxiously.

"Tell me," she begged, "if Guy had ever asked you to marry him should you have said yes?"

"I suppose so," Sabine sighed. "He is the sort of man very few women would refuse."

"You do not, by any chance," Elida asked, bending a little closer to her sister, "care for him still?"

"I might have done if I had realised how much he cared. He never said so and yet, since I am at the confessional, shall I tell you something? He was a poor man in Washington—just Naval Attaché to a very extravagant Ambassador. You know how much liberty one has over there and I think if I were to have gone on seeing him secretly, with all the excitement and glamour of those little dinners together or stolen meetings in strange places—well, I do not know, Elida. I do not know what might have happened. There have been times when I have been alone with him when I should have been afraid to let him know **[52]**

just what I was feeling. He never expected anything from me, he never asked for anything. Perhaps that is why I cannot help loving him a little. There are not many men like that."

Elida smiled as she stood upright.

"Perhaps," she said, looking down at Sabine with her mass of tumbled hair framing her flushed face and a very soft look in her damp eyes, "perhaps I am more glad now than I have been at all that I am to take your place."

CHAPTER VI

For the third afternoon following, the private card room of the St. George's Club had been deserted by its most ornamental members. It was the third day of a series of informal conferences which had been hurriedly summoned by the Prime Minister to discuss certain alarming developments in European politics. Although the Press had shown a most laudable restraint, there were many sinister and disquieting rumours afloat. On the Stock Exchange prices had sagged badly. No one knew exactly what was happening except that handful of men seated in the official library of No. 10, Downing Street, and they themselves had very few facts to go on. On this third afternoon, Malcolm Dunkerley, joint Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, who had recently been appointed Envoy Extraordinary from Great Britain to one of the disturbed capitals of Europe, was supplying the thrills. He had flown back from the Continent the previous evening and his report had produced something akin to consternation amongst the few who had been asked to listen to it. Dunkerley had just come up from the House and his harassed and dejected appearance was sufficiently clear indication of the badgering which he had received and the questions which had been showered upon him. From this informal gathering who were present by special invitation, he had nothing to conceal and he was very frank indeed.

"Orson-Meade thought that his reception was chilly enough," he confided, "but his people were at least polite. That is more than I can say of my friend. He didn't mince words either. After dealing with diplomats for so many years it seems a queer thing to hear a Dictator talk." [54]

"Are you serious," Fakenham asked, "when you say that he actually threatened war?"

"I am indeed," was the somewhat agitated reply. "'We are weary of conversations,' were his last words to me. 'We want peace but we are tired of talking about peace. It leads nowhere. It gets nothing that we want.' I asked him plainly then what it was he wanted. He showed me a map that would have created a sensation in the House if it could have been passed round! 'We want people of my country established there and there and there,' he said, touching three places. 'We want a coinage, banks, and an exchange of our own. We want an open market for petrol, iron, steel, rubber, cordite, nickel—practically everything you can think of in raw materials. We do not want to buy any manufactured articles. We want to import the raw materials ourselves from our own people and pay for them with our own money. Until we can do this we are dissatisfied and our only alternative is to do as we are doing—to prepare

to take what we want for ourselves.' It is no good concealing the fact, gentlemen, that this is a distinct and definite threat. I am practically ordered back again to an interview on Tuesday week and I am expected then to reply to what amounts to an ultimatum."

"Our friend," the Premier observed, "has opened his mouth wider than ever before, because up till now he has always spoken of the issues between us as being matters for discussion and arbitration."

"Well, there is no question of discussion or arbitration at the present moment," Malcolm Dunkerley pronounced. "I am to be back at the Palace on Tuesday week and unless I take a definite proposal, their next move will be with battleships." **[55]**

"You really believe that they want war?" the Premier persisted.

Dunkerley shrugged his shoulders.

"I am afraid I do," he answered.

"Jellicoe's reply to such demands as these would have been a Naval demonstration at Malta," one of the younger of the Ministers put in.

"In Jellicoe's days," Fakenham remarked drily, "the country against whom he would have been demonstrating did not possess a matter of a thousand war planes."

There was silence for a few moments. Then Dunkerley summed up the whole affair.

"This is the first positively belligerent move which either Orson-Meade or myself has encountered. The curious feature, otherwise, in these attempted conversations, has been the reluctance of each of the countries we have approached to put forward any definite proposals. It seems to me that up till now they have been playing for time."

"No doubt about that," Fakenham agreed. "I can tell you why, if you like. Before they committed themselves finally they wanted to find out exactly how far we had got on with our rearmament scheme."

"I can prove the truth of your words," General Mallinson remarked from his corner. "It is not a thing we ever talk about outside the department, but if it interests you gentlemen I can tell you that there are more foreign spies at work at the present moment in this country than ever before. They are all here after the same thing and they are positively reckless about it. They are at Aldershot, at Devonport, at Newcastle, at Chatham, at Woolwich, and several other places I needn't mention. They are running almost incredible risks, for which, naturally, a few of them have already paid the penalty. They are out to discover **[56]**

exactly how far our schemes have been carried out, especially in planes and battleships. Now that they have found out the truth, or what they believe to be the truth, we are for it."

There was a further brief silence.

"I should imagine," the Prime Minister decided at last, speaking firmly and resolutely, "that General Mallinson is right. Our potential enemies have not wished to commit themselves until they were sure that we were really in a hole. I have not a word to say about the espionage business. That lies entirely in the hands of the General here and Admiral Cheshire, but I do think, having studied carefully the reports of Malcolm Dunkerley and Orson-Meade, that both countries with whom they have been attempting to hold these conversations have come to the conclusion that our rearmament preparations are in a parlous state. I propose that Malcolm Dunkerley and Orson-Meade return at once to their respective posts and insist upon a continuance of the conversations. If any further delay is attempted we shall know that they mean war. We are working on that presumption already."

"Personally, I do not think there is much doubt about it," Fakenham agreed. "I know the general public always believes that a newspaper wants war. We don't. I can assure you of that. All the same, I think it is coming."

"If so, it must be faced calmly," the Premier continued. "Malcolm Dunkerley and Orson-Meade must return to their posts to-morrow. If they are confronted with the same difficulties, they must break off negotiations and return. In that case we will have another brief meeting amongst ourselves and a Cabinet Council the day after."

"There is just one thing more I should like to mention," General Mallinson said as the meeting showed signs of breaking up. "It is on Admiral Cheshire's behalf as well as my own. We should like to be allowed to make a formal statement as to this matter of espionage before anything in the shape of mobilisation is determined upon. We might have some interesting facts to lay before you." **[57]**

"You shall have the opportunity that you ask for," the Premier agreed. "Your departments are run, as is only right, in complete secrecy. That secrecy, however, in the face of imminent war, must come to an end. If there is anything you have to say that might influence the situation, we shall expect you both to say it in this room immediately you are called upon."

"Cheshire, I know, will be prepared," the General said. "So shall I."

The Prime Minister rang the bell.

"The meeting is dissolved," he announced, rising a little

abruptly to his feet.

Prestley rose from his easy chair and strolled over to the card table as Fakenham, Mallinson, and Herbert Melville entered the room almost together half an hour later that afternoon.

"Heavens!" he exclaimed. "What a welcome sight! Come along and cut, you loiterers. Anyone been down in the City?"

"Not a soul," Mallinson replied. "Be reasonable, my dear fellow. Why should we imperil our diminutive pensions and feeble savings by furtive visits to our Stock Brokers in these days of panic?"

"It's a bad day down there, I can tell you that," Fakenham observed, spreading out a pack of cards.

"I don't care a hoot about your stocks and shares," Prestley assured them. "It's the franc I was anxious about." **[58]**

"Seven points down since yesterday," Melville declared. "I saw it on the tape downstairs."

Mallinson yawned.

"No more shop," he begged. "Your deal, Fakenham. Melville and I are together."

The first hand was played in silence. Prestley marked down the score and leaned back in his chair.

"If I were Dictator or Monarch or Prime Minister of this bright little island where I am at present much enjoying life," he said, "I should have the newspaper posters censored."

"Gets a perfectly sane idea, sometimes, this transatlantic gent," Mallinson murmured.

"Glad you agree. I left my abode this afternoon a happy man."

"Congratulations," Melville grunted. "Considering you had about two thousand people eating you out of hearth and home and doing their best to drink your cellars dry last week, you seem to be bearing up pretty well."

"I was all right until I saw those damn' posters," Prestley confided as he sorted his cards. "There's one just outside. 'Reported hitch in foreign conversations. Gloomy tone in City.' Is Britain really going to be bullied into war, does anyone know?"

"No one, unless they are actually in the Cabinet, knows a thing of what is going on," Mallinson declared blandly. "All that we know of politics is confided to us by the leader in the *Times* and the hysterics of the *Express*. I gather from these that the

Dictators are slowly making mincemeat of our plenipotentiaries and ambassadors."

Prestley glanced towards the closed door.

"I read the *Times* occasionally," he said, "also less often the *Express*, but I form my ideas as to whether things are going well or badly chiefly from Cheshire's expression. I saw him in the distance somewhere near Bury Street last evening on his way, I suppose, from the Admiralty to one of his usual haunts in Piccadilly, and to me he looked as though the blow had already fallen." [59]

The door had been quietly opened. It was now closed. Cheshire stood there on the threshold scowling.

"Who is libelling me?" he demanded.

Prestley sorted his cards.

"On the contrary," he objected. "I was just saying that you should be regarded as the human barometer. I saw you last night looking like a thundercloud. I knew then that you had had bad news down at that gloomy show of yours and that probably the enemy fleets were already in the Thames!"

"My expression at that moment," Cheshire explained, "meant nothing except that I was still feeling the effects of that marvellous champagne which was flowing in your palace last week."

"That's the one weak spot in the British Navy," Prestley sighed. "They never could stand their liquor."

The playing of the hand commenced. The bidding was spirited. It was at least a quarter of an hour before any remark outside the game was ventured upon.

"This looks like a conspiracy to keep me out," Cheshire grunted as the callers wrote down the amount of their penalty.

"A perfectly justifiable catastrophe," Melville declared. "A partner who revokes is the one thing to be dreaded at this game."

"Many a rubber," Cheshire pronounced, "has been won by a judicious revoke. The great thing is to know when to make it and to measure rightly the intelligence of your opponents." [60]

"No more back chat," Prestley insisted. "War is declared. I go four no trumps."

A dreary negative on his left.

"Grand slam," from his partner.

“Pass me,” murmured the General.

“And me,” echoed Prestley.

“Double,” from Melville.

There was no redouble. Melville led the ace of clubs. Prestley’s partner exposed his hand. Prestley laid his on the table.

“Any other lead, my friend,” he said, “and you had chosen your bedfellow for the night!”

Cheshire rose to his feet with a sigh.

“I shall go to the library and find a book,” he declared. “I might have been dealing the cards myself. Two absolute Yarboroughs except for the ace of clubs against two mighty no-trumpers and they lose thousands! The game progresses. My God!”

Nevertheless, in due time the inevitable happened. The rubber came to an end. Almost simultaneously Brooks, the only waiter who was allowed to enter the small card room, made his appearance with a note upon a salver. He presented it to Mallinson, who glanced it through and passed it across the table to Cheshire who had just returned. The latter nodded.

“Serve you right for keeping me out so long,” he remarked to the other three. “Mallinson and I have to go.”

“Downing Street?” Prestley asked.

Cheshire nodded. His remark was scarcely reverent.

“The old man’s got the jitters,” he confided. “The General and I are off to save the Empire.”

CHAPTER VII

The Prime Minister's reception of his two visitors was friendly but a little depressing. He motioned them to chairs.

"Sorry to trouble you again so soon," he said, "but I have been thinking over your request to me, General Mallinson."

"Yes, sir."

"It seems to me that if we waited until the time came for mobilisation, we might miss the bus. We three are alone together now. I should like to have a few words with you on this Secret Service question. The increase in the number of foreign spies working here seems to me rather significant."

"No doubt about that, sir," Cheshire acknowledged, accepting and lighting a cigarette from the box which his host had passed him. "At a rough estimate I should say that there were twice as many major spies at work here as ever before. Money is being thrown about everywhere. Half the time the trouble is to avoid arresting some of these fellows before we have found out as much as we want to about what they are after."

The Premier nodded.

"Well, I'm glad you realise what you are up against," he remarked. "Remember, I consider that you, Admiral Cheshire, you, General Mallinson, and the Commissioner of Police at Scotland Yard are the three people responsible for dealing with this inroad. We discussed this afternoon, as you doubtless remember, the much stiffer attitude, during the last week or so, of our friends, or rather, I should say, our enemies in Europe." [62]

"Certainly, sir," Mallinson admitted.

"I suppose it has occurred to you," the Premier continued, "that all this increase in the number of spies working here is due to the fact that the enemy are furiously anxious to discover just how our scheme of rearmament is progressing."

"That, too, was mentioned this afternoon," Mallinson pointed out.

"You are, without a doubt, then, feeling your responsibilities," the Prime Minister continued. "It is obvious that a great many of these spies have succeeded in getting through reports which have disclosed a considerable part at any rate of the situation."

"To a certain extent, sir, that may be true," Cheshire replied. "Our reaction to that is simple. A portion, by far the most important portion, of the reports which are sent out almost

daily from London and all over England we could stop if we liked."

"You could stop?" the Premier repeated incredulously. "Then why the mischief don't you?"

"Because," Cheshire explained, "at the present moment our counter-espionage is at least as good as any work that is being done on the other side. A great many reports are being sent to foreign countries, through sources which they consider above suspicion, based upon information which is not altogether correct."

The Prime Minister stroked his chin.

"Aren't you taking a great responsibility in letting these reports go through?" he asked.

"Perhaps so," Cheshire admitted, "but on the other hand we believe that it pays. I need not say that both the General and I are proud of our organisations. Foreign espionage over here is very far-reaching and comprises an enormous number of correspondents, but our counter-espionage is, on the whole, a great deal better." **[63]**

"What you mean, then, I suppose," the Premier remarked, "is that you are deliberately permitting two enemy countries to build up an idea as to the progress of our rearmament schemes, which is, to say the least of it, pessimistic."

"Quite true, sir," Cheshire acquiesced. "You are putting into plain words what I was only hinting at."

"I knew that something of the sort was a recognised principle, of course," the Premier went on thoughtfully, "but just now don't you see the danger of the position? We are at work tooth and nail to prevent war. The reports you are allowing to go through might be reports which are likely to encourage it."

"On the other hand," the General pointed out, "the advantage of having an enemy country completely deceived as regards our position, say with regard to the calibre of our guns or the number of divisions we could put into the field at once or the capacity of our planes, might easily win the war for us."

"We always win any war in the long run," the Prime Minister observed a little irritably. "What good do we get out of it? None at all. We generally find ourselves having to pay our enemies' debts."

"The coming of war," Cheshire ventured, "is never likely to be wholly influenced by the reports of spies. On the other hand, supposing war comes, we should be in a much better position if the enemy conducted their tactics in ignorance of our true dispositions. For example, sir, the Admiralty have bought five thousand tons of a metal which is really an alloy of aluminium **[64]**

from a neutral country. The enemy believe we are going to use those five thousand tons in coverings for our aeroplanes and they know perfectly well that the stuff, instead of being non-inflammable, as it should be, will blaze up at the slightest suggestion of fire. Of course it is not going on our planes at all. It is going on the dump heaps."

"Pretty costly piece of work, that. You have to pay for it."

"Yes," Cheshire admitted, "but, unlike most of the material we have bought, this comes to us on extended terms of credit. Long before we have parted with the money we shall have found out its defects and turned it down."

The Premier was thoughtful for a few moments.

"It is a dangerous game you two are playing," he remarked. "You are really encouraging enemy countries to have a whack at us."

"Our idea," Cheshire pointed out, "is to carry on right to the last moment and then let the truth leak out about one or two little matters. Simultaneously, there is a chance that the enemy may come into possession of papers purporting to disclose an exceedingly well-thought-out offensive, with which they might have to deal. It would be calculated to give them a shock. Personally, I think we should always be able to engineer a climb-down on their part."

"Something up your sleeve there," the Prime Minister observed with a smile.

"My *pièce de résistance*."

The Prime Minister changed the subject a little abruptly.

"What about this Naval Captain of yours—Ryson—who shot himself the other day?"

Cheshire was suddenly grave.

"You realise, of course, sir," he said, "that his letter was a fake. It is a terrible thing to have to confess of anyone in the Service, but I have had the idea for some time that he was engaged in traitorous work. The time came when I was able to prove it. No information that he has passed on will do us any harm. On the other hand, the enemy believe, or will believe in a day or two, that they have the secret of the hidden deck on our new fast cruisers." **[65]**

The Premier was once more thoughtful.

"What you have told me, gentlemen," he said at last, "is in a way reassuring. It may account to some extent for this change of attitude on the Continent. I cannot say, however, that I am completely convinced as to its wisdom. I shall have to consult

a few of my colleagues. Keep a tight hand on your operations for the next few days. I agree, of course," he concluded, rising, "to the principle of supplying false information. On the other hand, in this instance it is a distinct incentive to the one thing we want to avoid—war."

"Do you think you will ever be able to avoid it, sir?" Cheshire asked quietly.

"It must be avoided for another two months at any rate," the Prime Minister declared.

The two men, as was their custom, left separately—Cheshire on foot, walking the few hundred yards to the Admiralty, Mallinson returning in a taxicab to his almost secret block of offices in a little-frequented part of the War Office. They met again at the hour for *apéritifs* at the club. Cheshire, who had been unable to forget the slight break in the Premier's voice as he had uttered his last brief sentence, referred to it almost at once.

"The Chief was right, in a way, this afternoon," he pointed out. "We are not pulling quite the same rope. His job is to prevent war. That is not exactly our line. Ours is to see that if the war comes we win it." **[66]**

The General sipped his glass of sherry.

"That robot-like man with still, set features and glasses and half-opened mouth is perfectly right," he admitted. "You and I are treading all the time on gunpowder, you know, Cheshire. Can't you imagine them gloating in some faraway council chamber over the false plans of that cruiser of yours and chuckling when they think that those five thousand tons of aluminium are quite enough to make a whole fleet of fighting planes worthless? It's a dirty business sometimes, Cheshire."

"You don't think I like it, do you?" was the almost savage rejoinder. "What about your Gibraltar plans?"

Mallinson nodded.

"That has been the finest achievement of our whole organisation," he declared.

"Yes, but don't forget," Cheshire reminded him, "you had to kill three partially innocent people before you brought that off. Not only that, but if any enemy were to launch an attack upon the place, based upon what they believed to be the existing conditions, it would cost them a thousand or two of lives."

"That," the General replied more equably, "would be *la guerre*."

Footsteps were heard approaching and the conversation

between the two men faded away. Prestley lifted the curtain and entered the room.

"You haven't come back expecting another rubber at this hour of the evening, have you?" Cheshire asked.

Prestley shook his head. He drew the curtain again behind him and joined his two friends.

"No, I don't want to play any more bridge," he confided. "I came back rather hoping that I might find you here, Cheshire." [67]

"Here I am, a little crushed, but still cheerful," the latter observed. "At your service, my friend. I'm ready to lend you a spot of money if that's what you are looking for, or to stand you a drink. What about a glass of this sherry?"

Prestley nodded in an abstracted sort of fashion. The Admiral filled a glass from the decanter which was standing on a silver salver between the two men. Prestley sipped its contents with the air of one whose thoughts were far away.

"Tell us some good news," Cheshire begged. "Mallinson and I are feeling rather depressed. We have been round to Downing Street and had something of a wigging from the old man."

"If I had been on the same terms with the old man, as you call him, as you two are, I should probably have been a visitor in Downing Street myself this afternoon. Somehow or other, he is always a little stiff with me."

"No one in the world would believe it," Mallinson remarked, "but I have come to the conclusion that our Prime Minister is a shy man."

"Maybe," Prestley agreed. "Anyway, there is something I would like to say, but I don't want to say it to the Press. You two fellows would be as good confidants as anyone else and, mind you, what I am going to disclose comes in just the course of a friendly little chat."

Cheshire and Mallinson were very silent. They both listened intently.

"What I mean," Prestley continued, "is that I am not making a confidential communication to you, I am telling you a fact which you can make use of exactly as you like. All I say is—keep away from any direct intercourse with the Press. Get me?" [68]

They nodded acquiescence. Prestley went on.

"Well, this is what I want you to know," he said. "You are aware that Count Patani came to England on some sort of a special mission and that he never went near the Foreign Office and only left a card at Downing Street? As a matter of fact, his

visit over here was not official in the least. He did not come with the idea of discussions of any sort with the British Foreign Office. He came to see me."

"The devil he did!" Cheshire interjected.

"To justify myself," Prestley went on, "and you know I am very careful in such matters, directly he announced that he was visiting London on a special mission to me which must be considered entirely confidential, I shut him straight up. I told him that as a member of a friendly nation living in England, I could not agree to a confidential interview with anyone whose country was on strained relations with the Court of St. James's. I offered to hear what he had to say and to give it my consideration, but I declined to treat his visit, or any offer he might make, as confidential."

"This man ought to have been a diplomat," Cheshire murmured.

"Patani was a considerable time hesitating after that," Prestley continued. "In the end he accepted the situation. His mission was to ask me for assistance in helping to arrange an immediate loan of a very large sum of money to his country in case she should find herself in urgent need."

His two listeners were pensive for several moments.

"In urgent need of it," the General repeated, "means war, of course."

"That depends upon how you choose to take it," Prestley went on, the frank, good-humoured expression and twinkle in his eyes temporarily banished, his face the face of a very serious man. "You understand that in coming to you and telling you this I take it for granted that you are as anxious to keep affairs of this sort out of the Press as I am. I cannot accept the hospitality of your country and the friendship of so many delightful people and remain silent upon such an important matter. I leave it to you two entirely how you treat the communication I have just made. Pass it on to anyone whom you think ought to know, but keep the Press out of it." [69]

The General nodded emphatically.

"For our own sakes, as well as yours, Henry," Cheshire declared, "that is understood."

"We are international bankers, of course," Prestley continued, "and we can command capital in practically every city of the world, but I told Patani what I told the representative of a smaller power less than a year ago—my firm, so long as I am at its head, will never help in the raising of large sums of money for purposes of offensive warfare."

"And what did Count Patani say to that?" Cheshire asked quietly.

"He fenced with the question. He hinted at the enormous armament preparations in this country. It was necessary, he declared, for his own country to protect itself. There was the whole of Abyssinia untouched dripping millions into the hands of industry, sufficient security for any loan in the world. He was very eloquent. I listened to a great deal he had to say which is not your concern or mine."

"And the result?" the General enquired.

"He leaves to-night at eight o'clock by the private plane which brought him," Prestley confided. "I have refused even to consider the question of a loan until certain political matters are settled and peace assured." [70]

"You are a great man," Mallinson pronounced.

"I am nothing of the sort," was the firm disclaimer. "I was brought up with these ideas and believe me, nine tenths of my countrypeople share them. We hate war like nothing on earth, and there is not a member of my own firm who would not be behind me in every word I said to Patani. The banking industry as a whole, let me tell you, has given the wider aspects of this matter the most strenuous consideration. Twelve of us held a conference in Paris a few weeks ago. We decided that the most effectual methods of checking warfare are to discredit it and to support its operations in no way whatsoever."

"So Patani goes home," Cheshire murmured, emptying his glass. "You have made history, Prestley. They talk about our work for the Empire. You have done something for all civilisation."

"I agree most fervently," Mallinson concurred.

The little meeting was at an end. The General was disposed to linger but something in his friend's attitude conveyed a suggestion to him. He took his leave. Cheshire and Prestley were alone. The moment had arrived which the former had been dreading.

"Prestley," he began, "I am going to ask you a question which you may answer or not as you will."

"Sounds mysterious. Go ahead."

"Did Sabine know of Patani's mission to you?"

Prestley gazed fixedly at his questioner. He seemed to lose much of the warm humanity which had transfigured his somewhat stiff being. He drew himself up slightly. His expression was more set.

"I do not think," he said, "that it is within your province to ask me that question." [71]

Cheshire flushed slightly but he showed no signs of resentment.

"Probably not, Henry," he admitted, "yet it is a question which you must pardon, even if you don't choose to reply. Sabine is known to be an intense and enthusiastic daughter of her country. The Patanis are a younger branch of her own illustrious family. There were reasons why the question suggested itself to me."

"Perhaps you could explain them."

"I would rather not," was the gentle yet firm reply.

"Very well, then. There is a counter-question on this same subject which I must put to you."

"Let it alone altogether," Cheshire begged.

"I should be glad if that were possible," Prestley replied with a slight softening in his tone and expression. "Listen to me, Guy. You are, I suppose, my wife's oldest friend in this country."

"It is my privilege."

"You have known her sister since she was a baby."

"That is quite true."

"You are also, if I may be permitted to say so, a close and intimate friend of my own."

"It is an honour to consider myself so. There is no man living whom I respect more."

"Then we can surely talk now not only as men of kindred blood but as friends and allies. Tell me, have you any reason to believe that my wife's devotion to the country of her birth—"

"Do not ask me any such question," Cheshire interrupted with sudden vigour. "Don't do it, Prestley. Don't you see the position in which you are placing me? You have a claim upon me, so has Sabine, because of our previous friendship, but my country stands first with me as yours would with you. You are driving me into a corner. I will not answer your question, but you shall get this much out of it. Take my advice—send your wife and her sister back to New York for a few months." [72]

"That is your advice?"

"Yes."

"Any explanations?"

"No."

"You are keeping the real truth hidden from me. What about

that fellow Ryson? He was a great friend of Sabine's. He was in and out of the house all the time."

Cheshire raised his eyebrows.

"How is Ryson concerned?" he asked coolly. "He committed suicide because he had hold of the wrong job."

"No more than that to tell me?"

"No more."

"Yet you want me to send Sabine and Elida out of the country?"

"I have offered you some advice."

Cheshire was immovable. Prestley, a strong man himself, knew it. He turned on his heel. His companion moved swiftly between him and the drawn curtain. He gripped Prestley's arm as he was passing.

"All that I have said, Henry," he told him fervently, "I have said in friendship."

Prestley turned back and his voice was raised scarcely above a whisper.

"I am not leaving you in anger, Guy," he said. "I am leaving you because I need to be alone for a time."

"I feel like that myself," the other admitted.

Prestley descended the stairs and disappeared. The General frowned as his co-worker joined him a few minutes later in the coffee-room.

"I'm only guessing, of course," he said gravely, "but isn't your friendship for the family leading you into rather deep water, Cheshire? The whole world knows that the Princess and the Contessa Elida are devoutly patriotic." [73]

Cheshire had apparently recovered his spirits.

"What are sailors for if not to deal with the deep waters?" he laughed light-heartedly.

[74]

CHAPTER VIII

The telephone bell, faintly audible from the cloak closet, rang just as Horace Florestan, seated at the head of the table in the dining room of his semi-detached West Kensington residence, was preparing to carve the sirloin of beef—the usual Sunday-night supper. The girl who was waiting at the sideboard turned towards the door. Her master stopped her.

"I will answer it," he announced, laying down the knife and fork. "You will excuse me for a few minutes, Deborah?" he added, glancing down the table towards his wife.

Mrs. Florestan, an untidily dressed woman with large, indifferently concealed limbs built on flowing lines, with beautiful, strangely-coloured eyes and full, voluptuous lips, shrugged her shoulders.

"Be as quick as you can, please," she begged. "We are late as it is and the children are hungry."

The head of the household nodded and left the room, walking with light footsteps, which seemed somehow in keeping with his lean, tightly-knit body. They heard him cross the hall and disappear into the cloak closet where the telephone instrument was placed. Afterwards, there was silence. Mrs. Florestan rose slowly from her chair and sank into that of her husband. The two children—Mary aged fourteen, and Tom aged twelve—looked at her hopefully.

"Go on, Mother," the boy said encouragingly. "You can carve just as well as Dad. I'm hungry."

Mrs. Florestan carved, completing her task with a sort of languid precision which seemed one of her characteristics. She resumed her place, carrying her own plate. The maid served salad. [75]

"I wonder who it is wants Dad?" the girl asked.

"Silly hour to ring up, anyway," her brother declared.

Mrs. Florestan appeared to consider the matter for a moment.

"It cannot be the City, unless it was one of the Continental branches wanting him," she observed. "It may be one of those tiresome people at the club. I wish he had never gone on the committee."

The maid removed the cork from half a bottle of claret which had been opened for the midday meal. She served Mrs. Florestan, and the two children with water from a glass jug. No

one spoke for a few minutes. They were healthy children and they were hungry. It was the boy who broke the silence.

"Whoever it is," he grumbled, "they must have had something to say. Funny, keeping Dad all this time. Shall I go and hurry him up?"

"Stay where you are," his mother advised. "You know that your father does not like to be disturbed when he is at the telephone."

The meal proceeded in silence. Then the boy, who had finished his first helping and had his eye on the joint, rose to his feet.

"Can I call Father, Mum?" he begged.

Mrs. Florestan shook her head. She turned to the maid.

"Rosa," she said, "would you mind just reminding your master that we are waiting for him?"

The girl hurried to the door. She tried the handle, stooped down for a moment, tried it again and looked back at her mistress.

"The door is locked, Madam," she announced. **[76]**

A queer light shone for a moment in Mrs. Florestan's eyes, the light of fear or premonition.

"Impossible," she declared. "Why, the key was on this side when we came in."

Rosa shook her head.

"Someone must have moved it, Madam," she said. "The door is locked on the other side."

Mrs. Florestan rose to her feet and with considerable speed for a heavy woman she made her way to the door. She turned the handle in vain. The boy joined her and began shaking the door. It was without a doubt fastened.

"What on earth is the meaning of this?" Mrs. Florestan asked a little helplessly.

"Dad locked us in while he had his talk," Mary observed. "Perhaps he's talking to a lady friend."

"Your father does not do that sort of thing," her mother said.

She moved to the window.

"Tom," she enjoined, "will you climb out this way—here is the latchkey of the front door. Find out what your father is doing."

The spirit of adventure entered into the boy's veins. He pushed

up the window, stepped out, opened the front door without any trouble and made his way down the narrow darkened passage. He flung open the door of the cloak closet. The place was empty. He stood away and called up the stairs.

"Dad!"

No answer. He turned the key and threw open the door of the dining room.

"I can't find him!" he exclaimed. "There's no one at the telephone, and the key was on this side of the door all the time."

"What about his hat and coat?" Mrs. Florestan asked quickly. [77]

"They're both here."

Mary ran lightly upstairs. She called down in a moment.

"Dad isn't up here."

Their mother lifted the telephone receiver from its place.

"Exchange," she said, "my husband was called to the telephone a few minutes ago. Can you tell me where the call came from?"

There was a brief silence, then the answer came through.

"A call box at Charing Cross."

"You do not know who it was?"

"Of course not," the operator replied. "Anyone might ring up from a call box."

Mrs. Florestan hung up the receiver. The boy, who had been to the front door again, came tearing back.

"I say," he cried, "the garage doors are open, the gates, too, and the car is gone!"

Mrs. Florestan shrugged her shoulders. Her attitude was simply one of mild surprise mingled with boredom.

"Perhaps," she suggested, "we had better finish supper."

The two children chattered wildly through the remainder of the meal—even the maid now and then put in a word. Mrs. Florestan remained silent. She made no comment upon any of the suggestions. When the meal was finished she went to the telephone, closed the door and asked for the Police Station. She stated her case to the Sergeant who answered. There was a brief silence whilst he made a report. Then he came back.

"The Inspector thinks that your husband is probably having a [78]

joke with you," he said.

"My husband is not that sort of man," Mrs. Florestan replied.

"If you wish it, he will come round."

"I do wish it."

In a quarter of an hour's time there was a double knock at the front door and Inspector Douglas made his appearance. The children had been sent back to their school in a taxicab. The maid remained in the room. The Inspector was told exactly what had happened. Even he was a trifle puzzled.

"Your husband hasn't any relatives who are likely to have been taken ill?" he enquired.

"To the best of my knowledge," Mrs. Florestan answered, "my husband hasn't a relative or an intimate friend in the world."

"Will you give me the number of the car, please?"

Mrs. Florestan and the maid between them were able to furnish the information.

"You have no knowledge of your husband being in any difficulties or trouble?" the Inspector asked a little diffidently.

Mrs. Florestan shook her head.

"My husband is employed by a firm of shipping merchants in the City," she said. "He earns a good salary. We have never been in debt. He has neither friends nor enemies. He is on the committee of the Golf Club and usually plays on Saturday afternoon and Sunday."

"He didn't say anything about expecting a call, I suppose?"

"Certainly not. Why do you ask that?"

The Inspector stroked his chin.

"I was just wondering why he locked the door on his way to the telephone," he remarked.

Mrs. Florestan might possibly have hazarded a reply to that question. She made no effort to do so, however. The Inspector, with cheerful promises of speedy news, took his leave.

Admiral Cheshire was fortunately an early riser and he was already breakfasting when an important visitor arrived.

"Sir Herbert Melville, sir," Greyes, his very excellent and devoted servant, announced.

"Show him in, of course."

The valet opened the door a little wider. The Deputy Commissioner entered. Greyes departed, closing the door behind him.

"Something up?" Cheshire asked, rising to his feet.

The Deputy Commissioner nodded. He drew off his overcoat and threw it over a chair.

"I don't know whether you will want to come into this, Cheshire," he said. "It isn't strictly in your department but it might lead anywhere. I have come straight to you because I know you are interested in the man. You asked me if I had his dossier."

"Right. Go ahead," Cheshire invited.

"The man's name is Florestan."

Cheshire whistled softly.

"I should say I am interested in him," he muttered. "Have a cup of coffee while you talk?"

Melville shook his head.

"Not for the moment. I was up at six o'clock and had some breakfast of a sort. I may take a cup of coffee later. I want to get this off my chest. Early this morning they rang me up from the Yard. It seems that at about midnight a car was discovered with the engine still running drawn up close to the kerb opposite the entrance to St. George's Hospital. A solitary passenger was in the seat next the driver's but there was no sign of the driver. The passenger was apparently a dying man. He had been shot through the side. He was carried into the hospital. Everything was done for him that was possible. He is lying now between life and death. They didn't ring me up at the moment. Suddenly one of the doctors recognised him. Do you know who he is? Meldicott." **[80]**

"Not Meldicott the motor man?" Cheshire exclaimed. "Not Sir Theodore Meldicott?"

"It is he all right."

"I hope to God they keep him alive," Cheshire said. "He is doing more than any man breathing to put us in good shape. He has the contract for the whole of our tanks and all the bombers he can turn out. Been living at the works—his own foreman. If this is true, it is bad news!"

"I was afraid you would find it so," the Deputy Commissioner said gravely.

"And Florestan—where does Florestan come in?"

"I was coming to that," Melville went on. "The police examined the car and found false number plates. There was one underneath, beaten nearly out of shape, but they traced it. There is a false name on the registration card but the original number was the registration number of Horace Florestan."

"Thank God you let me into this," Cheshire declared. "I want that man, Melville."

"Well, you have a chance of getting him."

"Anything been done?"

"Nothing outside the ordinary curriculum," the Deputy Commissioner replied. "It's rather puzzling. Mrs. Florestan rang up herself about her husband's disappearance and the car having been stolen from the garage. Of course he took it himself. It seems that he lives in a small house in Colville Terrace, West Kensington. He was rung up while the family were at supper, left the room to answer the summons and never returned. When they went to look for him he had gone, the car had gone, and the telephone call was from a call box at Charing Cross. Florestan, it seems, is employed by a large shipping firm with offices in Holborn. There is no doubt whatever that it is his car. We shall arrest him at once as soon as we can find him. We have two men now down in Holborn waiting until the offices open." **[81]**

Cheshire glanced at his watch.

"Look here," he said, "you will have to let Mrs. Florestan know that the car has been found."

"We thought of telephoning her."

"Don't," Cheshire begged. "Send an inspector round and let me go, too. And listen—have your people keep Florestan under observation, if he's fool enough to go to the office in Holborn —which I'll bet a hundred to one he won't—but don't arrest him. We don't want any ordinary Police Court business here nor a word in the Press. If it gets out that Meldicott is the wounded man we can't help it, but keep it secret as long as you can, especially if the doctors don't pull him through."

Melville nodded.

"I will do what I can," he promised. "If anything happens to Meldicott, though, we must arrest Florestan if we can find him."

"Yes, but do it in the way I shall point out," Cheshire insisted. "Let my department or Mallinson's handle this. I could get him twenty years as easily as snapping my fingers at the present moment, but there are things about that man—" **[82]**

"All right," Melville interrupted. "I quite understand. What

puzzled me rather was the openness of it all—his wife ringing up and that sort of thing. Still, you come down with me to the Yard for a few minutes, then I'll send you down to the West Kensington Police Station; you shall get the inspector who went round last night and go and talk to Mrs. Florestan. Give me that cup of coffee now, Admiral, and get ready. Mind if I use your telephone?"

"Go ahead. You will see me in two minutes as the perfect Police Inspector in mufti."

He pressed the bell. Greyes presented himself almost at once, an overcoat on his arm and a hat in his hand. His master shook his head.

"Nothing of that sort, Greyes," he declared. "I want the oldest dark suit I have—blue serge for choice—ordinary shirt, double collar with a black tie, rather thicker shoes than I generally wear; sort of rig-out I wore when I was down at Deptford for the week-end."

"I understand perfectly, sir," the man answered. "Am I to accompany you, sir?"

"Certainly not," was the prompt reply. "I shall be back for lunch. Disconnect the telephone and don't answer the bell. Anyone who wants me can think I am round at the Admiralty."

Greyes, who very much disliked these independent expeditions, touched his hip pocket lightly. Cheshire nodded.

"I hate bloodshed in the morning, Greyes," he said smiling, "but queer things are happening nowadays."

CHAPTER IX

Deborah Florestan, from the moment of her calm, unhurried entrance into the back parlour of Number 137, Colville Terrace, presented a problem to both of the men who were awaiting her. Inspector Douglas, who had spent his life at various London police stations, settled down to consider her from the strictly official point of view. Cheshire regarded her from an altogether different angle. To him she presented no ordinary problem. She had taken no pains to conceal or modify her somewhat unusual appearance. She wore, even at that comparatively early hour of the morning, a rose-coloured gown which followed almost too closely the lines of her ample and voluptuous figure. Her face was devoid of cosmetics. There was no sign of lipstick upon her lips. The massive coils of her hair were untidy and ill-brushed. She showed neither fear nor any particular interest in this unusual visit. She listened to Cheshire's word of introduction with a slight air of boredom.

"Mrs. Florestan," he said, "my name is Cheshire. I have a semi-official post at Scotland Yard. My companion, you will remember, came to see you last night."

The woman inclined her head slightly and motioned them to a couch.

"Does it take two of you," she asked, "to come and see me about my stolen motor car?"

"We are more interested," Cheshire replied, "in your stolen husband. We should very much like to have a little conversation with him."

"My husband is a man of regular habits," she confided. "I expect he will be home to dinner to-night. What I do not quite understand," she went on, "is why the police should be concerned in his doings." [84]

Inspector Douglas leaned back in his place with folded arms. He was content to let his more distinguished companion take the lead in the preliminary steps of this investigation.

"You see, Mrs. Florestan," Cheshire continued, "as yet you have not had the latest information. Your car was discovered last night unattended outside St. George's Hospital with a man inside who had been shot in the chest, and was, as he is even now, very near to death."

"Someone must have stolen the car, then," she said coolly. "My husband is not a murderer. He does not even look for adventures."

“Mr. Florestan is engaged in the City, I believe?”

She nodded.

“He is with a firm of importers. Brown, Shipman & Co., is the name. Their offices are in Holborn.”

“Have they rung up yet to know why he has not arrived for business as usual?”

“Not yet.”

“Have you telephoned to them?”

“Why should I?”

Cheshire smiled good-humouredly.

“I am glad to see that you can take it so lightly, Mrs. Florestan,” he said, “but you must remember that your husband is missing. He left the car—presuming he drove it there—with the engine still running and disappeared, leaving an apparently dying man in the front seat.”

“The car must have been stolen,” Deborah Florestan repeated.

“At some stage during the evening that might have been the case,” Cheshire admitted, “but the fact remains that your husband drove it away from here having previously held a telephone conversation with someone of such importance that he locked the door upon his family. It went from here, without a doubt, under your husband’s control.” [85]

“Does anyone know that?” she asked.

“Certainly,” he answered. “Inspector Douglas here has secured the evidence of the policeman who was on duty at the corner of the street. He saluted your husband and said good evening.”

“Then up till now,” she observed, “that policeman seems to be the last person who saw him.”

“Precisely. Mrs. Florestan, have you any idea from whom that telephone message came?”

“Not the slightest. I never interfere in my husband’s concerns.”

“Do you think that he is engaged in any private business as well as being in a situation with Messrs. Brown, Shipman & Co.?”

“I have no idea.”

“The motor car,” Cheshire went on, “was fitted with a set of bogus plates. Have you any idea as to the reason for that?”

“None whatever,” she replied with a shade of contempt in her

tone. “I should think that there was no reason. I should think that the car was stolen last night and the bogus plates attached.”

Cheshire nodded appreciatively.

“Quite a feasible notion, Mrs. Florestan,” he agreed. “The car I noticed was a Daimler—a very expensive model.”

“I know nothing about cars.”

“Do you know what your husband’s income is?”

Mrs. Florestan’s interest in the conversation seemed to be waning. She stifled a yawn, however, and shook her head. [86]

“He is a very secretive man.”

“How much does he allow you for housekeeping?”

The question seemed to amuse her faintly.

“He makes no allowances,” she said. “I ask him for money when I want it.”

“Do you know what his salary is?”

“Fifteen hundred a year.”

“Quite a good salary,” Cheshire remarked, “but still, that Daimler model is listed at over two thousand pounds.”

“I am quite sure,” Mrs. Florestan told them, “that my husband would never pay that amount for a car.”

“Has he any intimate friends or relations?”

“Neither. He is on the committee of the Golf Club but he seldom goes there except on Saturday afternoons and Sunday mornings. We go to a picture palace sometimes on Saturday nights. He has no vices that I am aware of and he spends every evening, when he is not travelling, at home. He is, I suppose, as near as you can get such a thing, a model husband.”

“Do you ever see his correspondence?”

“If I do,” she answered, “I never look at it. He receives very few letters.”

Inspector Douglas, who had been listening intently, took advantage of a slight pause on his companion’s part to intervene.

“Do you know of anything in your husband’s life, Mrs. Florestan,” he asked, “which could account in any way for his being called up on the telephone last night, locking you all in the dining room while he spoke, taking out the car, and disappearing without a word or a message to you?”

"Nothing whatever," was the quiet reply. "That is why I am expecting every hour to hear something from him. I have just ordered dinner for half-past seven. I feel quite sure that he will be here. I really do not see what you are worrying about." [87]

"Are you not rather ignoring the serious incident of the dying man found in your car and the fact that it was driven either by your husband or someone else to St. George's Hospital last night?" Cheshire enquired drily.

"The car was stolen without a doubt," Mrs. Florestan answered. "It must have been stolen, because of the false plates that you say were attached."

The two men exchanged glances. Inspector Douglas, with a word of excuse, left the room.

"You will forgive us, I am sure, Mrs. Florestan," Cheshire explained, "but my companion has gone to find your maidservant. It is his duty to make a complete search of the house and of your husband's belongings. You have, I trust, no objection."

"Why should I have any objection if you think it necessary? The maid can show him the various rooms. I do not think that there is a locked drawer or cupboard in the house."

She rang the bell. The maid appeared almost at once.

"Rosa," her mistress directed, "go and find the other gentleman from the police who is wandering about the house somewhere. Show him into any room he wishes to visit. Begin with your master's bedroom and the little pigsty he calls his study. He is looking for something which I hope he will find."

Rosa disappeared with a half-muttered ejaculation. [88]

"I hope you won't mind putting up with my presence a short time longer," Cheshire said.

"Stay as long as you want to," Mrs. Florestan invited indifferently. "I shall take the dog for a walk at twelve. I have nothing to do until then. I think you might spend your time to better purpose, though, than to keep badgering me with stupid questions. Surely you could be more entertaining than that if you chose."

She rose to her feet, helped herself to a cigarette from a box on the table and offered it to Cheshire with a faintly inviting smile. He shook his head politely.

"Gaspers," she commented, as she lit one and returned to her chair. "Not much class but I cannot stand Turkish tobacco. Ask me some more questions if that's all you can think of to talk about."

"You are very kind," Cheshire acknowledged. "If I seem inquisitive, believe me it is only with the idea that something you might tell me, combined with what I already know, might help me towards relieving your anxiety at your husband's absence."

"I am not in the least anxious," she declared carelessly. "He will be home at half-past seven. He has not been a quarter of an hour late for years—when he comes back at all. Perhaps that is what makes him so tedious."

"You have been married long?"

"Fifteen years."

"Any children?"

"Two. They are at school. They come home for the week-end every half-term. They were here last night."

"Have you ever lived abroad, Mrs. Florestan?"

"What a question!" she cried. "Is my English not good?"

"Perfect," was the quiet reply. "Yours is just the question a foreigner might ask, though, and not an Englishwoman." **[89]**

She looked at him quite steadily for a moment. It was then he noticed the peculiarity of her eyes—eyes that might have been beautiful in passion or if lit with real interest but which seemed heavy and sombre in ordinary conversation.

"I am quite ready to submit to your cross-examination," she drawled. "You have explained why you are making it and I am satisfied, although I think you could be a much more amusing companion if you chose. Let me ask you one thing for a change, however. Do you think that I know things about my husband which you do not?"

"That seems to me to be one of the possibilities of the situation," Cheshire admitted.

"You think that he is a bad man, perhaps—that he killed or almost killed the passenger in his car?"

"Alas, we have not got nearly as far as that yet, Mrs. Florestan," her visitor replied. "We have to find out from the firm where your husband is employed whether he has any friends or acquaintances likely to have got him into trouble, or whether they could throw any light upon this mysterious Sunday-night message. We have heard what you have to say about your husband. We have to make enquiries now in other directions. It will be a long time, I fear, before we shall be able to tell you just what has happened to him and why."

"Drop in about dinner time and I may be able to relieve your

mind," she said confidently.

There was a puzzled look on Inspector Douglas's face as he re-entered the room a short time later. Deborah Florestan, who was smoking her second cigarette, smiled across at him a mirthless challenge.

"Well, Mr. Inspector," she said, "you have found out that my husband is a wicked man—yes? You have found out why he could afford to buy an expensive motor car and pay only seventy pounds a year for his house?" **[90]**

The Inspector smiled good-humouredly.

"Can't say I hoped for much, Mrs. Florestan," he replied, "but I must confess that we have drawn a complete blank. Quite a model chap, your husband. Everything in his rooms neat and tidy. A special box for the letters written by the children from boarding school. Heaps of receipts. No bills. All wonderful."

"A very careful man, my husband," she agreed. "Now you must try and find out who it was who telephoned from the call box at Charing Cross soon after eight o'clock last night, and also where my husband left the car and who stole it. Plenty of work for you still, Mr. Policeman, but not here."

"Madam is making fun of us," the Inspector observed. "Nevertheless, I must congratulate her. She possesses the perfect husband. As she remarks, our work has not begun yet."

"Mrs. Florestan seems quite convinced that he will be back in time for dinner," Cheshire confided. "She suggests that we drop in and see him somewhere about half-past seven."

Inspector Douglas nodded.

"From what I have discovered of his daily life, in the contents of his secretaire, his wardrobe, his diary and his account books," he pronounced, "I do not think he will be five minutes late."

"Then this," Cheshire remarked, with a slightly more friendly note in his tone, "will be only au revoir, Mrs. Florestan."

She smiled, dismissing them both with a wave of the hand. **[91]**

"Certainly come if you are so anxious to meet my husband," she said, addressing herself to Cheshire. "Bring the Inspector, too, if you must, but I should think that one pair of eyes would be enough."

It seemed to Cheshire that there was something mysterious, almost challenging, in the faint smile which so completely changed her expression. He answered her promptly, however.

“We will make it enough,” he told her. “I will leave the Inspector at home.”

CHAPTER X

Mr. James Brown, senior partner in the firm of Brown, Shipman & Co., who in their lighter moments proclaimed themselves as being importers or exporters of anything from disused razor blades to live elephants, quaked visibly as he sat behind his desk in his beautifully furnished office and gazed at the card which his clerk had just presented.

"Admiral Guy Cheshire," he read out. "What the devil does this mean, Hobson? What does anyone want here from the Admiralty? That must be Florestan's business."

"I have no idea, sir," the serious young man in heavy glasses replied. "He came in a taxicab and handed in his card at the Enquiry Office. He desired to see a partner in the firm."

Mr. Brown dabbed at the beads of moisture upon his forehead with a large silk handkerchief.

"No sense in keeping him waiting, anyway," he observed sharply. "Show him in, Hobson. Can't imagine why I gave Mr. Leonard the afternoon off. Playing golf on a Monday, indeed! Show the Admiral in."

Cheshire, in his unimposing mufti, although quite a distinguished figure, was nothing alarming to look at. He came in very civilly, removed his hat as he entered the office, and bowed to the elderly gentleman seated at the desk.

"Mr. Brown?" he enquired.

"That is so. That's my name. Mr. James Brown. I see that you are from the Admiralty."

Cheshire waited until the door was closed. [93]

"Well, yes, Mr. Brown. I have some connection, too, with one of the minor branches of Scotland Yard. A little matter has come to our notice which seems to need some sort of explanation and I thought you might help."

"We've not been doing anything wrong, eh?" Mr. Brown demanded nervously. "We have a large business with branches in Singapore, all over the East, India, Egypt, and connection in practically every country in Europe. No one is more careful than we are as regards what we buy and what we sell. There's a lot of opium been changing hands lately—"

Cheshire interrupted with a smile.

"That is not the business I'm on at all, Mr. Brown," he assured

him. “It is something much simpler.”

“We can’t be responsible for everything that happens in these faraway places, of course,” Mr. Brown declared in a slightly relieved tone. “Take a seat, sir. Take a seat.”

The visitor accepted a chair by the side of the desk, placed his hat on the carpet and loosened his overcoat.

“I wanted a word or two with you, Mr. Brown,” he said, “concerning one of your employees.”

“Well, which one? Who’s been doing wrong now?”

“No one, I hope,” was the soothing reply. “It is a Mr. Horace Florestan I came to make enquiries about.”

“Florestan, eh?” the merchant repeated with an air of relief. “One of the best men we have on our staff and one of the most respectable. What about him?”

“Has he been to business to-day?”

“How the devil should I know? We have twenty-two travellers and buyers for England alone. I can’t tell you whether he’s out on the road, or gone on a buying expedition, or sitting in his office.”

“Perhaps you would be kind enough, then, to make enquiries,” Cheshire suggested.

Mr. Brown shouted down a speaking tube, pressed bells, spoke on the telephone. In a few minutes an elderly man, a little flurried, a girl and a youth appeared from different parts of the premises.

“Here, Mr. Fitch,” his employer called out, addressing the older man. “Where’s Florestan to-day?”

“He’s due in Newcastle to-day or to-morrow, sir. I’m not sure whether he has left yet. Hammond here might know.”

The youth came forward.

“Mr. Florestan has not been in to-day, sir,” he announced. “I have been making up some of his accounts for him.”

“What about the young lady?” Cheshire ventured.

“I am Mr. Florestan’s secretary, sir,” she confided. “He told me before he left on Saturday that his arrangements for this week were very uncertain. He gave me some price lists to copy in case he was not here to-day.”

“Leave any address—say where he was going to?” Mr. Brown asked.

The girl shook her head.

"Not with me, sir."

"Mr. Florestan is very methodical, sir," Hammond intervened. "He will probably be in sometime during the day. He has an appointment in Antwerp on Thursday."

"If he comes in, let me know at once," Mr. Brown directed, waving them away. "You see sir," he added, turning to his visitor, "we allow our trusted employees a great deal of liberty. Mr. Florestan buys and sells for the firm. He often takes an unexpected journey if he hears of any transactions likely to be profitable. Now, what business have you that concerns him, I should like to know? What is it that you want to find out?"

"I will explain, if you will give me an opportunity," Cheshire answered drily. "Mr. Florestan lives in Colville Terrace, Kensington." [95]

"First time I've ever heard of the place," Mr. Brown declared. "I don't know where any of the people live. I live in Berkeley Square, myself, but it's all spoilt with building, now. Can't recognise the place. Well, go on. What about Florestan?"

"Mr. Florestan, it has been reported to Scotland Yard," Cheshire continued, "was disturbed at supper time last night in the dining room of his home in Colville Terrace by a telephone summons. He left the room to answer the call. When he failed to return, his wife alleges that they went in search of him and found that he had disappeared, also that the garage doors were open. He had apparently gone away in the car."

"Without a word to anyone?"

"Without a word to anyone. Furthermore, he is not only still missing, but soon after midnight his car was discovered unattended outside St. George's Hospital with a man inside on the point of death."

"God bless my soul!" Mr. Brown exclaimed. "What can have become of him?"

"You're asking me!" was the terse reply. "That is what I've come to find out. No one has seen him since he left 137, Colville Terrace at eight o'clock last night."

"But you say he drove his car to St. George's Hospital."

"No, I didn't say that," Cheshire pointed out. "I said that his car was discovered there unattended with the engine still running and a man inside who was on the point of death. The matter naturally is in the hands of the police. We want to know what has become of Mr. Florestan."

Mr. Brown clasped his head between his hands. [96]

"My God!" he exclaimed. "You are not suspecting Florestan of committing an act of personal violence, are you?"

"We are not suspecting Mr. Florestan, or anybody else, of anything at the present moment," was the patient reply. "What we want to know is what has become of him. You say that he has not reported here in any way. That seems strange."

"What was the matter with the man who was on the point of death in the car?" the other asked with apparent irrelevance.

"He has a bullet still in his chest which passed within a sixteenth of an inch of his heart."

Mr. Brown seemed on the point of collapse.

"Nothing to do with Florestan," he declared firmly. "One of the mildest men you ever met. I don't believe he would know which end of a gun to hold. Say, Admiral Cheshire, have you found out—do you know who the man was, or is, with the bullet in his chest?"

Cheshire nodded curtly.

"Yes, we know," he answered. "So would you, probably, if you saw him—that is, if you ever look at an illustrated paper. There are four doctors working to save his life and for the sake of his country we only hope that they will succeed."

"An Englishman?"

"I came here to ask questions, not to answer them," Cheshire said a little impatiently. "Will you tell me this, sir. Are there any branches of your business with which Mr. Florestan might come in touch which are of a dangerous nature?"

"Dangerous?"

"That is the word I used. Does Mr. Florestan, for instance, travel in countries not favourably disposed towards our own? Is he likely to be carrying on a correspondence of a treasonable kind?" [97]

"What—Florestan?" Mr. Brown exclaimed. "Look here, Admiral, you've got poor Horace Florestan all wrong. He's one of the simplest men breathing."

"Then why," Cheshire asked, and his very bright eyes looked as if they were trying to bore a way into the back of the other's brain, "why did he leave the supper table at home to answer the telephone, lock the door of the dining room behind him, drive off in his car and disappear? Why, too, is he in the habit of receiving letters at a post office in the name of Henry Copeland?"

Mr. Brown appeared to be either exasperated or to be gaining a larger amount of composure. He leaned across the desk.

"Will you tell me the sense, Admiral," he demanded, "of coming here and asking damn' foolish questions like that? How do I know? How could I know? Florestan is a salesman and a buyer for this firm and he does, let me tell you, an immense business. Beyond that we know nothing of him, except that a man never breathed who is less likely to be involved in any of these things you are talking about. Directly he turns up, when we hear from him, we will let you know right away. You shall know everything that we know, but for heaven's sake don't sit there asking me silly questions. You are used to crime and runaway cars and dying men, I suppose. I'm not. No more is Horace Florestan. Anything more I can do for you, Admiral?"

Cheshire picked up his hat and buttoned his coat.

"I see that I have been making a mistake, Mr. Brown," he said quietly. "It is my business to discover what has become of Horace Florestan and I shall probably succeed better by approaching the matter in a different sort of way." **[98]**

Mr. Brown banged the bell in front of him.

"It's no good your making nasty insinuations," he cried. "You are like a good many others who have any connection at all with Scotland Yard. You are obstinate. You have started on a wrong line and you haven't sense enough to see it. Go where you please—my warehouses are at your disposal, my employees' time is yours. See if you can find out any more about Horace Florestan than I have told you."

Cheshire made no immediate reply. There was a curious smile upon his lips, however, as he lingered for a moment looking down at the angry little man in the chair.

"It is just possible, of course, Mr. Brown," he said slowly, "that you are as simple as you seem, although personally I am inclined to doubt it. At any rate, you can take this from me. I represent an important branch of the Admiralty besides having also the authority of Scotland Yard behind me. We are taking out a warrant within an hour of this minute for the arrest of Horace Florestan. The next you see of him will probably be in the prisoner's dock, if he hasn't already slipped out of the country."

"But—but what do you mean?" Mr. Brown gasped. "Florestan a criminal? Such rubbish! You don't know your job, sir, whoever you may be. Why, he is the backbone of our business. A warrant out against Florestan? On what charge?"

"Attempted murder, sabotage and espionage," Cheshire declared coolly. "There may be a few other counts to add later on. Good morning, Mr. Brown."

The head of the firm of Brown, Shipman & Co. very nearly collapsed in his chair. He gripped its sides and called out almost beseechingly after Cheshire's retreating figure. [99]

"Hi, stop a minute, Admiral—stop a minute, sir! Look here, you are not in earnest?"

"Very much so," was the quiet reply.

"I will telephone to Mr. Leonard, if you will wait or come back again," the other spluttered out. "Don't go away, sir. I'll have him here in half an hour. He must hear what you say."

"No necessity," Cheshire assured him. "The only thing you can do for yourself and for your business credit, Mr. Brown, is to find out where Horace Florestan has got to and communicate with us. You will find me at the Admiralty any time. Ask for XYZ branch."

He made his own way out. Mr. Brown dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief held in his right hand. With his left he grabbed the telephone receiver.

"Give me the Sunningdale Golf Club," he demanded.

[100]

CHAPTER XI

The maid with the flaxen fringe and the somewhat flamboyant appearance opened the door of 137, Colville Terrace to Cheshire shortly after seven that evening. She seemed to accept his visit as a matter of course and stood on one side to allow him to enter.

"Your mistress at home?"

"Madam is expecting you, sir," she announced. "She told me to say that she would be down in ten minutes."

"Are you English?" he enquired.

She looked at him with a broad smile.

"What else do you suppose I am?" she retorted. "A Londoner bred and born, and never been further away from home than Southend. The master, he hates foreigners. He wouldn't look at one of them Austrian girls who came here from the registry office after a job."

"That's queer," Cheshire remarked. "I rather thought Mr. Florestan himself might be a foreigner. Are you sure he isn't?"

"You make me tired," she snapped. "That's the worst of the police, whether they're dressed like their betters or whether they're in uniform—they're always wanting to know something. It was the same when I was in my last place."

"Where was that?"

"More questions!" she sighed. "However, I'm not ashamed of the truth. It was the Sparrow's Nest Roadhouse down below Mitcham."

"A little livelier than this job, I should think," he remarked, smoothing his hair in front of the small glass.

"It may have been and it may not," she replied. "At any rate, when we had your sort down there asking questions we knew what they wanted. There's no drinking after hours in this house, anyway."

She showed him into the back parlour. As he passed the dining room he noticed that the table was laid for two.

"Master expected home?"

"Mind your own business," was the curt but good-natured reply.

He chuckled.

"From a nice-looking girl like you," he complained, "that's not a pretty answer. I expect you had plenty of admirers down at the Sparrow's Nest."

"I can find all the admirers I want, wherever I go," she answered, looking at him with bold eyes.

"I don't wonder at it," he replied, leaning over and kissing her lightly on the cheek. "I rather wish I had known you when you were at the Sparrow's Nest."

"The same old dodge," she laughed, not unpleasantly but with a note of grimness. "Kisses and a night out in London or one or two of those nice clean white notes—and you almost a gentleman! Why don't you leave this sort of thing for your Sergeants and that sort?"

"I generally do," he confided. "You're not bad, though, you know, Rosa. If you want to combine a little business with pleasure, tell me some more about your master."

"Ask the mistress. She knows all about him. She will be here in a minute or two. I have a good mind to tell her the kind of lay you're on."

"I don't think it would matter much," Cheshire observed. "She knows what we want. Either there's nothing you could tell or there's nothing worth telling. That's the reason she trusts you, I suppose."

The girl smiled. She looked occasionally a little stupid but she was all the time on the *qui vive*. She had left the door an inch or two open and she was obviously listening. **[102]**

"The master's all right," she said. "I don't think he will ever end his days in quod. All the same, he's a deep 'un."

His hand strayed towards his pocket. She shook her head.

"Not here and not now. I don't think ever. You are not quite my sort and money isn't everything. I get good wages here."

"Take me to your dressmaker's, next afternoon out," he suggested.

"Don't be rash," she answered.

"Why rash?"

"My afternoon out is to-morrow. Four o'clock at Madame Hortense's, corner of Beaumont Place and Regent Street, but I don't think I shall be there," she went on. "I shall have changed my mind before then, especially if the mistress behaves a little more decently. Still, there you are. Come along and try, if you

want to. I might like you better—”

It was curious how, though the silence seemed perfectly unbroken, they were both conscious of the approach of Deborah Florestan.

“I’ll let Madam know that you are here, sir,” the girl said in an altered tone. “Won’t you take a chair?”

“Thank you,” Cheshire replied. “You might take my hat, if you will. I don’t know why I brought it in.”

She accepted it and opened the door wide just as her mistress appeared, entering the room with the same easy, flowing movement, carrying herself with just a shade too much arrogance, diffusing perhaps a shade too much perfume, her large body a little too obvious beneath the close-fitting material of her black gown. She smiled at Cheshire curiously as she offered him her hand. The over-manicured fingers surprised him by their length and coolness.

“Well, you will not have long to wait now,” she remarked, sitting down. “Rosa, you can bring in the sherry.”

“You are spoiling me,” he observed, smiling.

“After all, you are working for the good of the public, I imagine,” she said a trifle insolently. “So you have been making use of your spare time by cross-examining my poor Rosa,” she went on, sinking further back into the corner of the divan. “I suppose you did not lure her into any confessions?”

“She was somewhat taciturn,” he admitted. “Perhaps the next time she may be more communicative.”

“A filthy business, yours,” she remarked, without the ghost of a smile, without any show of interest or emotion.

“Horrible,” he agreed. “As you say, though, it is for the good of the public. Someone has to keep the streets clean.”

“You are not suggesting things about Rosa, I hope?” she queried. “Rosa is quite a good girl although she looks such a sight.”

“There was no double meaning in my words,” he assured her. “Any news of your husband?”

“Not yet. I do not expect any. What I do expect is to hear the car drive into the garage in a few minutes or hear his latch-key in the door.”

“I shouldn’t think you will hear the car,” he said. “The police have that, you know.”

“Much good may it do them!” she scoffed. “How is the man

with the bullet inside him?"

"Still alive. If he gets through the night he may live."

"Been chatty yet?"

"Not a word. There's a police clerk waiting in the ward with book and pencil in his hand." [104]

"That is thoughtful," she observed. "They say a man generally has a few minutes' consciousness before he dies. I expect you will worm it out of the poor fellow who shot him."

"They will if they can," Cheshire admitted. "I hope it won't turn out to be your husband."

She looked at him critically. Something about his undoubted air of distinction seemed to displease her.

"Why do you not wear uniform, so that everyone knows you are a detective?" she asked. "I suppose you are ashamed of it, really."

Cheshire smiled.

"No, I can't say that I'm ashamed of it," he told her, "but as a matter of fact, I am not a detective. I go to some places, however, and have some work to do where I should not have a chance of success if I were recognisable. Mine is rather a new branch in the Service, you know."

"H'm. Call yourselves half gentlemen," she observed.

"I'm not sure," he replied, "that we go so far as that, but it is a sad fact that the criminal classes to-day consist largely of well-educated and well-brought-up people. They need someone in their own walk of life, you see, to deal with them."

The maid came in with a decanter of sherry and glasses.

"Set it down somewhere, Rosa," her mistress ordered. "We will serve ourselves."

The girl obeyed. Cheshire rose to his feet and walked to the sideboard.

"Will you allow me?" he asked.

"Half a glass, please," she said carelessly.

She came over to his side as the girl left the room. He felt himself somehow enveloped by that clinging perfume, curiously blended with an odour of bath salts and strongly scented soap. She raised her glass and her lips parted a little in that wonderfully controlled smile which seemed scarcely to indicate so much as mirth, to be indeed only the provocative [105]

anticipation of it.

“Shall we drink to his safe return?” she asked.

“Naturally.”

She looked at him and there was a gleam of enquiry in those strange eyes of hers. Her look meant something but Cheshire found it unanalysable. She drained her glass and set it down.

“Here he is,” she remarked, turning away. “I really do not know what he will say when he finds me drinking with a gentleman of the police. Good thing you were behaving so nicely!”

Cheshire was listening. There was the distinct click of a latchkey in the door, the sound of feet upon the mat. He realised then that the last thing he had been prepared for was Florestan’s return, yet a moment later the door slammed, footsteps came down the hall and a man of well over medium height, slim, fair, almost flaxen-haired, with pale complexion and skin which seemed somehow or other drawn too tightly over his bony face with its high cheekbones, entered the room. His eyes, grey-blue, and as bright as steel, were a trifle protuberant and his indrawn lips completed the sense of hardness which seemed to radiate from his whole physiognomy.

“Mr. Florestan?” Cheshire enquired.

“My husband,” Deborah Florestan observed from the divan. “This gentleman, Horace, is either from the police or from some sort of Secret Service or other. He has a horrible story to tell about you and the car.”

Florestan bowed without speaking, closed the door behind him, crossed the room and embraced his wife.

“Been worried, dear?” he asked.

“I never worry,” she answered. “I told this gentleman you would be home to dinner to-night. He did not believe me but he is here to see.”

Florestan and Cheshire exchanged curious glances. Cheshire saw before him just the unusual type of man he had expected, and from the first he was conscious of a subtle sense of danger in the atmosphere. Florestan himself showed no sign of emotion but he seemed puzzled at Cheshire’s visit and very much on his guard.

“You are not a regular policeman, are you?” he asked.

“Not exactly,” Cheshire admitted. “I am interested in the matter of your car, though. I came down early this morning with the local Inspector and saw your wife.”

"What is worrying you about my car?" Florestan enquired. "I am glad to hear it is found, anyway. Where was it?"

"Outside St. George's Hospital at midnight," Cheshire confided. "There was no driver, the engine was still running and there was a passenger in the front seat who was as near death as a man can be and still breathing."

"Fallen into bad hands," Florestan sighed. "Just my luck, that. Pinched by one of these gang outfits, I should think. Wonder what made them drive it to St. George's Hospital?"

"The same question," Cheshire observed with an undernote of sarcasm in his tone, "has intrigued Scotland Yard. I should have mentioned that false registration numbers had been affixed and the identity card was missing."

Florestan groaned.

"My new Daimler," he muttered. "Well, what about it, sir? Have you brought it back?"

"The police have not finished their enquiry yet," was the curt reply. "I have been sent to examine you as to your movements last night. You must understand, Mr. Florestan, that this is a somewhat serious matter. The man who lies in the hospital now, and who was found in your car, is scarcely likely to recover and I may tell you, without disclosing his name, that he is a very well-known personage."

Mr. Florestan poured himself out a glass of sherry, pulled down his waistcoat and seated himself in an easy chair. He pointed out another to Cheshire, who, however, shook his head and remained standing.

"More unpleasantness, I suppose," Florestan said gloomily. "Deborah, you had better leave us."

Mrs. Florestan rose from her place with some slight evidence of unwillingness.

"You are satisfied, now, that I was telling you the truth, Mr. Cheshire?" she asked, lingering for a moment as she passed him.

"So far as you knew it, Madam, certainly."

He was nearest to the door and he held it open for her. As she went through she half hesitated. Their eyes met and he caught a gleam of disquietude in hers. It was obvious that she left them unwillingly. Cheshire knew quite well that there was something she wished to say. She glanced, however, towards her husband, who was watching them both, and with a little shrug of the shoulders passed on. The memory of that look troubled Cheshire as he closed the door after her and returned to his seat.

“We will now proceed with our conversation,” Florestan said. “What did you say your name was, sir?”

“Cheshire.”

“Mr. Cheshire, then, there is very little I can tell you about the car. I received a telephone message of an urgent nature just as I was commencing supper. I left the house within thirty seconds, I should think—I didn’t even come and say good-bye to my wife or offer her a word of explanation. I got out the car and I drove off. I went to the address where I hoped to find the man who telephoned to me and he wasn’t there. I waited for an hour. He didn’t come. It was Sunday night and it was difficult for me to decide what to do. When I came out the car had disappeared.” [108]

“At what address were you?”

“We will let that be for the present,” Florestan answered after a moment’s hesitation. “I went in a taxi to two other places where I thought I might find the person who had telephoned me. I failed. I then took the night train to Newcastle. I transacted some business there and caught the three o’clock back this afternoon.”

“Not having even rung up the police about your missing car,” Cheshire said thoughtfully.

“I had other matters on my mind.”

“How much did you give for the car?” Cheshire asked.

“Just under two thousand pounds.”

“The business must have been very important, Mr. Florestan, that you went away to Newcastle without even reporting your loss to the police.”

“The business was very important,” the other assented.

“Might one enquire as to its nature?”

“It referred to a very large contract.”

“With what firm in Newcastle? With whom were your negotiations conducted?”

Mr. Florestan shook his head.

“Those things are not talked about,” he said.

“You are aware that I represent the police?”

“The police can return my car to me. That’s all I want from them,” he declared.

"You will find, though," Cheshire told him, "that the police will require a great deal more from you. I am afraid that you will have to make up your mind to answer my questions." [109]

"Shall I?" asked Florestan quietly.

"I must ask you once more—where did you leave your car last night and what was the nature of the business which took you away from home and induced you to lock the door so that your family should not overhear any of your conversation at the telephone?"

"Got it well up against me, haven't you?" Florestan sneered. "I guessed I should find a bit of trouble of this sort waiting for me. Never mind. Why should I answer your questions at all? You are wearing no uniform, Mr. Cheshire, if that's your name, and I have nothing but your word for it that you have anything to do with the police."

Cheshire opened his coat and disclosed the inside of his waistcoat, to which was fastened a silver disc. He tapped it with his forefinger.

"Pshaw! What's that worth?" Florestan scoffed. "You can buy those in the Caledonian Market for a penny each. My business is my own and I don't give it away to anyone who finds his way into my house in my absence. I left my car in a well-known street, in a reputable part of London. I have never seen it since that moment and as to this talk about its having been found outside the hospital with a dying man in the front seat, why should I believe any story of that sort? I have had that kind of bluff tried on me before. My business is important and I keep it to myself."

"Very reasonably spoken," Cheshire answered. "It is the decision of an obstinate man, or of a man, Mr. Florestan, who knows that he is in danger."

"Danger—what of?"

"Arrest for murder if that man dies; of shooting with intent to kill if he lives. Pretty well the same thing." [110]

"Nice lot of evidence you have against me, haven't you?" Florestan jeered. "I'm going to call your bluff, Cheshire, or whatever your name may be. I don't believe you've anything to do with the police. I think you know more about the inside of the Admiralty than Scotland Yard and that you want to get at my business for your own reasons. Hands up!"

Cheshire was quick but Florestan was a thought quicker. There was a suggestion of long experience in the way that gun was held steadily towards the third button of Cheshire's waistcoat. The latter raised his hands. Florestan came slowly towards him.

“You’re playing the fool,” Cheshire warned him. “Your wife can tell you that I came here with the Inspector.”

Florestan made no reply. He was now only a couple of yards away and Cheshire, who was not wholly ignorant of such matters, knew that he was face to face with a desperate and clever man. Both of them were absolutely cool. Florestan had apparently thought out his plan before he had risen to his feet. From behind Cheshire came the sound of the quiet opening and closing of the door. A strange male voice broke the hideously tense silence.

“I wouldn’t shoot, Florestan. There are people in the street, the window is open, and the walls of this house are thin. We don’t need a gun for this job.”

Cheshire found the temptation to take his eyes off Florestan, who was creeping nearer and nearer, inch by inch, was almost irresistible. He watched his approach, absolutely unhurried, as calm and deliberate as his voice had been throughout their brief conversation. Cheshire never turned his head but he felt, somehow or other, that the two men had come to an understanding. The newcomer was so near now that he could hear his breathing. He flinched for a single second, the muscles of his neck twitching as he made an involuntary turn. Almost simultaneously, before he could lower his arm, Florestan’s fingers, like steel bands, were upon his throat. . . . He felt himself crashing backwards. . . . Semi-unconsciousness came almost at once. . . . His heels were on the carpet. . . . He caught a glimpse of a figure stooping over him, a square-shouldered, ugly man with pallid complexion. . . . He was being dragged along. . . . He was in another room. . . . There were cords around him, cutting into his legs, cutting into his arms, a sickly smell coming from somewhere. . . . Then it all began to fade away and the remnants of consciousness left him. The hour of Cheshire’s greatest humiliation had arrived.

[111]

[112]

CHAPTER XII

It was a couple of hours later when, against all the laws of probability, Cheshire opened his eyes. The rush of returning life into his veins was so overwhelming that he very nearly collapsed again. He was a strong man, however, and his subconscious struggle for existence conquered. He knew now what had happened—what was happening all around him. The floor was covered with fragments of smashed glass from the window behind his head and fresh air was flowing around him —marvellous elixir to a man already three parts comatose from suffocation. He tried to rise and felt the agony of the cords against every limb. He abandoned the struggle and stared in front of him. Slowly descending some rickety steps was Rosa, the maid-of-all-work. She held in her hand a hammer, her tousled fair hair and huge bangs were blown this way and that by the current of wind blowing through the place. She came slowly across to him, still swinging the hammer. He shivered with every step she took. She looked down at him with a grin.

"Still alive, eh, Mr. Policeman?" she asked.

He opened his lips to speak but his tongue was too dry and the roof of his mouth seemed on fire. He tried to nod but his head was rigid. He could only stare. After all, she had not the face of a woman about to commit a murder. Her features were coarsely fashioned but the large mouth was good-humoured enough and there was no cruelty in her eyes.

"Looks as though you were about done for," she remarked. "Hold on," she added quite unnecessarily. "I'll be back in a jiffy." **[113]**

She opened a door. Soon he heard another glorious sound—the sound of running water. She reappeared with a jug and dropped on one knee by his side.

"Open your mouth," she ordered.

He obeyed. She tilted the jug. Soon he was spluttering and choking, almost drowned in the wonder of this new and marvellous sensation. A few drops were trickling down his throat. Soon it went more easily. She drew back.

"That will do for the moment," she decided. "My, but you must be tough! Even now, this place kind of chokes me."

His eyes were fixed thirstily upon the jug. She leaned over and repeated her heavenly task, leisurely tilting a few spoonfuls at a time down his throat. When she set down the jug it was empty but Cheshire felt that he was reborn into a glorious world. He found his voice.

“Cut—” he begged, “cut this cord.”

“I should say so,” she replied. “I’ve begun—I may as well go through with it.”

She disappeared and returned in a moment with a huge carving knife in her hand. He made a little grimace as she bent over him.

“Don’t you be afraid,” she continued soothingly. “I’ll be careful. I’ll begin down by your ankles. Close your eyes, if you don’t like the sight of the knife. Look at my hands. I am as strong as an ox. The knife won’t slip.”

There was just a moment when life seemed to be ebbing away again, the shock, perhaps, of that first realisation of freedom. Then the blood began to flow once more in his veins. Soon he was sitting up, supported by her arm. He tried to scramble to his feet but she only saved him from falling, with an effort. She dragged him a little way and propped him against the wall.

“I’ll see if that old devil has left the brandy,” she said. **[114]**

She was gone a couple of minutes. When she returned she was carrying a tumbler and a bottle. She went back to the tap and poured in some water, then she added the brandy.

“Drink it slowly,” she warned him.

He drank it—slowly at first, then there was a long and beautiful gulp.

“Look here,” he muttered, “I don’t know much about you, Rosa, but you have saved my life.”

“You were pretty well gone,” she admitted.

“Where’s Florestan?”

She grinned.

“Hiding somewhere, I reckon. He won’t come back here.”

“And the other man?”

“He’s gone, too.”

“What made you come?” he asked.

“You chuck asking questions,” she enjoined. “I may be a bad lot like those two but I’m no killer. I left them—never mind where—and I took a bus at the corner. They think I’ve gone home for the night. Another thing they thought is that no one could get into this house. They forgot the coal cellar!”

“I thought you looked a bit grimy,” he remarked.

She nodded.

"That's the way I came in," she explained. "When I put my head in here I pretty well pegged out. There was a little draught from the door there so I fetched a hammer and broke a window. Then I turned the light on and I saw you. I reckon you didn't know what you were up against when you came here to tackle the old man."

"Who is he? What's he up to?" [115]

"Not my business. I'll tell you this, though. He's a killer. I don't know why he didn't finish you outright, same as the bloke in the car. Now try standing."

He stood with perfect ease. His eyes were fixed longingly on the bottle. She poured him out some more brandy.

"Sip it," she ordered. "Be careful, now, or I shall take it away."

He obeyed. When he returned the glass she poured a little out for herself and drank it neat.

"Good," she muttered. "Now come on. If you can climb the stairs I will let you out. Here's a whistle. That will bring a taxi."

"What about you?" he asked. "Florestan might come back."

"I don't think so," she reflected. "He has left everything too neat and clean. What I don't understand, though, is why he didn't leave someone to watch the place until you had conked out."

They stumbled up the stairs, Cheshire leaning upon his companion's shoulder. She left him on a chair in the hall and wandered round the place. Presently she reappeared with a large sheet of paper, from which she read:

> "Mr. and Mrs. Florestan are called away owing to the sudden illness of their daughter. Nothing is to be touched. They will be back to-morrow."

"All me eye!" she pronounced. "Everything as tricky as possible. Chairs pushed away from the table—telephone receiver off—disturbed at their meal, eh? Illness of the daughter. You come right along, old dear," she went on, with a change of voice. "This place scares me. They're a bad lot, those two. I'm getting the dithers myself!"

Rosa listened for a moment. Then she drew the bolts of the door and peered out. She closed the door again softly. [116]

“I want to get away,” she told Cheshire. “There’s something I don’t like about this place. You can lean on me all you will. Let’s get out in the road, then we’ll blow the whistle for a taxi.”

“I’m agreeable,” he replied. “I’m all right now. You come along with me and I will take you where you will be safe.”

“If he gets to know,” she muttered as she reopened the front door, “I don’t know as I will ever be safe again in this world. That don’t matter, though. Living ain’t such a catch as all that.”

They passed out onto the steps. Rosa closed the door behind them. They traversed the few yards of tiled way to the gate, pushed it open and they were in the street. The rain was coming down now steadily.

“Blow this,” she enjoined, handing him the whistle.

He raised it to his lips and blew feebly. She snatched it from him and its shrill summons rang down the deserted road. Only a few hundred yards away were the rumble, hootings, and flaring lights of a great thoroughfare. She looked towards it longingly. They seemed somehow or other cut off from that whirlpool of life and action. There were no signs of any response to her summons.

“I’ll nip down to High Street,” she proposed. “I’ll find a taxi quick enough once I get there.”

He opened his lips and closed them again. Shame was overpowering him. He was afraid to be left. She patted him on the shoulder with one hand, as though he were a child, and picked up her skirts with the other.

“I’m going to run,” she confided. “I’ll be back in no time. I’ll find a taxi and we’ll get away from this place.”

“All right,” he assented.

“You hold on to the railings there. Keep under that little tree as much as you can. I’ll be back in a sec.”

Off she went—a strange, wild enough figure, hatless, her hair in disorder, a cheap scarf already half wet through drifting backwards from her neck. Cheshire watched her in amazement as she covered the ground with long, uneven strides; he even smiled faintly as he imagined the shock she would give a harmless pedestrian encountering her suddenly. She crossed the road and disappeared. She was in the shadow of some gardens, still some distance from the thoroughfare. A taxi turned a corner. Cheshire staggered out, waving his hand. The driver looked straight ahead. His flag was down, and with a sinking heart Cheshire realised that there were passengers inside. Even then he did his best to check the vehicle. It passed him without a sign. Long before it had disappeared he heard the soft

padding of footsteps along the damp pavement. In the light of the standard he saw the figure of a man coming towards him, a nondescript-looking person in a dark overcoat and bowler hat, holding up an umbrella which concealed his face. Cheshire watched and listened. The man was drawing nearer all the time. A score of yards away he paused, raised the umbrella slightly and looked around him. There was no one else in sight. Cheshire squeezed himself back against the railings. The pedestrian came slowly on. As he reached the gate of Number 137, through which Cheshire and his companion had issued, he paused. Suddenly he lowered his umbrella. His hand was upon the gate and Cheshire realised with a little shiver that they had left it open. He looked up at the house—unlit, drab, ugly. There was not a light from the basement to the top floor, no light even through the chink of the curtains. The man stood there with his fingers upon the handle of the gate. He seemed on the point of entering when, at the last moment, he caught sight of the outline of Cheshire's strained figure. He came slowly towards him. He thrust his hand into his pocket. When it came out the flash of a torch dazzled Cheshire. An exclamation broke from his lips. The torch was almost immediately extinguished, but the man still advanced.

"What are you doing there—waiting for anybody? Where did you come from?" he asked fiercely. **[118]**

"Is that any business of yours?" Cheshire retorted.

There was an instant's pause. Cheshire, still a little blinded from the effects of the torchlight, could see nothing of the other's face. His voice was not unpleasant, except that it was a trifle rasping and portentously, hideously, familiar.

"Never mind what it has to do with me," he said. "I have friends that live here—that's all. I was thinking of paying them a call."

"You have business at this house?" Cheshire asked.

"A friend of mine lives here," was the guarded reply. "Keep your mouth shut for a moment. I am going to have another look at you."

The voice was suddenly more threatening. The man had edged into full view. Cheshire, no longer dazzled, saw him clearly. There was a threat already in his suspicious eyes. Once more the light flashed out and Cheshire knew that he was recognised.

"How the hell did you get out of that cellar?" the man demanded.

"Mind your own business."

The other looked around. The driving rain was like a barrier from the outside world. Nevertheless, he lowered his voice.

"We are going back again together, you and I. To tell you the truth, I was going there to have a look round, even though I forced my way in. Just as well, I should think. Come on!" [119]

Cheshire struck out at the arm which gripped his shoulder, but the other laughed as he evaded the feeble blow.

"I'm damned if I can understand how you escaped from that house," he declared with a most unpleasant grin. "I think that you want another whiff of the old lady, eh? We will go back together and have a little talk."

Cheshire put out all his small store of strength and struggled for every foot along the pavement. He shouted for help but a rough hand closed over his lips. They had reached the gate. The man with whom he was wrestling paused for an instant for his final effort. Suddenly, the most amazing, the most wonderful recollection crept into Cheshire's brain. He gave a very excellent representation of a man about to collapse.

"Let me lean here for a moment," he faltered. "I feel ill."

He caught hold of a post. His captor looked at him suspiciously. Cheshire had all the appearance of having spoken the truth. He was ghastly pale and the words came feebly from his lips.

"I will be all right if you let me breathe for a few seconds," he gasped.

The man's rough hand was grudgingly withdrawn from the collar he was grasping. Cheshire threw back his head and drew a long breath. His fingers were travelling slowly downwards. The man was watching the windows of the house intently. Cheshire had found the button and unfastened it. He leaned suddenly away and sprang clear. There was bite enough about his voice now as he stretched out his hand.

"If you move an inch towards me I'll shoot you dead," he threatened. "I am not strong enough to struggle but I am strong enough to tell you that, and I am strong enough to pull the trigger. You will die like a dog if you even twitch." [120]

The man stood still. The thing was impossible and yet Cheshire, although rocking on his feet, was holding out a small revolver of very familiar shape, and whatever might have happened to the rest of him, his right hand was firm enough.

"What the hell—" his aggressor began.

Cheshire edged a foot farther away.

"I hadn't time to use this an hour or so ago," he said. "Your friend was too quick for me. I'm not taking any chances this time. I'm not waiting while your hand goes down. Would you like one barrel to be sure it's loaded? You can have it."

"Put it away," the man grunted. "I'm not doing you any harm."

Cheshire took another step backwards. He was safe now from anything in the shape of a sudden spring. Not only that, but there was a pleasant sound in his ears—the hooting of a taxicab close at hand. He could almost catch the reflection of its lights.

"There's a taxi here," he announced, his voice becoming every moment firmer. "Get ready. You're coming along with me."

"Not I," was the prompt reply. "Put that gun down."

"You're coming along with me," Cheshire repeated.

The cab stopped. Cheshire heard the woman's cry but his eye never left the figure a few yards from him. Rosa ran across the pavement and stood by his side.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Florestan's friend who helped tie me up," he answered. "I'm taking him to the Police Station. What sort of a driver have you got?"

"Usual sort."

"Tell him to step down. I want to speak to him."

The man lumbered from his seat.

"Listen," Cheshire said. "I'm connected with Scotland Yard. I've caught a burglar here. I want to take him to the police station."

"That's all right, sir," the driver answered. "It's in Crockham Street, just round the corner. Bring him along."

"Not so easy," Cheshire replied. "He's planning a getaway already. I'm going to put him on the front with you. Let your glass down so that I can shoot him from inside if he moves."

The driver seemed to consider the question.

"All very well, guv'nor," he said doubtfully, "but what if he goes for me?"

"I'll shoot him before he can hurt you," Cheshire promised.

"I've done no harm!" their captive shouted fiercely. "If you take me to the Police Station I'll make you all pay for it."

"We will pay with pleasure," was the prompt reply. "Keep your hands up now, whoever you are. Walk out of that gate. I shall be two yards behind you all the time. Take the place beside the driver."

"Against orders, that, you know, sir," the driver observed.

"I can break orders when I choose," Cheshire snapped. "Don't worry. You're on a good thing. Step out."

"I shan't move," their prisoner muttered.

"All right. Stand out on the pavement, Rosa, and blow your whistle. Tell the driver to sound his horn at the same time. We will have a policeman in two minutes."

The man gave in. **[122]**

"I don't mind going to the police station with you," he conceded. "I've done nothing. I just stopped to ask you for a light. I don't believe you're from the police. If you are I've done nothing—there's no charge against me."

"Then if you don't mind coming—come," Cheshire insisted, stepping on one side to let him pass, his right hand all the time steadily stretched out.

As soon as the man was settled in his place and the window had been lowered, Cheshire crept cautiously into the back of the cab. The girl took her place by his side. They drove off. In five minutes they had arrived at their destination. The taxicab driver blew his horn. A police constable came out.

"Inspector Douglas there?" Cheshire asked.

"He's inside, sir," the man replied.

"Say that Cheshire of XYZ is here with a prisoner. Fellow's dangerous. Will you ask him to step out? I've got him covered here."

"There's no need for your Inspector," the man in front shouted scornfully. "I'll come."

He swung onto the pavement. The constable took his wrist. They filed into the Station. Inspector Douglas, who was seated at a desk, rose to his feet and saluted. Cheshire drew him on one side.

"Inspector," he confided. "I was wrong to go to that filthy house without you. Ring up the Yard at once. The Deputy Commissioner won't be there but Greville will be on duty. Tell him that it's Cheshire and that I am all right. I have a man here who is to be locked up for the night. We will deal with him in the morning. I want you to put him in a cell straight away. Don't give him a chance."

"Anything you say goes, of course, Admiral," the Inspector replied, gazing at the latter in astonishment. "You've had a rough time, I'm afraid, sir. Take the man down to No. 3 cell, constable." **[123]**

"You will get into a lot of trouble for this," the prisoner

blustered. “Look here, you have no charge against me. You can have my name and address if you want it. I was doing no harm. I was just walking down the road.”

“He’s lying,” Cheshire said calmly. “He was in league with Florestan and the two of them tied me up and gave me chloroform.”

“Take him down,” the Inspector ordered firmly.

The constable and his charge disappeared. Cheshire’s right arm collapsed and he sank into a chair.

“I’ve been had for a mug,” he told the Inspector. “Tied up and chloroformed by that man and Florestan!”

Inspector Douglas shook his head.

“Are you going to make a charge, sir?” he asked, drawing the sheet towards him.

“Not at the moment. I don’t want to come into this if I can help it, Inspector. He can be held under the new regulations but loitering with the intention to commit a felony will do, if you have to frame him. You’ll hear from us all right in the morning.”

The Inspector, bare-headed, conducted his distinguished visitor back to the taxi. Cheshire gazed into its empty interior blankly.

“What’s become of the girl?” he asked the driver.

“Slipped out, I reckon, when we was inside,” the man replied. “There was no sign of her when I came back.”

Cheshire looked up and down the street helplessly. There was no doubt about it that Rosa had disappeared. He gave his address to the driver.

“Go slowly,” he enjoined, “and keep your eyes open. If you see anything of the young woman pull up and tell me.” **[124]**

“Right, sir.”

But although they drove slowly, and stopped twice on false alarms, they saw no more of Rosa.

[125]

CHAPTER XIII

It was characteristic of Cheshire's unique position, that he entered his private room at the Admiralty on the following morning without comment or remark from anyone. He glanced through several communications of varying interest, dictated a few letters to his typist-secretary, put one or two other matters on one side for further consideration, and sent for Hincks. The young man presented himself almost at once with a roll of plans under his arm. Cheshire leaned back in his chair and studied his appearance for a few moments.

"You are working too hard, young fellow," he observed.

"It's the only way I can make up, sir."

The Admiral continued to regard him thoughtfully. There was something pathetic about the haggard face, the unnatural lines about his mouth, which went so ill with his youthful mien and complexion.

"You must not take things too hardly, Hincks," his Chief said kindly. "Working late last night, eh?"

"I was here until four o'clock this morning, sir. I am making headway. Would you like to see how far I have gone?"

Cheshire shook his head.

"I won't interfere with you at present," he decided. "The situation is unchanged—the idea remains. You are still in touch, I suppose, with Regent's Park?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you arrange an appointment for seven-thirty this evening?"

"Yes, sir." **[126]**

Cheshire nodded.

"No good eating your heart out, you know, Hincks," he said. "You are on the right road to recovery but don't overdo it. A mental cripple is no use here these days. Remember, we are out of the wood in a fortnight, or never. That work you are engaged upon may lead to great things. Don't brood."

"I try not to, sir."

"You've got it both ways, I know," Cheshire said kindly. "Stick it out."

The young man's faint smile was more eloquent than his words.

"Your encouragement is a great help, sir," he acknowledged. "You wouldn't care to have a look and see how I'm getting on?"

"I would rather wait. I have a busy day before me and I don't want to be distracted. I must see Melville and the General. Melville first, if possible."

"The General has been on the private wire twice this morning, sir."

Cheshire glanced at his watch.

"You had better ask him to come round, then. I don't want Melville here. I saw a half dozen of those journalists hanging around as I came in. You gave my message to Lord Fakenham?"

"I saw him myself, sir," Hincks replied. "He assured me that none of his people are concerned. It is the irregulars, the men who hang round on the chance of getting a paragraph or two out of something they see, or fancy they see, who are the trouble here."

"Daresay he's right," Cheshire assented. "I was lazy myself this morning and I used the private entrance, but we ought all of us to come in through the main building. Takes a quarter of an hour, I know, but it's necessary. What is the morning report from the hospital?"

"The operation will be this afternoon, sir."

"I would like to see Admiral Maddox during the day sometime when he is disengaged."

"I will send him word, sir."

"Nothing more. Just see to those matters I have spoken of. The Regent's Park one is quite important."

"Everything shall be attended to, sir," Hincks promised as he took his leave.

Cheshire, once more alone, touched the ivory knob of one of the bells upon his desk. His typist-secretary, a young woman of early middle age and very capable appearance, re-entered the room almost immediately. She was carrying her notebook and pencil in her hand and she seated herself upon a stool near the desk.

"Deputy Commissioner Sir Herbert Melville to lunch with me at the St. George's Club at one o'clock. Ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Express note to the Sergeant-in-Charge, West Kensington Police Station.

> The prisoner brought in last night by a representative of XYZ is to be charged with loitering and remanded. Remain in cell. No communication, on any pretext, with anyone outside.
>
> Representative of XYZ will be down presently and is to be permitted access.

A formal communication, also Express, on Admiralty notepaper to Messrs. Brown, Shipman & Co., Holborn. **[128]**

> The undersigned requests that Mr. Horace Florestan be instructed to call here on receipt of this note. He is to ask for XYZ room. If Mr. Florestan is unavailable it is desired that a director of the firm should present himself. Go yourself to General Mallinson as soon as you have attended to these matters. See him personally. Ask him to come direct to me. The letters can be signed by whoever is in charge of the general office and any replies brought to me."

"Commander Filbrick is in charge this morning, sir."

"Excellent."

He waved her away. With a dozen books of reference around him, Cheshire worked for an hour upon what seemed to be an incomplete chart. By the end of that time Mallinson had arrived. Cheshire abandoned his work and swung round in his chair to face the newcomer.

"You're looking peaky," the latter remarked curiously.

"So would you, if you had been through what I have."

"Smell of disinfectant, too," the General continued, sniffing.

"Chloroform. I was had for a mug last night, Mallinson."

The General frowned.

"Why the devil you take these jobs on alone I cannot imagine, Cheshire," he remonstrated. "You know quite well if anything happened to you the whole of your department would go phut. With Ryson gone there would be no one else to look to."

"You're a little bit difficult yourself that way, sometimes, Mallinson. Happen to remember that road between Aldershot and Camberley?"

"Shut up!" was the terse reply.

"Look here," Cheshire said, "we've got to put our heads together. You know that firm of shipping merchants we've had our eyes on for some time—Brown, Shipman & Co.?"

The other nodded.

"I was looking through my reports on them the other day," he said. "Apparently they do a colossal business." [129]

"There is a mysterious sort of fellow connected with the firm," Cheshire went on. "Florestan is his name. They keep him altogether in the background, pretend he just buys and sells for them here and there, but I believe he is one of the principal figures in the whole organization. He is as clever as they make 'em, too. Although," Cheshire added meditatively, "he makes mistakes sometimes."

"As for instance?"

"Well, he and a confederate left me last night tied up and chloroformed in a cellar. Asinine thing to do. He'd much better have made a clean job of it. Of course the usual young lady came and cut the cords and opened the window and here I am! Even then, I got away from his mouldy suburban house with difficulty."

"Pleasant sort of chap to have anything to do with," the General grunted.

"I also believe," Cheshire continued, "that this same house is a blind and that he has a suite on the other side of the Milan Hotel leading out onto the Embankment, where he lives like a prince. However, here's the point. I've got him already in two places. I've got him on last night's little affair and although there's still some mystery about that I feel convinced that he was at the back of the attack upon Meldicott. The motor car outside the hospital was his, anyway, and I don't for a moment believe his story that it was stolen in the street whilst he was paying a call."

"Bright fellow, aren't you?" Mallinson declared with a smile.

"Forget it," the Admiral snapped. "I'm not touching Florestan for the moment. It's my belief there are bigger things behind that man than anything we have run up against yet. There is no doubt that he is enormously involved with one of the European countries with whom we are in difficulties. He is working on a scheme which, if only we can get the hang of it, might put XYZ on the top of the world." [130]

"When are you bringing him in?"

"That's the point. I don't want to bring him in just yet. His confederate was guarding the house where I was last night. By

a fluke I got the best of him and I took him to the Police Station. I am going down there this afternoon to put him through it. I want to find out exactly where Florestan is, without putting the wind up. I want him to go on with his schemes, whatever they may be. I hope to be in a position to put my hands on him to-night, if necessary. If he has left the country he is clever. I don't think he will try to get away. His job is here and he is the sort of man to stick to it until the end."

"Well, you are top-dog in this," the General sighed. "You take a damn' lot of risks, though, Cheshire. I am afraid I should hand over the tracking down of this fellow Florestan to Melville. It's his job, anyway."

"I have gone so far with it that I don't feel like quitting, myself, altogether," Cheshire declared. "I have only seen him once in my life but I have got him summed up. The whole of this business connected with him is clear enough to me except why he left Meldicott alive and how he got hold of Ryson as he did, which is a matter I won't discuss with you, even, at the moment, and certain details about this scheme he is at work upon. I am sending a dozen men to follow particular trails. That is being done through Melville, of course. They are going to watch the rooms I suspect he has under the name of Henry Copeland in the Milan. They are going to watch for Mrs. Florestan, who is in it, too. They are going to lay a network round all his haunts, but leave him alone until I give the word."

"Risky, risky!"

"Well, anyhow, you know the position now," Cheshire wound up. "The next thing I have to tell you is that I have sent for either Florestan or one of the partners in Brown, Shipman & Co. to come up here to-day. Florestan won't come, of course, but I am hoping to get a clue as to the larger business from the person who does come up. I would like you to stay here when he arrives. I am going to meet the Deputy Commissioner at the club for lunch, afterwards. I shall have to have him working with us. Then one of us must go round to Downing Street. I don't want to outstrip my authority but we must get even more latitude from the Chief. I don't want Florestan or his wife or his accomplice of last night—in fact, anyone connected with him—brought into the Police Court for the moment, even if they collect enough evidence to bring the Meldicott affair home to him."

"Aren't you putting rather a heavy burden upon the shoulders of XYZ?" Mallinson asked seriously.

"Maybe," Cheshire assented. "I have to do it. Have you seen any of the reports this morning from the Foreign Office? I had them at my rooms. You had them, too, I suppose?"

"Pretty dreary," Mallinson acknowledged.

"The conversations are being continued with the greatest difficulty, we are told from both centres. There is no real earnestness in the suggestions put forward. One or two of them are utterly unreasonable."

"I know," the General acquiesced anxiously. "No progress has been made at all. Dunkerley, in his code message, says plainly that the smell of war is in the air. There were fifty thousand people outside the great man's quarters last night shouting for him. Conversations! They've had enough of them, Cheshire. They're getting ready for a move. The frontiers are already more difficult. There's a cordon of guards twenty miles in circumference round their great flying base." [132]

"I quite agree with you," Cheshire acknowledged. "At the present moment they mean war, and, Mallinson, we may as well face the truth, it's chiefly our doing. We started on certain lines, though, and we've got to go through with it. That's why I am taking risks. There's one more thunderbolt they're forging for us which I want to get the hang of and there's one more final chapter in our scheme of the last three months to be let loose on them. Afterwards, we hand over to Fakenham and let the Press do their bit."

"You're a wonderful chap, Cheshire," the General said. "It's the timing, though, that is the terrible difficulty. If you're a day late, if there's a single hitch—"

"Cataclysm!" Cheshire interrupted. "Débâcle! Anything you like to call it. The flames of hell blackening the face of Europe. But I shan't be a day late."

One of the telephones upon the desk buzzed out a gentle summons. The Admiral took up the receiver.

"A representative of Brown, Shipman & Co. is here, sir," his typist-secretary announced.

"You can send him in at once," Cheshire replied.

[133]

CHAPTER XIV

Mr. Leonard Shipman, a jaunty young man in tweeds, was presently announced and shown into the bureau. Cheshire greeted him with marked affability, presented him to Mallinson and saw that he was installed in a chair.

"Very kind of you to come round, Mr. Shipman," he began. "We have had some business transactions with your firm which have been quite satisfactory."

"Glad to hear that, sir," the visitor replied, setting down his hat by the side of the chair and leaning a little forward. "We like Government business when we can get it. The money is good and naturally we are interested in doing our best for the country."

"A very pleasant spirit," Cheshire observed. "Tell me, you have a buyer in your firm, a very shrewd man, I should think—a Mr. Florestan?"

"Florestan is a wonderful chap," Shipman confided enthusiastically. "He's like quicksilver, too. It takes any of the others about a week to make up their minds before they start off on a business trip. Florestan is in Hamburg to-day, Newcastle the day after, and on his way to the States at an hour's notice. He doesn't care where he goes. He's an expensive fellow, but he makes profits."

"Where is he, I wonder, just at the present moment?"

"Couldn't say, I'm sure. He was in Newcastle sometime yesterday. We put in a tender for a large quantity of steel plates for the two new battleships they're building there. He went up to try and get a recommendation to purchase."

"Wonderfully enterprising fellow," Cheshire remarked. "I should like to meet him some day." [134]

"He would come in and see you, I'm sure," Shipman declared with a slight air of condescension. "He's terribly busy but he would rather do business with the Navy than anyone. Mr.—let me see, what was the name?"

"Cheshire," was the smiling reply. "My friend's name is Mallinson."

"Both sailors?"

"I might venture to call myself that," Cheshire acknowledged. "My friend is—er—a semi-retired Army man."

"Gives you something to do when there's talk of war in the air, I imagine," the visitor observed.

"Keeps us busy, of course," the Admiral assented. "All the same, there's not going to be any war."

The young man looked very wise. He pulled the *Daily Mail* from his pocket but put it back again.

"I daresay you have seen the papers," he remarked. "These conversations we were going to have with the two Dictators don't seem to be getting much further."

"Slow work, diplomacy," Cheshire sighed. "Now, supposing we had another contract to offer Mr. Florestan, how long do you think it would be before we could get hold of him?"

"Hard to say," he reflected. "If you will give me some particulars I could speak to him about it when he rings up. Florestan, you know, is a man of very strange habits. He telephones from the most unexpected places but he very seldom leaves an address."

Cheshire was thoughtful for a moment.

"I should like to ask you a question confidentially, Mr. Shipman," he said.

"Go ahead," was the generous invitation.

"I take it that in view of the fact that the Admiralty have placed some very large contracts in your hands, you are not doing business just now with any foreign country?" **[135]**

The young man shook his head.

"Not a ha'p'orth," he assured his questioner. "Florestan saw to that. I won't say we've not had offers, because we have. We are known as one of the largest dealers in metals in the world and naturally we are constantly being asked for tenders. Nothing doing, except with England and the Colonies. We are holding almost the largest stock of nickel of anyone in the United Kingdom to-day. That was Florestan's idea. We have been buying steadily for six months."

"A great man, your representative," Mallinson remarked. "I really must meet him."

"He would be pleased to come and see you, I'm sure," the other declared, "as soon as this rush is over."

"Is he an Englishman?" Cheshire asked curiously.

"For anything I know to the contrary. He has a British passport. He's been with us for over twenty-five years. Of course, he's travelled so much on the Continent and he speaks all the

languages so well that you might take him for almost anything."

"He has a house in London, I suppose?"

"He's not very communicative about his private affairs," was the dubious reply. "He lives somewhere down in Kensington, I think, and I believe he is married. Not that his wife can see much of him. He's flying round the world all the time."

"Is he a member of the firm?" Mallinson asked.

"We are incorporated," Shipman answered. "Last year the directors voted him ten thousand pounds' worth of shares as a recognition of his services. This year I think it will be twenty thousand—especially if you gentlemen come along with another contract or two." [136]

"It looks as though we shall have to," Cheshire admitted. "That nickel is one of the things I wanted to talk to you about."

"I couldn't sign an offer in his absence."

"When could you bring him here, then, do you think? The contract would be worth having, you know. It would be worth your while trying to find out exactly where he is. I expect his wife would know."

"She seems to be away," Shipman confided. "There are half a dozen things we wanted to ask him about but there's been no reply from his house, although we've telephoned three or four times."

"He seems to be quite a mystery man," Mallinson said drily.

"He does the business, anyhow," the young man pointed out. "He's been buying stocks of metals for two years now. We have several millions of money lying dead."

"So if there were no war—" Cheshire began.

The visitor forgot himself.

"Of course there will be war," he interrupted. "Why, I could tell you fellows something. I could tell the man who wrote this leader in the *Daily Mail* something about that. You know it yourselves, though. These conversations are just a piffling waste of time. You mark my words, it won't be many weeks or many days either before you hear the hum of the big planes over London again."

"As soon as that?" Cheshire exclaimed with every demonstration of uneasiness.

"I've got a little place myself in Surrey," Shipman continued. "It's right away from any factories—stands in a park of its own. All the same, I have had a shelter built there, a gas-proof [137]

one, too, large enough for the whole family and staff. The first time I hear that buzzing in the air I'm off."

Mallinson coughed.

"How old are you, if it's not a rude question, Mr. Shipman?"

"It doesn't matter how old I am," was the somewhat truculent reply. "I'm a principal in one of the largest firms of metal dealers in England. I won't say the firm couldn't get on without me but they don't have to. I'm immune. So is Florestan, although he's getting very near the age limit, anyhow."

The Admiral sighed.

"Well, I congratulate you, Mr. Shipman. It seems as though this war would mean another great fortune for your firm."

"We hope so."

"If," Cheshire went on, leaning a little forward, "you could possibly bring Mr. Florestan into this office within the next few days, I think I could get a contract signed for you for a large, a very large amount. We want nickel."

The young man looked thoughtfully at the toes of his shoes.

"Florestan doesn't like any of us others interfering with his business," he confessed. "I doubt whether he would come even with me. Of course, I'll try, if you like, as soon as we hear from him."

Cheshire frowned for a moment or two in thoughtful silence.

"What would happen to your business, Mr. Shipman," he asked abruptly, "if this wonderful representative of yours were not to return from one of these mysterious journeys?"

The visitor was taken aback.

"Not return?" he repeated. "I don't know what you mean." **[138]**

"If he were to meet with an accident or some foreigner were to get hold of him and realise that he had become a very important feature in a portion of our rearmament scheme. Strange things in that way have happened, you know."

The young man was visibly disturbed.

"You have not heard anything about him yourselves?" he asked suspiciously. "There has not been any trouble we don't know about?"

"Not exactly trouble," Cheshire reflected. "No, I cannot say that. Still, I don't mind telling you, Mr. Shipman, it would be a great satisfaction to me to have five minutes' conversation with

Florestan."

"About the nickel?"

"Yes, and also another matter altogether."

"Won't I do? I am a director of the firm, which, up to the present, Florestan is not."

The Admiral shook his head.

"Your being a director of the firm, I am afraid, would not help in this matter. You see, Mr. Shipman, a rather queer thing has happened which came to my knowledge by accident, and which seems to suggest that Florestan had concerns outside the business of Brown, Shipman & Co."

The young man met Cheshire's keen gaze without any signs of embarrassment.

"I don't know what you are talking about," he declared. "Frankly, I don't. Seems to me you have got hold of a mare's nest. If there's a busier man in this world than Florestan, looking after the affairs of the firm, buying and selling, and studying metallurgy as he does night and day, I never met him. What time has he got to poke his nose into other concerns, I'd like to know? You've got him wrong. That's a certainty."

Cheshire stroked his chin thoughtfully. **[139]**

"You may have read in the paper yesterday," he said, "about a somewhat singular happening. A man was discovered in a dying state in a motor car outside St. George's Hospital."

"I read that all right," Shipman admitted, "and Mr. Brown was saying something about it this morning. One paper hinted that the person in a dying state was someone of importance."

Cheshire nodded.

"Well, the car, although there were some false numbers upon it, belonged to Florestan."

There was no longer any doubt whatever but that the visitor was as innocent as he appeared. There was nothing feigned about his laugh of derision.

"Rubbish!" he exclaimed. "Florestan had his first afternoon off for weeks on Saturday and when he's at home on Sunday he always plays golf near where he lives. You are not going to try and kid me that he is one of these gangster fellows?"

"It does seem ridiculous, doesn't it?" Cheshire remarked. "But this much, at any rate, is the truth, Mr. Shipman. Florestan left his home in Kensington that night after having received a telephone call, took out the car without telling his wife or

family, and disappeared. Now, have you seen him since Sunday night?"

"There was no need for me to see him. He left word that he would be going to Newcastle."

"Will you be so kind as to telephone to Newcastle and see if he went there?"

"But I don't know for certain where he was going in Newcastle. Armstrong's was one place, I believe."

"I think so," Cheshire observed. "And there's a department of Armstrong's which admit that they have had dealings with Mr. Florestan on your behalf. All the same, they have seen nothing of him lately." [140]

The young man meditated for a moment.

"He must have left the car somewhere and it was stolen."

"That is a possibility," Cheshire admitted. "But what I am coming to is this. Mr. Florestan has been engaged in some large transactions with a department of the Admiralty. We do not wish the limelight turned upon him too fully. We should like you to go back to your office and try to find out by the correspondence there or the information of any of your staff where Mr. Florestan is likely to be. We don't want a fuss made about his disappearance, if he has disappeared, but we want Horace Florestan."

For the first time, Shipman, having recovered from the shock of his astonishment, seemed to be taking the situation seriously.

"If anything has happened to Florestan," he declared, "I don't know how on earth we shall carry on. I always told old Brown that we left too much in his hands."

"You go back," Cheshire enjoined, "and make every possible enquiry at your place, then send me a report. Let me have it before three o'clock this afternoon."

The young man rose to his feet and picked up his hat.

"I'll do what I can about it," he promised, "but as to that car being Florestan's and the man having been shot in it—that's all rubbish, you know. It simply could not have happened."

"It seems improbable, doesn't it?" Cheshire remarked, with his finger on the bell.

Shipman hesitated for a moment on his way to the door. He returned a few paces. [141]

"Say, who was the person in the car?" he asked curiously.

“There is no certainty about that, but it’s just possible, from what I have heard, that he might have been a very large customer of your firm’s.”

The other grinned as though much relieved.

“One thing I can tell you about Florestan,” he said as he turned to follow the Orderly from the room, “he was not the man to go about the world shooting our customers! Good morning, gentlemen.”

CHAPTER XV

Luncheon that morning in a small private room of the St. George's Club had rather a grim commencement for the Deputy Commissioner and Cheshire. The former was speaking through an extension to the telephone which had been added for his convenience during the last few weeks, when his friend arrived. He laid down the receiver and turned to greet Cheshire as he entered with a somewhat sombre expression.

"Meldicott is for it, I'm afraid," he said.

Cheshire glanced at the clock.

"Already?"

"Yes. They decided to operate at midday. The bullet was one of those foul things they were using in Chicago before the clean-up. Not much hope for anyone with that in his body for even a few hours. They have had to telephone for Lady Meldicott and his mother. The Press have the whole story now, of course. No use trying to keep it back. The reporters are like a lot of ravening wolves down at the hospital."

"Any news of Florestan?" Cheshire asked, and there was a cold, brilliant light in his clear eyes, a sudden savage twitch of his sensitive mouth—he was a killer at that moment.

"Not a trace," Melville replied. "Here's something else for you, though. A man who declared that he drove the car to the hospital gave himself up at Scotland Yard this morning. I cross-examined him myself for half an hour and I believe he is telling the truth."

"Sure it wasn't Florestan himself?" Cheshire demanded incredulously. [143]

"Absolutely," Sir Herbert continued with conviction. "This fellow is dark-complexioned, a head shorter and half Florestan's age. His name is Jesson and he told his story well enough. He was in the park with his girl and he saw a car pull up by the kerb and a man who had been driving descend and disappear almost at once. It was a dark evening, as you know, and raining, and this fellow Jesson could not even attempt to give any description of the man. Anyhow, he thought it was queer and he and the girl hung round for a moment or two. The driver didn't come back and Jesson, looking at the man in the front seat, saw at once that he was in a state of collapse. There was no policeman about and Jesson did perhaps what you can understand a man doing. He was a chauffeur out of work. He left his girl, got into the car and drove it to the hospital. It was not half a mile away. At the last minute he came to the

conclusion that the man was dead and he lost his nerve. He had been in trouble not so long ago—two years for having half-killed a man in a fight—and he suddenly got the funks. He slipped out of the car, pressed the bell of the hospital, turned round and disappeared."

"Do you believe him?" Cheshire asked.

"I do," was the confident reply. "So would you, if you talked to him. He brought the girl with him. She is as respectable as they make 'em, had stuck to him all the time he was in prison and was trying to help him get a job now. Meldicott had plenty of money on him and they found a lot of loose notes in his overcoat pocket, even. Jesson apparently touched nothing. He admits he hoped to get a good tip for what he had done but he just lost his courage. He thought that previous conviction against him would carry such weight that no one would believe his word. When the paper came out this morning and hinted that the man who had been a passenger in the car was dying, and that he was an important personage, the girl persuaded him to go to Scotland Yard and own up."

The telephone bell rang. Melville lifted the receiver, listened and set it down with a brief remark. **[144]**

"All over," he told Cheshire. "Meldicott died without recovering consciousness."

They sat down at the table but neither of them had any appetite for lunch.

"What about this firm that Florestan worked for?" Melville asked.

"Wealthy, old-established, been dealing in metals and everything to do with guns, battleships and planes for twenty years. The late managing director founded the foreign business but his son and grandson, who are now directors, are duds; as honest as the day, but everything seems to have been left to this man Florestan. He has refused a directorship but they give him large bonuses at the end of each year and he works the business just as he likes. He has lived ostensibly in that poky little house in Kensington, where I went to see him, but he has also a flat on the Hotel side of the Milan. Just now it seems to be closed up. Melville," Cheshire concluded sternly, "you have got to find that man."

"We shall find him all right," Melville declared. "Whether we shall be able to hold him or not, though, I cannot tell you, unless you want to bring your own little affair into it and that I imagine you would never do. The only report we have is that a man who might have answered to his description left in a private plane from Heston at daybreak this morning. The plane was licenced in the name Rosenthal. The man had his own pilot who left with the plane. He always went in for night journeys

and no one seems to know much about him. We shall have a fuller report soon but it does not look very hopeful. He may be at the other end of Europe by this time."

"What have you done with Jesson?" Cheshire asked. [145]

"We detained him at Scotland Yard. He is perfectly willing and we are on the safe side, anyhow. I warn you, though, I am not often wrong and I believe his story."

"Sounds only too probable," Cheshire admitted.

"Brownlow from the Foreign Office is lunching upstairs," Melville went on. "I talked to him for a minute or two. Things seem as bad as possible. Both our friends are still doing everything they can to delay matters. They mean war, you know, Cheshire. There's no doubt about that, and we are not ready."

"No more are they," the other rejoined. "Well, we will leave that to the politicians, but I'll tell you this. If ever this thing blows over or if war does come, nothing in the world would induce me to have anything to do with my present branch of the Service again. I don't mind hardships and I don't mind taking risks, but this is simply hell. You are surrounded all the time by dangers you can't cope with, people you can't get at. A man needs a peculiar sort of mentality, Melville, to do our work."

"And you're damned good at it, so don't grouse," the Deputy Commissioner pronounced. "You know already everything there is to be known about fighting a ship, and peace-time work would be a cold job for you. You frighten me, Cheshire, now and then," he went on, moving to the sideboard and helping himself to one of the cold dishes, "but I believe in your present plans. I believe if you can only succeed in your last effort and get the truth to these fellows at the psychological moment, they will climb down at once and if the other thing happens, twenty-four hours after the first shot has been fired, when they find that there is not a single thing as they expected to find it, they will lose their nerve."

"Hope so," Cheshire said. "Anyway, the scheme has worked up till now, as one can tell from their attitude, and from some of the dispositions they have made." [146]

The telephone bell rang again. Sir Herbert listened for a moment or two, interposing some brief ejaculations of a somewhat severe character, and rang off.

"You won't like this, Cheshire," he cried as he finished the conversation. "I will send Partridge down and have him make a report. Seems to me like gross carelessness. That man you left in the Police Station last night has escaped."

"The devil! How was that?"

"Well, the Inspector has been explaining that they were treating him a little leniently because, of course, they had no right to hold him without bringing him up for remand. The warder took him some dinner, the fellow was waiting for him behind the door, knocked him senseless and was out of the place, into the back and over the wall like a streak. I am terribly sorry."

"Not your fault, old chap, but it's bad luck all the same," Cheshire observed. "You see, he is the only one who must have known that that servant girl saved my life and turned me loose again. If she's gone back to her own home or any haunts where she is likely to be recognised, I am afraid she'll pay for it."

"She will suffer in a good cause, anyway," the Deputy Commissioner remarked.

"Yes, but I don't want her to suffer."

"Always the ladies' man," Melville smiled.

"Shut up!" Cheshire said calmly. "She was a plain, unwashed, ill-spoken, typical low-class domestic servant. All the same, she saved my life and she knew she was running a bit of a risk. You've got to find her for me." [147]

"With your eloquent description it ought to be easy," was the somewhat sarcastic reply.

"I should send Partridge down to reprimand the officials at the Police Station," Cheshire suggested thoughtfully, "and then put one or two of your best men who know that locality on to the job of finding her. She will need protection."

"I'll do exactly what you say, Cheshire," the other promised, "but so far as your man Florestan is concerned I should think he is well out of the country by now."

"I don't think so," the Admiral rejoined, "and if he is he's as likely as not to be back again to-morrow. His job is not finished yet, and he's no quitter. He has made two mistakes—leaving Meldicott alive, for one. But knowing about the ammunition he was using I suppose he felt quite safe. He ought not to have left me with any life in my old hulk, though."

"Of course you ought not to take on these fancy jobs yourself," the Deputy Commissioner observed. "It's just as bad as though I went out to a coiners' den or a murderers' social club to start an investigation. You have the whole of the XYZ staff to fall back on."

"I was too damned curious," Cheshire admitted. "Never mind. I paid for it. The thing I am most sorry about is the girl."

"Can't think what she wanted to bolt from the taxicab for," Melville meditated.

"Neither can I. Anyhow, it's bad enough to owe your life to a woman without probably having her done in afterwards for saving you. If you let them get that girl, Melville—"

"No threats, my friend," the other interrupted. "You can't threaten a policeman. It's not done." [148]

There was a loud yet respectful tapping at the door. The head waiter of the club presented himself. The two men looked at him curiously.

"I offer you my apologies, gentlemen," he said gravely. "I know that it is forbidden to interrupt you but I hope you will excuse me when I tell you the cause."

"Well?" Cheshire queried.

"The Princess Pelucchi has just left her husband here, sir. He has gone into the luncheon room. She asked whether you were in the club. I—forgive me—replied in the affirmative."

"A damn' silly thing to do," Cheshire said. "You know very well that neither the Deputy Commissioner nor myself are ever in the club when we are wanted. Go on."

"The Princess is in the car outside, sir. She begged that you would spare her one moment."

Cheshire rose to his feet.

"The mischief's done, I'm afraid, Melville," he observed. "I don't suppose it makes much difference. I decline to go into the street, though. There are half a dozen newspaper men hanging round. You must show Her Highness into the Strangers' Room and see that no one else enters."

"Very good, sir."

The man departed, returning in a minute or two more solemn than ever.

"Her Highness is in the Strangers' Room, sir," he announced. "I have left one of the waiters outside with orders that the room is not to be used."

Cheshire nodded.

"I'll be back in a few moments," he told Melville.

[149]

Sabine was looking very lovely, as usual, but there was a shadow lurking in her eyes and her smile was a little anxious. It was a smile which Cheshire did not return. He bent over her fingers with a cold salute and stood waiting.

"You are angry with me, Guy," she said. "I should not have

come here."

"It is not wise," he told her. "Just now, things are very difficult. Every movement of every person of importance is being watched."

"I did not realise that," she admitted. "I came to speak to you because Elida has told me about to-night. I am afraid for Elida, Guy."

"I don't think she will come to any harm."

"Nevertheless, it is not a good thing that she should go to a place like Machinka's and meet you there alone on this terrible secret business. I came to pray you to take her out into the country somewhere or meet her as privately as you have done before at Regent's Park. Anywhere, sooner than Machinka's."

Cheshire shook his head.

"There are reasons," he insisted, "why to-night Machinka's is necessary."

"You may be spied upon there," she warned him.

He looked at her very steadily.

"I hope so."

"You hope so?" she repeated, considering his words. "What is it that you have in your mind, Guy?"

"It would be no longer worth while keeping in my mind if I disclosed it to you," he answered.

"Is that not unkind?"

"You are a Pelucchi," he reminded her.

"I was also once your very dear friend," she said sadly. "How you have changed, Guy. How cold and stern you have become. Is there anything human left in you?"

"Temporarily," he told her, "I have ceased to exist as a human being. I am like the modern armies—I am not a human unit. I am mechanised." **[150]**

"If I could only understand a little," she sighed. "I know how terrible it was that I should have involved myself in these affairs with Godfrey Ryson but is it not almost as bad if Elida has secret discussions with you?"

"Worse," he replied. "Much worse."

"Then why do you urge her to do what she hates?"

"Because individuals count for nothing any longer. I am

working only for a cause."

She shivered as she wrapped her sables round her.

"I am sorry I came," she confessed. "I cannot imagine why this blight has fallen upon the earth. As you say, we are no longer human beings. War itself could scarcely be worse."

He pondered over her words.

"War brings misery to millions," he pointed out. "The struggle to avert war is so gigantic that it is of little consequence if it freezes the humanity out of a handful or so of us."

"What is there that I can do?" she pleaded.

He considered that also.

"Yours is the hardest task," he admitted. "Do nothing. You will save your country from ruin that way, no other, for believe me, Sabine, that vainglorious egoist who has lost his sense of proportion and everything except his gift of rhetoric is better left alone. If we stop the war we shall save your country."

"Your methods," she ventured, "of saving the world from war are a little cryptic."

"I am not upon my defence," he answered.

He touched the bell. She leaned towards him once more.

"Elida is to go?" she asked with a little break in her voice. **[151]**

The door was opened. The hall porter was in the background.

"Show Her Highness to her car," Cheshire directed. "Princess, *a rivederci*."

[152]

CHAPTER XVI

Elida came into the private salon of Machinka's Restaurant that evening with a laugh upon her lips and a glow of excitement in her beautiful eyes. She threw aside the black scarf which she had been wearing almost like a yashmak over her hair, and held out both her hands to Cheshire. He took them, he even raised them to his lips, but she felt the chill of his presence.

"Guy, dear," she protested, "have I come once more to a tragic feast? Can we not pretend that we are playing a game?"

"Should we be better off?" he asked.

"I think so," she declared, looking at herself in the mirror. "Life lasts such a very short time. Why should we brood upon the unhappy side of it? I am fond of you, Guy. I love the thought of our tête-à-tête dinner. I only wish I could cheer some of that gloom away from you."

"Yours is the right spirit," he acknowledged, a slightly softer note in his voice. "All the same, Elida, these days—each one seems to bring its special tragedy."

"But the world goes on," she argued. "Why pretend that we can control it? We cannot. We are puppets, after all. Why not be happy puppets?"

"A delicious alliteration," he smiled. "You know that Sabine came to see me at the club to-day?"

"That was stupid of her," she said. "Sabine is getting like you. She is taking all this as though it were not only the end of our lives but the end of the world. Tell me the news, if there is any worth hearing."

He rang the bell.

"Your Campari arrives," he told her, "and your strange Italian Vermouth. And Luigi," he added, as the dark little man hurried into the room.

Respectful salutations followed. Luigi served the *apéritifs* and presented the menu.

"It is the dinner of the house," he announced, "but it is good. If you will excuse the *risotto*, which is a luncheon dish and not usually eaten at this hour, you will find that it is a light one. The Contessa will, I believe, approve."

Elida took the menu from Cheshire's hand. She looked it through and nodded.

"The asparagus Parmesan, I adore," she said. "Some fruit afterwards, and coffee, Luigi—strong, hot, black coffee . . . And now, Guy, what is there serious to tell me? Ronnie is safe? He is still working?"

"He is still working," Cheshire assented.

She shivered a little.

"I do not think that you have the straightforward brain of a sailor at all," she declared.

"Why not?"

"It is too Jesuitical, the whole affair."

"A spy has no conscience," he told her, "neither has a counter-spy."

"What Godfrey Ryson did was terrible," she said thoughtfully. "Even though Sabine begged and prayed him to do as she wished it was terrible. But you who introduced us, who apparently knew what was going on from the very beginning, why have you spared Ronnie? Why do you keep him there at work? Why do you still allow him to take these tracings which are to be passed on to my people?"

"Well, for one thing, his guilt was infinitely less than Ryson's. It was, in fact, scarcely guilt at all, because he was obeying his superior officer." **[154]**

"I think we will not be serious until after dinner," she declared. "Do you not notice how gay I have become? You know mediaeval Italy was the home of all philosophers. That little company of men and women in their villa near Florence made world history after Boccaccio had set them loose. I have the same spirit. There are still joys in life. I shall cling to them even though now and then I am forced to do evil."

"Isn't this rather a new Elida?" he asked curiously.

"Perhaps so," she confessed. "I should like to make you a new Guy. I should like to smooth those hard lines out of your face, bring the kindness back to your eyes, the warmth to your touch, the tenderness to your tone."

"Better be careful!"

"My dear man," she laughed, "why be careful?"

"Because Luigi is here with the *minestrone*."

Perhaps Cheshire was really grateful for this fantastic exhibition of Elida's strange temperament. She was, he knew, in her way sincere. She had all the delightful volatile outlook

upon life of the Southern European. She conceived it her duty to life and living to be light-hearted. They gossiped about the past and even the future as though the clouds of disaster had ceased to loom over them or even had ever existed. Afterwards, when they sat side by side on the sofa, she thrust her arm through his.

"Now let us talk seriously, if we must," she begged.

"There is very little that is fresh to tell you," he said, holding a light to her cigarette. "As you know perfectly well, I am now taking Ryson's place and you are taking Sabine's. Next week, perhaps even sooner, I am going to bring you the most important packet of plans and charts of all, but . . ." [155]

"Go on, go on," she cried. "It is just the 'but' that I want to know about."

"For my own peace of mind in the future, I must be sure that you clearly understand this. Nothing that I pass on to you, nothing that you handle, has been or ever will be absolutely correct."

The gaiety faded from her face, her lips trembled.

"I realise that," she murmured. "I have always known that you are using me to deceive my own people."

"This is my counter-stroke against Sabine for having seduced Ryson, and through him, Hincks, from their duty. By obeying my present instructions, you, Elida, in place of your sister, are making such amends as are possible, and furthermore, you are saving young Hincks's life and giving him a chance to escape the consequences of his sin."

"And Ronnie knows that," she whispered bitterly.

"There has been no bargain between us," Cheshire told her. "I give him the instructions, he hands me over the results."

"But he knows that the maps and the figures, that everything he hands over to you is misleading?"

"Naturally."

"Does he know that you are making use of me to pass them on?"

"I have never told him so."

"Well," she sighed. "I am glad that he has not sunk so low as that, but although I am fond of him it would have been better if he had possessed the courage of his friend, Godfrey Ryson."

"Young men are fond of life," Cheshire reminded her. "Then, too, you must remember he was only carrying out the orders of [156]

his superior officer. I am not attempting to excuse his fault but he is at least working out a bitter expiation."

"And if I refused now to go on with my part in this business?"

"The Service, perhaps the world, would have no further use for Commander Ronald Hincks."

"An ultimatum?"

"Precisely."

Elida sipped her coffee slowly and deliberately. She withdrew her arm from Cheshire's to handle her cup and when she had finished she did not replace it. She lit another cigarette and smoked on in silence.

"It is a hateful thought that I am helping to deceive my country," she confessed at last.

"Sabine had every intention of deceiving the country whose hospitality you are both accepting at the present moment to help your own," he reminded her coldly. "This is your retribution."

"And how do you know that I shall not tear up these papers or send them with a little note to explain that I have no faith in their genuineness, and why?"

"Did you do that with the last packet?"

"No."

"You sent them without comment?"

"Yes."

"There, you see," he pointed out. "You have told me the truth. I will go further, Elida. You will always tell me the truth. Next time we meet I shall ask you whether you have sent what I give you to-day also without any warning, sent them in the ordinary way. You will answer me and what you say will be the truth."

She looked at him half fearfully.

"I can tell a lie if I choose," she said.

"Not to me."

She turned away from him.

"You are a terrible man. Once I was so fond of you, and now I am afraid. What is to come of it all?"

"How can I tell? The soldier who is flung into the battle line does not waste time thinking of the morrow."

"Will there be a to-morrow?" she asked wearily.

"The chances are even," he replied. "I only know that I am doing everything a man in my position can to ensure its coming. So are you."

"Go on," she insisted. "You owe me plain truths."

"You shall have them," he assented, capturing her hand and holding it. "You know the orders I wear, and I can honestly say that I have earned them. I believe that I have the fighting spirit, yet I hate war like hell and every moment of my life now, every thought, is devoted to preventing it—even at the expense of every principle I have ever cherished."

She reflected upon his words for a moment.

"And what about me?" she asked. "You are making use of me. Am I to forget altogether the ignoble side of what I am doing? Am I to remember only that I am one of your fellow workers in this mission, which, I suppose, after all, is greater than anything personal—this mission for preventing war?"

"You are," he assured her firmly. "You have grasped the situation precisely. What you are doing, on behalf of Sabine, is partly retribution, but, beyond that, if it would help my work, I would sacrifice any living being, even though he or she were the nearest and dearest thing in my life."

"Exactly how am I helping?" she persisted.

"In this manner," he answered. "The man who is for the moment at the head of your nation, genius though he may be, has one fault. He is over-confident. It is a bad fault. You are helping to feed it. When, at the last moment, he knows the truth, the shock will be the greater." **[158]**

"And what about the other?" she asked. "He means so much less to me, but he counts."

"You are not in any sort of direct connection with him," Cheshire pointed out. "He is being dealt with in the same way. They are both receiving information which, if it were correct, would make their success a certainty. Incorrect it would spell disaster. Our northern friend will be quicker to realise the position. He will be the first to change his attitude."

"Tell me some more," she begged. "I need reassurance."

"Not now," he replied. "Within a week or ten days I shall have, as I have already said, a further trust to hand over to you. It will be the most important part of our whole scheme. When that has been studied for twenty-four hours in both capitals, the time will have arrived. The Dictators will be told the truth. They will know then that all this army of spies with which they have flooded the country has bungled. The Dictators will have an entirely different view of the situation put before them. They will be shown a plan of the blow we intend to strike if war

comes, which will be paralysing to any hopes they might have had of success. Then will come our moment. Our envoys will change their tone. The conversations will be conducted in a different spirit. We shall give much, we shall expect much, but that much will spell peace. The mistake you make, my dear Elida," he wound up, "is that you think of yourself as a traitress, whereas you are really a prophetess. You believe that you are engaged in a business of infamy, whereas really you are the Joan of Arc of your people."

"You are a pleasant comforter, are you not, dearest Guy?" she said, stroking his arm. **[159]**

"I am telling you the truth."

"Oh, I wonder," she answered. "This business of spying defeats me. A man tells a lie for his country's sake and he is acclaimed a hero. Guy, I wish Ronnie loved me more than his country."

"But he doesn't."

"Give me some more coffee," she begged.

He poured it out in silence, added the sugar gravely and placed the cup in her hand. She drank it and wiped the tears from her eyes.

"No, he does not," she repeated quietly, "and I think I love him for it. The greatest thing in a man's life is his sense of honour. No woman could be jealous of that. Still, she needs just the right word sometimes. How shall I meet Ronnie, I wonder, when we do come together again?"

"As lovers," he told her.

She rose to her feet joyously. There was a return to her former gaiety about her expression and movements.

"Give me the papers," she begged.

He placed them in the silk bag she was carrying. She closed it with a little gold key from her bracelet.

"When do we meet again?" she asked softly.

"When we do meet it will probably be for the last time," he told her. "You will hear from me, Elida."

She clutched his arms.

"Guy," she confessed, "I am terrified of the next time and I am terrified of the days that will pass between now and then. Sabine, too, is wretched. You know her well enough to understand that there was nothing between her and Godfrey Ryson, but his suicide was a shock to her. She feels that in a

way it was her fault."

"You must point out the truth to her," Cheshire said. "She has less to reproach herself with than she thinks. It was not for her own sake that she made him a traitor. It was for her country's. He sinned and he paid the penalty." [160]

"And what about me?" Elida asked.

"Remember, you came into this for the sake of Sabine," he said. "When the crisis is over you will have an English husband, you will be an Englishwoman. You are working for the greatest cause in the world—the cause of peace. Be proud of it, because you are fighting for your own country, too. A war would set them back half a century."

"You think that they would not win?"

He laughed with real gaiety for the first time that evening.

"Not a chance, my dear Elida!"

She drew a long breath but the corners of her lips were quivering.

"What conceit!"

He drew her arm through his and led her towards the door and along the passage outside. She shivered as she fastened her cape around her.

"You have had a curious effect upon me to-night, Guy," she whispered. "I believe, yes, I am sure, that I am nervous."

He kissed her upon both cheeks and there was a kindlier look in his eyes than she had seen before for some time. It seemed to her that he was once more a human being.

"Now," she said as she drew away, "I feel better able to face the world again."

"Nervousness all gone?"

Her slight grimace was just a little querulous.

"Very nearly," she murmured.

[161]

CHAPTER XVII

Elida ran almost light-heartedly down the narrow flight of stairs, pushed open the door and stepped into the cobbled yard. Then she faced the passage and permitted herself a little grimace. It was an ugly spot, with pools of darkness towards the farther end which the lights in the mews failed to penetrate. There was a certain hesitation about her movements now. She was not at all sure that her knees were not trembling. Perfectly absurd, she told herself. The noise of the busy traffic was all around her. It was only these few yards that seemed unlit and desolate. Even with the thought of the taxicab at the other end, her nervousness remained. Almost she yielded to the impulse of retracing her steps. Then she remembered that stern expression on Cheshire's face which once or twice that evening she had found so frightening. He would lose all confidence in her. It was ridiculous to give in. It was so unreasonable a fit of cowardice. She took her first step forwards. After that it was easier. Half-way down she stopped. She would have called out if she had dared. She made a second effort and conquered. She staggered on, reached the door, opened it and stepped into the mews. With a great breath of relief she realised that the taxi was there waiting. The driver descended from his seat and held open the door. She was safe, after all! How absurd it had been to fear anything. She put her foot on the step.

"I have not kept you waiting too long?" she asked, smiling.

She glanced at the man's face as she spoke and the fear came back. It was not the same driver. [162]

"Where is the man who drove me here?" she enquired quickly.

He had moved, as though to cover her possible retreat. He was not an agreeable-looking person and he was also a complete stranger.

"I am his mate," he announced. "He was called away. The lady will please step in."

Elida hesitated.

"But why should he be called away?" she demanded. "I engaged him for the evening from Hill's Garage. You are not one of Hill's men."

"Just as good, young lady. Now please—"

She felt herself being gently impelled into the cab. She turned towards him indignantly. At that moment the door on the other side opened. A rough pair of hands was extended towards her.

Before she knew what was happening she was seated at the back by the side of a muffled-up stranger. The driver was already in his place. They started off. Curiously enough, her nervousness had decreased.

"What do you want?" she asked the man. "How dare you come in here?"

"I drive with the Contessa a little way," was the gruff reply. "If she keeps quiet nothing will happen to her."

Elida looked eagerly towards the turning in the main street.

"Why should I keep quiet?" she demanded.

Something harder than the man's knuckles seemed screwed into her side. It was underneath her cape that she felt the pressure all the time. Nevertheless, she kept her presence of mind.

"Is that a revolver?"

"I do not want to use it," the man answered. "You have got to come with me to a gentleman who is going to ask you a few questions." **[163]**

"I am going to do nothing of the sort."

"I think so. It is not you he wants, though."

"What is it then?"

He inclined his head towards her bag.

"Your bag," he said. "Would you like to give it to me?"

"There is nothing there of any value," she assured him. "My rings are worth a hundred times more."

"We may have your rings as well!"

They passed a huge electric-light standard. She caught a glimpse of his face and shivered. He was dark with a sallow complexion, over-red lips and he smelt of cheap perfume. His eyes were appraising her viciously. She looked away from him out of the window. They were within a few yards of a busy street. She could see the taxicabs passing up and down. There was even a policeman standing at the corner.

"I am going to call out," she cried.

"I think that you will not," he answered. "Remember, life for a beautiful young lady like you is worth something. To me it is worth nothing. They may catch me, they may not, but it is a sure and certain thing that with the first sign you give or sound you utter I pull this trigger and you wake up in the other world—if there is one."

"What is it you want?" she asked a little wildly.

"For myself I want nothing."

"Then why are you doing this?"

"I am escorting you," he told her again, "to a gentleman who wishes to ask you a few questions. He will probably examine the contents of your bag. They are nothing to me. Afterwards, if he is good-tempered, and he is sometimes, he may hand you over to me to escort to your home, and after that I shall not refuse a little offering." [164]

They were in the thoroughfare now, crossing St. James's Street, entering St. James's Square. She sat quietly in her place.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Not far," he answered. "I am glad you are being wise."

"I am not being wise at all," she retorted with a tremor in her voice. "I am behaving like a coward. I ought to have called out at the corner of the last street."

"Hopeless," he assured her. "Besides—you are forgetting this."

Elida tried to draw a little further away but the hard end of his weapon was still there pressing into her side.

"I suppose you know that you are hurting me terribly," she complained. "I shall call out soon from sheer pain."

"Then I shall have to shoot you," he told her suavely. "You are not dealing with beginners, Contessa. We have two taxis following us. I can slip out of this one and into the other in a moment. You will not be able to move until the ambulance comes."

"Where do we find this gentleman who is going to examine the contents of my bag?" she asked.

"A very short distance further. If the Contessa is nervous she can hold my free hand. It would be a great pleasure to me to feel the fingers of the Contessa clasped with mine."

"I am growing less and less afraid of you," she said, "but I tell you this—if you touch me I shall call out, whether you shoot me or not."

He shuffled an inch or two nearer to her along the shiny seat. His insinuating smile became almost a leer.

"You will not, then, save perhaps your life," he suggested, "at the expense of one small caress?" [165]

She clenched the fist of her right hand and drew it back. He was only just in time to stop her smashing the window.

"Little fool!" he exclaimed. "You would cut those white fingers of yours all to pieces."

"I do not care. Where are we now?"

"Our destination," was the curt reply. "Get out!"

The taxi had come to a standstill by the kerbstone in front of a dark, gloomy-looking building. Elida looked out eagerly. The door was thrown open with a flourish. A tall commissionaire in uniform stood there saluting. She sprang out of the taxi.

"Send for a policeman," she demanded breathlessly. "I have been brought here against my will. These men want to rob me. The one in front is not a proper driver at all. This man has been holding a revolver at me for the last ten minutes."

Not a muscle moved on the face of the commissionaire. He stood on one side and motioned to her companion. They moved swiftly down a little passage.

"Did you hear what I said?" she called out over her shoulder.

The commissionaire turned his back. The man who had been seated by her side in the taxicab laid his hand over her mouth and gripped her by the chin.

"Contessa," he protested, "why be foolish? Should I bring anyone so beautiful to a place where harm was likely to happen to her?"

Elida bit savagely at his hand but it was too tightly stretched over her lips. The driver, who had passed them, had rung a bell. Almost immediately, a door, skilfully camouflaged to appear like a part of the wall, swung open. She was in what seemed to be the lounge entrance to a club or small restaurant. Beyond was the vista of a bar, behind which stood a barman in a white linen coat. Her companion, who had been holding his hand over her mouth, suddenly removed it. She called out to the barman.

"Come and help me!"

He took not the slightest notice. She turned to her escort. The driver had remained outside.

"What is this place?" she asked.

"A place where you can have a very good time if you behave yourself and you can have the worst time in the world if you misbehave."

Elida threw herself into an easy chair. Her companion made no

effort to prevent her. He handed his coat and hat to a boy who had hurried out of a cloakroom.

“Come here, boy!” Elida cried.

He took no notice.

“Do you not hear what I say?”

The boy was already retreating. She called again but his head was kept obstinately turned away.

“Very sad case,” her captor confided, smiling. “Born deaf and dumb. That is one curious thing about this club,” he went on. “From the commissionaire to the maître d’hôtel every one of the servants is stone deaf and also dumb.”

“I think it is a horrible place,” she declared. “Why have you brought me here?”

“If you will mount those stairs with me,” he suggested, “you will know. You are here to meet the president. He is the gentleman I told you about who wishes to know precisely what you have in that little bag. It would save time if you mounted the stairs. I will perform the necessary introduction and I will leave you—with infinite regret, may I say?”

“I should prefer even the president of a club like this to you,” she told him. “Please to lead the way. I will follow you.” [167]

He swung round stiffly and obeyed. Half-way up the stairs he paused and looked back.

“Well?” she asked.

“I remind myself,” he said, “that only a week ago I buy one of these English picture papers and I see photographs of the beautiful Princess Pelucchi and her even more beautiful sister. There you are all smiles and court dress and graciousness. The picture is not true. I think myself you are a very disagreeable young woman.”

“How dare you!” she exclaimed. “How dare you, when you have been sitting for so long with the muzzle of a revolver pressed to my side! I have a bruise, two bruises, in fact. When I undress to-night I shall hate you even more than I do now.”

He sighed.

“I regret more than I can tell you that I shall not be present.”

“Show me the way to this president of yours,” she cried furiously.

At the topmost step he knocked at a heavy mahogany door and beckoned her to precede him. A man, seated before a desk,

looked up at their entrance.

"This," her companion announced, "is the young lady whom I was instructed to meet in the Jermyn Street Mews and conduct here."

The other nodded. He bowed slightly to Elida, then pointed to the door.

"You can go," he ordered the man. "Contessa, I should be glad of a few minutes' conversation with you."

He tapped the chair by his side. She looked at him in amazement. **[168]**

"What is your name?" she demanded.

"Horace Florestan," he replied. "It may not be known to you but it will be known soon to all the world."

[169]

CHAPTER XVIII

There was a moment of speechlessness. It was a room which seemed to have been built for silence. In it there were no signs of any windows save something that might have been a skylight at the top. All sounds which might have penetrated from the neighbouring streets were muffled. The music from the club below was inaudible. Elida fought against the feeling that she was afraid. The man seated by her side, with his measured tone, his hard bony face, his somewhat protuberant eyes and incomprehensible smile, was in a sense terrifying. She hated, too, the firm rigidity of his features, which it seemed no shock on earth could disturb.

"I owe you apologies, Contessa," Florestan said, "for this crude method of obtaining speech with you. Our spheres of life are so far apart that I had lost hope of meeting you under ordinary conditions."

"What do you want with me? Who are you?"

"I am an ardent sympathiser with your country," he answered evasively.

"I cannot think what you want with me, but was it necessary to have me forced into a taxicab and brought here against my will?" she demanded.

"Only against your will, Contessa, because you did not understand," he remonstrated. "I am quite sure that my friend Marius Ludini would only have used force as a last extremity."

"I do not wish to discuss your friend Marius Ludini," she retorted coldly. "I would only say that I have never been brought into contact with a more objectionable person. You say that you are an ardent sympathiser with my country," she continued. "If so, what are you doing here in London?" [170]

"I am engaged in the same fashion as you are engaged," he replied. "I am a professor of espionage."

"What good do you expect to do by dragging me here?" she repeated. "Is it not always understood that people who are engaged in that sort of work should remain outwardly strangers to one another? If we are found here alone and one of us is suspected, the other one, too, is brought to trouble."

"If we were discovered that would be true," he admitted, "but why should we be discovered? I have three homes in London and two secret exits by means of which I can leave the country at any moment. I am living here carrying on vast operations and I am unsuspected. You have valuable friends in the British

Navy with whom you have—dealings. Are you suspected? I think not. Am I? Well, I may have to protect myself sometimes but I still continue my work."

"What do you want with me?" she protested. "I do not know what work you are doing. I do not ask. Why interfere with me? It is not your affair. The agents of our government with whom I have correspondence and dealings will bitterly resent it. They have probably never heard of you."

"That is going too far," he objected, shaking his head solemnly. "Everyone has heard of Horace Florestan. The only thing is that just as I have all these abodes in England—also in France—so I have just as many personalities, just as many occupations. The real Florestan very few people know of."

"If they catch only one of you," Elida retorted, "it seems to me the others might be in trouble." [171]

His smile was benevolent, almost saintlike.

"Must you assume," he asked gently, "that I am a bungler at my profession? Florestan, the merchant prince, is a very different man from the Florestan who perhaps might be accounted a gangster working in higher circles. The personality of one might be destroyed, but the other would remain. No indeed, I am not a bungler. My doubles and I, all working towards one end, are amazingly elusive."

"You are, no doubt," Elida scoffed, "a remarkable man. I hope that you are, as you say, a good son of my country. I am a Pelucchi, however, and there is no one of my country who should dare to treat me as you have. I wish to leave this place and be left alone to carry on the work I am doing."

"It is better, Contessa," he assured her, "that we work as allies and not as enemies. I may come from the class of our country-people from which the Dictator himself comes, and you may be, as I know you are, the daughter of a very proud line, but far above both of us comes our native land."

"I am willing," she said a little wearily, "to take you for granted. I propose that you continue your work, whatever it may be, and I continue mine in my own fashion."

"There is no reason whatever," he replied, "why we should not do so, only, Contessa, a curious fact has been disclosed to me. A week or so ago your sister was meeting secretly a Naval officer attached to that very dangerous organisation known as the XYZ Secret Service of the British Navy. That Naval Officer has recently committed suicide. Well, we expected the work upon which he was engaged to be carried on by another officer, his name—let me see—his name is Ronald Hincks. That officer seems to be living in complete retirement, one might almost say under arrest." [172]

"Well?"

"So," he went on, "neither you nor your sister meet these two any longer. You meet, instead, another man."

More than ever Elida realised the sinister nature of this profound silence by which she was encompassed, the suppressed fire in those unprepossessing eyes of his now fixed upon hers.

"Another man altogether," he continued. "It would be kind of you, Contessa, if you relieved some slight anxiety which I, on behalf of my country, feel in this matter. Tell me what arts you used to seduce a man who stands so high in the councils of England as Admiral Guy Cheshire."

"How do you know that I meet him?" she demanded.

"You met him to-night secretly at Machinka's Restaurant in Jermyn Street," Florestan replied. "You have papers in your bag there, soon, I suppose, to be forwarded to one of our friends in the Embassy. You must forgive me if I feel curiosity as to the nature of those documents—I and some others who work with me also in the cause of our country."

"I do not see that it is your affair," Elida protested, fighting against that sickening fear which was slowly paralysing her thoughts and words. "You work in your way. I work in mine. Our methods are different. Only the end is the same. It is not your business to interfere in what I do, even if you are the important person you say you are."

Florestan's long fingers played for a moment upon the desk, tapping the pad of blotting paper slowly and thoughtfully. She watched them fascinated. They seemed to have something of the same tendency towards tightly drawn skin and lack of flesh as his face. He suddenly pushed back his hair—neatly brushed and neatly arranged. It was unexpectedly thin, however, and it disclosed his shiny scalp. There was something inhuman about his baldness. His eyes were now fixed mercilessly upon her. **[173]**

"Anything that concerns our country," he said calmly, "is my business. If you doubt what I have told you, you will not doubt my credentials."

He slipped a watch, a thin, large gold watch, from his waistcoat pocket, opened it with a spring and showed her an inscription inside the gold case:

> Horace Florestan is one of my trusted band of patriots. He is to receive obedience from all the Sons and Daughters of our Country. B. M.

Elida stared at the engraved words incredulously. They seemed

to grow larger before her eyes.

"The watch was a gift," Florestan went on. "There are only two others similarly inscribed in the world, and one of those is in America. Will you explain to me, if you please, Contessa, the new conditions under which you are working? I ask you again—how did you succeed in corrupting the incorruptible? You see how chivalrously I treat you. Your bag is there. Its contents are at my disposal. They might tell me all that I wish to know. I would rather hear it from your lips, and prove it afterwards if I doubted you."

She fought her battle in silence, but the colour had left her cheeks. With both hands she gripped her bag. He rose slowly to his feet and leaned over her closer and closer. A fear greater than any she had yet felt parted her faltering lips. [174]

"Go away!" she cried. "I am suffocating. I cannot talk when you are so near."

His hand rested upon her shoulder. The tips of his fingers touched her cheek for a moment. She could hear the fierce beating of her heart.

"Contessa Elida," he said, "you are very beautiful. The world says you are not so beautiful as your sister. I find you the loveliest woman I have ever seen and you are of my country. We should work together. We might accomplish great things."

He listened to her cry, as she shrank away, with a faint smile of contempt. She had the despairing feeling that she was completely and absolutely trapped; that in another moment, struggle as fiercely as she might, she would be in his embrace.

"You must not touch me!" she cried, although the effort of speech hurt her.

"You little fool," he murmured. "Of what are you afraid?"

"Of you," she faltered, and again the words seemed to blister her dry throat.

"Do you not realise," he said, and now she felt the distance between them becoming only a matter of inches, and herself suffocating, "do you not realise that it is not you I want? I desire you to give me, of your own free will, that bag. If not, I must take it. I must see for myself whether this, the only Englishman whom our Naval chiefs fear, has really fallen. Afterwards—well, Contessa—we shall see."

There was nothing hurried, nothing passionate in his movement, yet she felt that his hand was seeking hers, the arm upon her shoulder was holding her in a grip of iron. Then there came a whirlwind change. The sudden relaxing of his fingers astonished her. He was standing upright, stiff and taut, listening. She, too, was conscious of the first sound she had [175]

heard since she had entered the room. From some hidden place near the desk came the soft ringing of a bell. From another hidden place in the wall, curiously brilliant in the dimly lit room, came the glow of a red light behind a small bulb. She felt the burning in her throat lessening, the paralysis of speech and movement passing.

"What is it?" she cried.

He made no answer. It seemed to her that he had become invisible. Then she realised what had happened. The room was in darkness. The lights in the ceiling, the two or three around the walls, the shaded one upon his desk, had gone. At first she was terribly and mortally afraid. She cried out feebly, shrank back in her chair, felt herself surrounded with horrors. Nothing happened. There was a sense of emptiness around her. She stood up, stumbled towards the desk, filled the room with her cries. There was no reply. Gradually she realised that she was alone.

Elida was never really sure whether she lost consciousness or not. It seemed to her that there was a blank interval but she had no measure of time which could reveal it. She was back in her chair when the door appeared suddenly to be miraculously open. There were half a dozen men in the room. The torches they carried seemed like pin pricks of fire, but their voices were gruff and reassuring. The lamp flamed out upon the desk. A friendly voice sounded in her ear. A middle-aged man in plain dark clothes was standing by her side.

"The Contessa Pelucchi?"

"Yes," she gasped.

"I am Colonel Partridge in charge of a squad from Scotland Yard," he explained. "We want this fellow Florestan. He was here a moment ago."

"Was it a moment ago?" she asked. "I was frightened. I scarcely remember."

"I think you must have fainted," he said kindly. "You don't remember how he got away?"

She shook her head:—

"He was here, standing where you are. Then the darkness came."

They continued the search but there was no Florestan.

CHAPTER XIX

"Having no diamond, partner?" the Deputy Commissioner asked Cheshire suspiciously towards the close of their first rubber on the following evening.

"If I have, it's up my sleeve where you won't get at it," was the terse reply. "Strange though it may seem, I have no diamond. I have therefore trumped the trick," he added, gathering it up. "We get our contract and the rubber is ours."

"Our only chance," Fakenham grunted.

"I thought the blighter had another," Prestley observed.

Cheshire leaned back in his chair and grinned.

"There's a fable in this club," he remarked, watching his partner add up the score, "that once in the dim forgotten ages I revoked."

"Only last week," Sir Herbert muttered, "and I was your partner."

"It seems longer ago than that," the Admiral went on. "However, it is a thing that happens to an accomplished player like myself once in a lifetime. There is no news in the paper to-day—Fakenham takes care of that—nothing that I know of to disturb one's tranquility of mind. Have I shown any signs of carelessness?"

"Never played better in your life," his partner assured him. "We are two thousand and ten points up. Fakenham, I know, can afford to pay, if he will, but even if he won't, the famous banker on my right will pay for both."

"Not sure that I don't deserve to," Prestley observed, crossing his legs and lighting a cigar. "I ought to have got my trick in spades." [178]

"You missed a trick by shirking the finesse," his partner agreed.

"Ah well, I guess you fellows need the money," Prestley conceded in a tone of resignation. "The Police and the Navy, they say, are the two worst paid Services in England. That is why a policeman has to pass his life having clandestine assignations with a cook and a sailor has to have a girl in every port to pay for his beer."

"What a thoroughly offensive fellow Prestley is becoming," Melville remarked casually. "Anyone going to play another

rubber?"

"I can't," Cheshire groaned. "I have to dine early and give a lecture to the younger generation."

"I don't want to play again," the Deputy Commissioner decided. "I'll play you Bezique, Cheshire, in the back room until you have to go."

"How much money have you in your pocket-book?" the latter asked.

"About fifty quid."

"Good news," the Admiral chuckled. "I always believe that debts of honour should be discharged on the spot."

They passed into the back room. Melville closed the door behind him. Cheshire drew up a chair to one of the small tables and held his head for a moment between his hands.

"Get on with it, Melville, quickly," he begged. "I thought that last rubber would be the end of me."

"Sorry, but it was your own doing," the other reminded him. "You begged me, after those few words last night, not to communicate with you in any way, you told me what to say to the young lady, you planned it all yourself." [179]

"I know," Cheshire agreed. "It's a queer business. Nothing been heard of the fellow, I suppose?"

"Not a thing. I am inclined to agree with Partridge—he believes he has gone to earth somewhere in Soho. I can draw you a rough plan of his getaway, if you would like to have it."

Cheshire shook his head.

"Waste of time," he groaned. "It is our own fault, in a way. A club with three empty houses on one side and a cul de sac beyond can do just about what it likes."

"Can't blame Partridge," Melville said. "We occupied two houses and we had a dozen men posted round the club itself. The fellow must have gone through the cellars underneath, where some of my men were, and when he got into Firth Street the thing was easy."

"There's a taxicab stand in Firth Street," Cheshire remarked.

His companion nodded.

"There was only one cab fetched away within an hour of the time we raided the club," he reported. "Partridge is hot on the tracks of the driver but I don't think it will do him much good. He was hailed by a man coming in the opposite direction and

they seem to have picked up a lady afterwards."

"What about Holborn?"

"Well, Partridge went there himself," Melville replied. "They simply looked upon him as a lunatic. Florestan is apparently the most important man in the business. They showed me a telegram from him signed 'Florestan' sent yesterday from Belgium confirming his purchase of thousands of tons of steel plates, or something of the sort. They won't listen to any suggestion that it is an unusual thing for a man to be travelling on the Continent and in England without leaving any indication as to his whereabouts."

"What possible explanation can they offer?" Cheshire asked curiously. **[180]**

"Simply that their Mr. Florestan is known to be the keenest buyer of metals in the trade, and if his competitors knew where he went they would all follow him and up would go the price. That is why he keeps his movements so secret. As for the club itself, of course we knew there was nothing to be found there. The secretary seems to be a very respectable Italian importer who gave the police every assistance last night. There was no drinking and the class of people there were, so far as one could see, just wives and families of the tradespeople who belong. With regard to Florestan, they made no secret whatever about the fact that he was one of the firm of Brown, Shipman & Co., and president of the club. But no one there seemed to have the least knowledge of the existence of the secret passage and there is not a book in the place to even suggest that anything illegal was going on."

"I don't suppose there was," Cheshire observed. "How did they account for the secret passage, though?"

"They all declared that they knew not a thing about it. I would have sent for you to hear the cross-examination but you know how keen you were to be kept out of it."

Cheshire nodded.

"I did expect to hear something about the young lady, though," he said.

"Do you mean to say that you have not seen or heard from her?" Melville asked incredulously.

"Not I. I wouldn't telephone or go near her for the world."

"You don't know then that she was in a dead faint when Partridge forced open the door? She must have had a horrible time." **[181]**

"I can't help it."

Melville looked at his companion curiously.

"For a man of gallantry," he observed, "you seem to have allowed this young lady to take on pretty considerable risks."

"Risks be damned!" was the bitter reply. "Think of what was the other side. You may think me as brutal as you like, but I felt pretty well sure that when she left me she would be followed, that somehow or other Florestan would have made a big effort to get hold of her papers. The risk was worth running a hundred times over. Even you, my friend, don't realise that this conspiracy which we are fighting is vital. It is going to settle the future, for the next fifty years at any rate, of the British Empire. Get that into your head, Melville, and you will understand why I have had to act like a dummy all day and get on with my job and not even answer a telephone message, and why last night I lost all sense of chivalry and all that sort of rubbish. I let the girl go to face what she had to face because I believed she would lead your people to Florestan."

"You are rather a brute, but you are certainly consistent," the Deputy Commissioner agreed grudgingly.

"Consistent," Cheshire scoffed. "God bless my soul, Melville, there's one thing about me—I've developed an eighth instinct since I took on this job. I can feel spies when they are anywhere within a hundred yards of me. I tell you frankly, I felt perfectly sure that Florestan would do his best to get hold of that girl last night and I kept away on purpose. I have sat in my room all day long surrounded by sickly shadows—invisible—speechless. If I had telephoned to the Contessa, if I had been round there this morning, if I had had her escorted direct to her Embassy, if I had shown the faintest interest in her, the whole thing was up. You can abuse me as much as you like. I played the game that was worth playing and it nearly came off."

Melville threw his cigar into the grate.

"I'm sorry, Cheshire," he said. "You make me feel like a schoolboy. Anyhow, things might have been a great deal worse. Nothing more terrible happened to the Contessa than a nasty shock. Partridge himself took her home. They waited for an hour and then he sent her to the Embassy with a plain clothes escort in my own private car. At midnight she reported that she had delivered the package to the right person in the right way. The Embassy plane left at four o'clock and your stuff went out with the rest of the diplomatic despatches."

Cheshire remained in a very grim mood. His whisky and soda stood by his side untouched. His pipe filled with tobacco lay there unlit.

"What sort of men had you in the squad?" he asked.

"The best in the Yard."

Cheshire choked back his rejoinder but his expression was sufficiently eloquent.

"You must not be too down on us, old fellow," Melville continued. "We were outwitted. Partridge admits it. I admit it. We will get our own back—don't be afraid of that. Florestan is a devil of a fellow. Remember—I don't want to seem brutal but you had your own lesson with him that night in Colville Terrace. We have discovered one of his bolt holes, anyway."

"Close it," Cheshire enjoined firmly. "Block the passage. Have a score of men in the club. I have a fancy he might try to get back that way. Let your men in Soho take off the gloves to-night. Florestan cannot be far away. I feel he isn't far away. Don't be content with the ordinary sort of search. Rake out the place, Melville. It's time someone gave Soho a shock. See that they get it to-night. I would go and join Partridge but I've got a hunch."

"What is it?" Melville asked.

Cheshire rose to his feet. The silent fury which had been devouring him seemed for the moment to have subsided. He took a gulp from his tumbler. He walked over to the fireplace, struck a match and lit his pipe.

"Florestan is somewhere close around," he declared. "His business is here with us—not abroad. My hunch is that we shall see or hear again from him within twenty-four hours. If they drive him out of Soho I'll tell you now, Melville, where he will make for. The Milan. Do you get that? He has corner rooms at the Milan in the name of Copeland. I shouldn't be surprised to see him dancing with the crowd to-night or taking a drink at the bar!"

"If you really think that," Melville advised, "you had better keep away from your own rooms to-night."

"Not I," Cheshire answered. "I am the man he wants, just now. I don't think he will leave this neighbourhood until he has had a try to get at me."

"Have you anything to go on?" Melville persisted. "Why do you think he would take such a tremendous risk as to go to the Milan?"

"Because he's clever enough to do the entirely obvious thing when he's in a fix," Cheshire replied. "Wipe everything else out of your mind for the moment, Melville. It's Florestan, always Florestan. Don't telephone to me. If there is any news, send me round a perfectly reliable man at midnight to my rooms at the Milan. No papers or cards. No message. I will leave word for a Mr. Brown to be shown up, if he comes. Midnight exactly."

Melville nodded. [184]

"You are none too safe, yourself, my friend, in these places just now," he warned him. "You have had one narrow escape."

"Safety be damned!" Cheshire answered savagely. "Who cares about that? If it costs your life and mine and the lives of every one of your men who are searching in Soho at this minute, it would be worth while if we could get Florestan under lock and key."

"Why is he suddenly so formidable?" Melville asked.

"Because he works as I work—by instinct," was the vigorous reply. "Do you think he would have run the risk he has run with a sister of the Princess Pelucchi if he hadn't an inkling of my scheme? The merest suspicion, if he tests it, is destruction, that is, if the inkling arrives and the suspicion is born before its time. It will mean war, then, and we are not ready for war. That is the long and the short of it. At midnight, Melville, I shall be in my room alone."

"And supposing there is no news?"

"Conceited sort of chap, aren't I?" Cheshire rejoined, with a grin in which there was no mirth. "I shall find my way round to Soho myself!"

[185]

CHAPTER XX

The closest of espionage to which he could have been subjected would have discovered nothing in Admiral Cheshire's movements during the remainder of that evening to have given rise to a moment's suspicion. He arrived at his rooms at the Milan Court at the usual time, received a couple of telephone messages, one asking him to dine with a cousin at the Beefsteak Club, another enclosing a ticket for a theatre and an invitation to supper afterwards from some country friends. Both these affairs had been dealt with by his social secretary, who reported that no other telephone messages had been received and there had been no callers. Cheshire dismissed him for the night, took his bath and changed, ordered a light dinner which he had served in solitude with an evening paper propped up in front of him. Afterwards, he wrote three letters by hand, taking them down to the post himself, and strolled across the entrance hall towards the balcony lounge where a small crowd of men and women were drinking before-supper cocktails and watching the crowd dancing below. He lingered for a few minutes at the top of the steps, exchanged greetings with one or two of the maîtres d'hôtel who hurried up, and shook his head in reply to various invitations.

"No supper for me to-night, Joseph," he remarked to the small dark man who was urging him to occupy a table in a retired corner. "I may come in later with friends. Just came down to have a look at you. Business good, as usual, I see."

"Marvellous," the man replied. "Every night it is the same. This war scare seems to bring people instead of keeping them away." **[186]**

Cheshire nodded and took his leave. He had accomplished his purpose if it should be necessary. He had established an alibi. He turned his back upon the room and glanced carelessly enough round at the other lookers-on. Suddenly he stiffened. A Junoesque-looking lady in a very beautiful black evening gown, undoubtedly handsome, gloriously flamboyant, had deliberately smiled at him from her solitary table in the corner. Cheshire did not hesitate for a moment. He threaded his way through the crowded space towards her.

"Good evening, Mrs. Florestan—or ought I to say Mrs. Copeland?" he said, bowing over her hand.

He took care to show no signs of surprise. She looked up at him out of those curious and wonderful eyes. There was the same faintly ironical smile upon her full, voluptuous lips.

"Mrs. Florestan is my correct name," she told him. "My husband took his apartment here under another name as he has

so many Continental clients who stay here, and whom he is not always anxious to see. You did not disclose the whole of your own, by the by, when you came to pay us that little visit."

"Admiral Cheshire, if you prefer it," he replied briskly. "Sometimes it is convenient to forget one's title. How is your aggressive husband?"

"Oh, all right, I suppose," she answered. "He is away somewhere. An inconvenient sort of husband to have," she went on with a suggestive upward glance. "Never gives his poor wife a chance. She never knows when he is coming home, or, perhaps you would add, going away. Will you not sit down?"

Cheshire sank into a chair by her side. It was a quarter past eleven but he really felt that it was doubtful whether he could occupy his time until midnight more usefully than in a brief chat with Mrs. Florestan.

"Won't you have a cocktail?" he asked.

"I should love a champagne cocktail," she told him. "Not too much bitters."

"Have it without any at all," he suggested. "What's the good of spoiling good wine?"

"Very well," she agreed.

He ordered a bottle and made some reference to the music, which she ignored.

"I did not think I should see you again," she remarked. "You had a quarrel with Horace, did you not, after I left that night?"

"He was a trifle over-hospitable," Cheshire assented. "Didn't seem to like parting with me. What's become of that servant of yours—the one with the fringe?"

"She has disappeared," Mrs. Florestan confided a little bitterly. "They are all the same. You cannot find servants for small houses. What Horace keeps that wretched place on for I cannot imagine, when the firm give him a suite up here just to entertain his foreign customers in. I am a foreign customer, myself, at the moment," she added with a laugh. "I hate Kensington."

"Are you waiting for friends?" he asked.

"I have none," she answered. "I dress up and come and sit here most evenings just to watch the people arrive for dinner or supper."

"It seems scarcely an exciting life," he remarked.

"I have not the good fortune," she rejoined. "There is no one to make it exciting for me."

"Where is your husband?"

"Who knows? I wrote to the firm yesterday to enquire and incidentally to complain. Of his bills here I take no account. I come when I choose. I am established here now. They never ask for money. I pay none. I just sign. But I needed money for other purposes when I wrote to the firm." [188]

"What did they do about it?" he enquired curiously.

"Sent me an open cheque for two hundred pounds. Hoped it was enough. Assured me that my husband was deeply engaged upon some important contracts for the firm and that I might consider them my bankers if I needed more money. I sent them a batch of dressmakers' bills. I hope they liked it."

"He never asks you to help him in his work?" Cheshire observed blandly.

"I do not even know what his work is," she drawled.

Cheshire sipped his wine thoughtfully.

"Are you not sometimes curious?"

She looked at him with meditation in her large eyes—eyes of an uncertain colour—and a look from Mrs. Florestan was something worth remembering.

"I am afraid of my husband," she confessed.

"So am I," Cheshire admitted. "What a joke!"

"What should you do if he came in at this moment?" she asked.

"Run for my life," he assured her.

Once more the smile trembled at the corners of her full and shapely lips.

"That," she said, "I do not believe. I am sure that you would fight with him if it was necessary but I am sure that he would win."

"He seems to have had his own way with me pretty well up till now," Cheshire sighed.

"He will to the end," she told him. "Horace Florestan has been a mystery to me ever since we met. Why he married me I do not know. He simply told me that he intended to and he did. Every now and then he is my husband again, then he goes. He becomes a stranger. I am afraid of him. I never know when he is going to change. I never know when he is about to become a [189]

human being, but until he does, all that I do is wait, all that I feel is fear."

"A strange marriage," he murmured.

"You have said a true thing," she agreed. "No one knows how strange. Think—what is the greatest resource of a woman left like me? Reading? I cannot read. I will tell you why. There are no books written about men like my husband or women like me. I lose interest in this mob," she went on, with a wave of her hand. "They are all the same. I know just what they are going to do, how they feel, almost what they are going to eat. They are living the lives of ordinary human beings. Horace Florestan is not, and through him I am not. He is the Bluebeard of to-day. It is I who live in the cupboard. He locks the door. I bore holes and look out. That is how I see life."

He refilled her glass and his own, pushed his case towards her and held a match for her cigarette.

"Exactly what should you do if he walked in now?" he asked.

"Faint," she answered. "If our eyes met I should faint, because I should know that he understood what I was feeling."

"What are you feeling?"

She turned her head and looked at him. He forgot the heavy, clumsy woman he had first seen in that tawdry suburban sitting room. She seemed at that moment something wholly pagan, yet something with a queer quality of enticement. The light shone in her strange eyes, her lips were trembling.

"You are too little of a man, and I am too much of a woman, or you would know," she told him. **[190]**

The pause which followed, vibrant yet embarrassing, was curiously broken in upon. The man with the evil mouth, sallow complexion and jet black hair, seemed to appear from nowhere. As a matter of fact, he had left a party of friends who stood waiting for him upon the steps. Cheshire recognised him with amazement.

"Madame!" the newcomer exclaimed, as he made Mrs. Florestan a formal and tremulous bow. "Monsieur," he added with a glance towards Cheshire.

She looked at him lazily. There was distaste and also anger in her tone.

"What are you doing here, Mr. Ludini?"

"Madame, I am with friends," he answered. "I had not the thought of seeing you."

“Where is my husband?”

“No man living could ever answer that question unless he were within sight,” was the fearsome rejoinder.

“Why do you address me?”

“Because you have the courage which only fools have,” he answered. “Also your companion. He has had one escape. Next time he will not have the chance. You two together—it is more than formidable, that—it is disaster, if he should chance to come.”

“I have just heard your name for the first time,” Cheshire, who had made up his mind as to his course of action during the last few seconds, intervened. “I never heard it before and I have no wish to hear it again, but if you want to have supper with your friends to-night run along and join them. I have a fancy that it would not be difficult to place you in a police cell instead.”

“I took my risks when I addressed you,” the man replied, “but it would do you no good to adopt that attitude. I gave you credit for a certain amount of intelligence, which apparently you possess. I am powerless. I am less than a pawn in the game. Find my master, if you are looking for death. Keep away from him, and everything that belongs to him, and everybody who knows him, if you wish to live.” [191]

“Tragic but boring,” Deborah Florestan yawned. “Where is my husband?”

“No one knows. We never know,” he answered. “All that I can tell you is that it is a stroke of great good fortune that he is not here.”

Ludini seemed to disappear as silently and as swiftly as he had come. Cheshire leaned back in his chair and laughed.

“To think,” he exclaimed, “that that is the fellow who tried to stop my getting away from that damnable cellar of yours the other night! To think that I have let him go!”

“You are not a fool,” the woman said indifferently, “not in that way, at least. He could do you no further harm. The man you want is his master.”

“Take me to his master,” Cheshire proposed.

“Why?”

“For your own sake, for your greater comfort. Afterwards, the diamonds you wear so regally might be real ones.”

“I should be wearing them in my grave,” she told him.

He sipped his wine.

"You are becoming morbid."

She shook her head.

"I am not morbid. I am not a coward. I do not love my husband, but, God in heaven, how I fear him! He has a feeling for me," she went on. "I think that he would kill me if he thought that I had been unfaithful to him. All the same, I would fall at your feet and pray you—but what is the good? I am afraid. I should always be afraid." [192]

"I should like to see more of this extraordinary man," Cheshire remarked cheerfully. "He seems to appear and disappear at will, to behave, in short, as though he had wings underneath his coat, and to put the fear of God into everyone. That man Ludini who has just gone shivered as he spoke of his master. You yourself admit that he terrifies you."

"He terrifies me," she admitted, "because he lights fires that he cannot quench, because I have seen all those who have stood in his way go to their death. I would give everything a woman can give in life to be rid of that fear of him. Sometimes I believe that it will hold me in bondage till I die. . . ."

Joseph made one more effort. He had been called to a neighbouring table and he lingered before Cheshire.

"We are very nearly full up, sir," he announced. "The table I offered you still remains."

Cheshire glanced at his companion.

"Why not some supper?" he asked.

"Madame will find the music to-night delightful," Joseph said, bowing to her. "Presently Suzanne Dreyfus will sing."

Her eyebrows were gently raised as she looked towards Cheshire. He rose to his feet. She laid her finger upon his arm for a moment as she moved towards the stairs, but it was the shadow of fear rather than the joy of anticipation which walked with her into the supper room.

[193]

CHAPTER XXI

"Scarcely the usual gay crowd, Joseph," Cheshire remarked as he wrote out his order for supper and handed it to the maître d'hôtel.

The latter acquiesced sadly. He was an Italian, saving money fast, terrified lest any post might bring him his letters of recall.

"It is the fault of the newspapers, sir. The depression is always there. Did you see the placards to-night?"

"Never take any notice of them," Cheshire said.

"Nevertheless, they kill the spirit of gaiety in the people," Joseph insisted. "To-night the placards are speaking of a hitch in the conversations in one of the two capitals, another reports a deadlock in the other. At every table in this room at the present moment they talk of one thing only—the fear of war."

"You bring the caviar along, my friend," Cheshire directed, "and don't you worry your head as to whether there's going to be war or not. Even if there is, it won't mean the end of all things, you know."

Deborah Florestan leaned back in her chair with a sigh of content. Her eyes had penetrated into every corner of the room. There was not a soul visible whom she had ever seen before. She began to wonder whether this attractive companion of hers would invite her to dance. He certainly had the figure for it. It would be very pleasant.

"War is a thing I do not understand," she confided. "My husband, who rarely talks to me, said only a few days ago that he was making a great fortune for his firm out of people's fear of war, but that if war came they might easily lose it all again." [194]

"Quite right, too," her companion assented. "The Government would grab their profits back again."

She sighed.

"I should like my husband to make a great deal of money out of this fear of war that you speak of," she confessed, "leave it all to me and disappear."

"What do you mean by disappear?" he asked.

"Go somewhere where I would never see him again. It would be better if he died," she added complacently.

"Aren't you a trifle heartless?"

“I have no heart for my husband,” she admitted. “No more would you if you had lived with him for fifteen years, as I have.”

“How old are you?” he asked.

She seemed to find nothing unusual in his question.

“I am thirty-five,” she told him. “I was studying in London when the first bombers came over. I was not afraid then. I should not be afraid now. What I hate is the look on the faces of all the people. I think I was born to be gay. Horace has set his heel upon that spirit and it is wounded, but there is some of it left.”

“How does your husband make all this money for his firm out of the fear of war?”

“He sells all manner of things to the Government,” she replied. “He travels everywhere where there is steel or aluminium or nickel—anything that is needed in making aeroplanes or battleships. He buys and then he sells. He makes many enemies. People follow him about who mean evil. He himself is visited often by strange men who do strange things for him, and that is all I know, so ask me no more questions, please. He thought when you came to the house in Kensington that you were a spy. Perhaps you are. Perhaps I have done wrong in telling you as much as I have. The first time you asked me I told you that I knew nothing about his work. Somehow, now, I feel that I know you much better and it gives me pleasure to tell you the little I do know.” [195]

Cheshire laid down his cigarette.

“Do you care to dance?” he asked.

A light broke across her face. She seemed suddenly years younger. She rose to her feet at once.

“It will not weary you?”

“Not a bit of it,” he laughed. “I am out of practice, that’s all. That’s not going to matter, I can see.”

As a matter of fact, they were both good dancers, but the woman was superb. Notwithstanding her height and size, she was as light upon the floor as the slimmest of debutantes. She followed his movements as though by instinct. Looking at her unexpectedly, as they slowed up in one of the crowded corners, Cheshire felt almost puzzled. He was dancing with a very beautiful woman of a new type—Titian, Rubens, the painters of the first Spanish Madonnas, a curious medley of women in flowing robes and with superb limbs, passed through his mind. Certainly he had had no thoughts of this gallery of splendour when he had drunk that glass of sherry with Mrs. Florestan and fenced with her mocking questions at the little house in

Colville Terrace.

“Dancing gives you pleasure,” he remarked, when at last the music ceased and they returned to their places.

“Music and dancing,” she acknowledged quietly. “I have not danced for years. I began to think I should never dance again. It is like the commencement of a new life.”

“Can’t think how you kept up that beautiful sense of movement,” he went on. “Of course you know that you are a long way the best dancer in the room.”

“Am I?” she asked. “I never watched the others. I was so happy to be dancing myself.”

She paid him no compliments. He realised that she did not think it necessary. All the same, a slight change in her attitude made him almost uneasy. He decided that serious topics of conversation were best.

“Tell me,” he enquired abruptly. “I am not going to ask you any direct questions, but aren’t you ever curious about these Continental visits and secret journeys of your husband?”

She shook her head.

“They do not interest me.”

“I really believe,” he went on, helping himself to a cigarette, “that you are the first woman I have ever met in my life wholly devoid of the bump of curiosity.”

“I am one of the nicest women you ever met in your life, if only you would take the trouble to realise it,” she assured him.

“Even the very nicest are sometimes puzzling,” he persisted. “Tell me this, then—have you ever been curious as to why the police have not returned your car?”

She looked at him with unwilling suspicion in her eyes.

“Did you invite me to supper in order to ask me questions about my husband?” she asked him point-blank.

“I never had the faintest idea of inviting you to supper,” he told her, “until Joseph came and suggested it.”

She indulged in a faint grimace.

“It is humiliating,” she confessed, “that you preserve your character of always speaking the truth.”

“Friends always should,” he said. “Besides, there is more to be gained, as a rule, by speaking the truth than by telling falsehoods.”

"Shall we test that?"

"Well?" he acquiesced doubtfully.

"The first time I saw you you came to Colville Terrace accompanied by a police inspector. You yourself represented a department connected with the police, I think you told us. What are you really?" [197]

"A departmental overseer of unusual happenings."

"It sounds terrible," she said, "but it leaves me entirely ignorant."

"Is it confidence for confidence?"

"It might be if I knew anything."

"Very well, then," he proceeded. "I am really a sailor placed for a few months at the head of a department which keeps a watch on people who interest themselves tremendously in armaments at a critical time like this. Hence my interest in your husband."

"That does not account for my husband looking upon you as an enemy, does it?" she enquired.

"Not unless he was afraid I was trying to find out who had driven his car to St. George's Hospital last Sunday night."

"The night Sir Theodore Meldicott was shot," she murmured.

"The night he was shot—murdered," Cheshire assented. "Now, don't you think it is time I asked you a question or two?"

"Well?"

"Do you think your husband is a man who would commit a murder?"

She considered the point.

"I do not think he would hesitate for a moment if it was to his advantage."

"Well, that's frank, at any rate," Cheshire admitted. "Do you believe that he shot Sir Theodore Meldicott?"

"I do not believe or disbelieve," she answered. "I have not anything to go by. He certainly drove the car away that night. It might easily have been stolen, though, especially if he left it outside that terrible club of his." [198]

"Did he keep any firearms and ammunition in the house?"

"Not at Colville Terrace."

"Here, then?"

"Perhaps," she replied. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

"You had better go and search his rooms, then—267 to 269. Do not make a mistake, though. Number 269 is my apartment. You would like the keys?"

She drew them from her bag and laid them on the table. He avoided her eyes but he took them up and examined them.

"The larger one," she explained, "is for the door of the little hall leading into the salon. The two Yale keys are those of my room and his, one on either side."

He laid down the keys.

"The actual searching of rooms," he confided, "is not my job. I might send up an inspector."

"He will not find anything."

"And supposing I came myself?"

"You might be more fortunate."

"What I should like to find," he went on, acutely conscious of the tenseness of the moment but keeping his eyes idly watching the dancers, "is a cartridge with a peculiar casing, a casing of plain steel."

"I know nothing about firearms," she assured him calmly.

"You wouldn't like to look for me, I suppose?"

"Certainly not."

"Do you believe," he persisted, "that your husband could be capable of shooting a man with a bullet which is only used by desperate criminals, a bullet that if it lodges in a man's body anywhere, whether it is a vital spot or not, will inflict a mortal wound?" **[199]**

"I think," she replied, "that a bullet of that sort would appeal to Horace immensely. He is terribly cruel, you know. He thinks nothing of life or death in other people. He has no sympathy. He has no kindness."

"Then why do you hesitate to look and see if you can find a cartridge of this description in his rooms?"

Again he knew that she was looking at him but he refused steadily to turn his head.

"Because I think you should make the search," she answered

with a note of mockery in her tone. “Why should I run the risk because you have been kind to me for an hour? What do I gain by it? If you suspect that such a thing is to be found, I have made it easy for you to find it.”

He stretched out his hand, picked up the keys and slipped them into his pocket. She laughed quietly, almost, he fancied, happily. The disturbance remained in the atmosphere but the tenseness had passed.

“You would like to dance again?” he asked.

She made no reply but rose to her feet with a swift movement of effortless grace. Again she yielded herself altogether to her passionate love of dancing, and her almost fantastic skill. Her feet seemed scarcely to touch the floor. There was a look of supreme content in her eyes and the softened expression of her mouth. Only it seemed to him that now and then, at the corners, and when he paused for a moment to yield to the sway of the music, she drew a little closer to him. He was conscious of the grip of her fingers upon his shoulder. All the time he could feel her soft breathing upon his cheek. Then the leader of the orchestra came to the conclusion that three encores were sufficient. The music ceased. They made their way to their places. Cheshire’s bill was waiting upon his plate. Mechanically he signed it, mechanically he counted out the amount of the *pourboire*. Without any conscious impulse, he rose to his feet, helped her draw her ermine cape around her shoulders and followed her up the stairs. She was a pace or two ahead of him at the top and she led the way without hesitation to the lifts on the left-hand side. He followed her. The lift man bowed respectfully. They glided up to the fourth floor. Again she stepped out first and led the way down the corridor. Towards the end she waited.

“You have the keys,” she reminded him. **[200]**

He opened the door. She passed through the hall into the sitting room beyond, then she flung off her cape and turned round.

“That is my room,” she said, pointing to the right. “The one on the other side is Horace’s. I see that both doors are open. Which first?”

“I shall make my search,” he answered.

“Then I await the pleasure of Monsieur,” she remarked, holding out her hands.

She flung wide the door of her room, revealing a very delightful glimpse of pink satin furnishings, a softly burning light over the bed, a gentle current of pleasant air from the open window that looked out on the Thames. She came up to him and he felt her arms slowly encompassing his neck.

“Now, my man of adventures,” she whispered in his ear, “I ask you again—which first?”

“The cartridges.”

“Your minor search!”

He laughed, touched her cheek for a moment with his fingers and drew away.

“We shall see,” he said.

She was not wholly satisfied. She gripped at his arm.

“You shall kiss me once before I let you go,” she insisted. **[201]**

He kissed the eyes which had always intrigued him, felt the faint stir of her eyelashes beneath his lips and drew away—himself a little breathless.

“If you are too long,” she warned him, “I may come and see if I can help you. Listen, it is no good ransacking drawers and wardrobes. There is a small cupboard there built like a safe which I have always suspected, and you will have to be clever because I think there is something secret about the fastenings.”

He stepped back a little unsteadily and it was he who closed the door between them. In the sitting room he threw open the window and leaned out over the balcony breathing in the night air. He was still himself; still, he swore, he was himself—Guy Cheshire—the man whose life belonged to his country, the man who ran all risks for her. There was danger where he was. He knew that well enough. There was danger to himself, not only to his life but to everything that counted—to his self-esteem, to his proud passage through the days to come. Yet on the other hand, there was Florestan. If only he could find that one thing! If it took a thousand men—with that foul cartridge at Scotland Yard—Florestan would pass the rest of his days, as many days as he lived, anyway, in safe keeping. He paused to collect himself. His mind jumped about from place to place. He was ready to risk his life. Why should he mind risking the rest? It belonged to no one. Then the voices began to scream in his ears. To no one except himself. There was Sabine to be faced. How? As an all-conquering man or as one of the herd? Stupid to have cherished what he had cherished so long, madness to throw it away even for his country. “Hypocrite!” he murmured. These were real beats of his pulse, a real passion tearing in his veins, a real animal sense burning. . . .

Cheshire closed the window and entered Florestan’s sleeping apartment. He obeyed the instructions of the woman whom he had just left. He went straight to the cupboard built into the wall. There was no lock, only a solid panel. He slid it back, disclosing four drawers and a little space above. The four drawers were locked. In the space above was a row of small **[202]**

bottles, some of them half-emptied—cognac, whisky, Cointreau. He removed the bottles. The top space was bare. Then he tried the drawers again. They were firmly locked. Perhaps, if there had been ordinary keyholes there, anything to indicate a rational mode of opening them, he might have given up his task as hopeless, for the drawers themselves were of metal and would have yielded to no implement he could find. The absence of any place for the key, however, seemed in itself to convey a suggestion. He felt the back of the upper part of the cupboard, realised that the bottles which he had drawn out had had for their foundation two shelves. He tapped them. Below was hollow. He went all round the sides. He pulled them, he pushed them, he made every possible effort to discover their secret. In one of those four drawers below, in all probability, lay the evidence he so passionately desired. He knew quite well that nothing would induce him to leave the room until he had dealt with it, at whatever cost it might be. He went over the ground again, then, abandoning the subtle search of his fingers, he struck his hand with his clenched fist. At last he drew up a chair and sat down in front of the cupboard in despair. It seemed that nothing but sheer force would be of the slightest use.

The light, swift footsteps behind sent him swinging round, brought him swiftly to his feet. Deborah Florestan had entered the room. For the moment he was staggered. She had the appearance of a girl. Her great coils of hair had been released and—unexpectedly light in colour—hung over her shoulders. She was wearing a white negligee. She seemed somehow to have gained a finer quality of passionate and vivid humanity. Her lips smiled at him, her forehead was slightly wrinkled. **[203]**

“You do not succeed? You are a long, long time,” she complained.

“You see where I arrive,” he pointed out. “Those four drawers —they are of metal. There is no opening. With a crowbar I could force them from their places, with dynamite I could blow them up, but even a Samson could not move them with his bare fingers.”

She laughed mockingly.

“Poor dear man! Out of my way, please. I will show you something.”

She went down on her knees. In all his efforts to be fair to himself in later years, Cheshire’s cheeks sometimes burned as he confessed how the lines of her figure, the curve of her arm as she leaned forward, almost made him forget the sacredness of his mission. Her long fingers crept underneath the space between the drawers and the bottom of the cupboard. There was a little click. As he watched, the topmost drawer slid out of its place towards him. He gripped it. She stood upright.

“There you are,” she said. “I should have told you. How could you find out? You are only a dear, stupid man, is that not so?”

He looked into the drawer without speech. It was empty. He drew out the second. That also was empty. He drew out the third. There were two loose revolvers lying there and a box of cartridges. He drew out the fourth and there was a case, a brown leather case, with a brown buff inside. There was space for two revolvers of small size. Both were there—one clean, the other with a little dark edge to its muzzle and in the vacant space of the case there was an indentation which held a box of cartridges three-quarters full. Cheshire drew one out—the sheath was of glittering steel. He stood looking at it like a man who had lost all power of speech or movement. **[204]**

“You have found what you want?” the woman whispered. “I am cold.”

“I have found what I want,” he answered. “One minute.”

He took the revolver which showed signs of recent use, and slipped the box of cartridges into his pocket.

“Let me put everything back as it was,” Deborah Florestan begged. “Let me close the cupboard. We will get away from the room. I hate it here. In mine you will be safe.”

Cheshire laughed a little unnaturally. The revolver was his, the cartridges which fitted it—devilish messengers of death—were also his. His companion bent over the drawers. There was a click and they slid back. She closed the panel door of the cupboard and turned slowly towards him. Her hands rested upon his shoulders. Even in later life he wondered just what she was about to say, for in those strange eyes there was a light which he could never have imagined, there was a trembling even in that first word which came from her lips.

“Dear—” she faltered.

That was the beginning and end of the speech, for at the same moment they heard voices in the corridor, the grating of a key—a passkey, in all probability—in the outside door. Then there was an instant’s pause—afterwards a knocking. The woman drew slowly away. Her voice as she spoke had a certain terrible hopelessness but it was steady and scarcely raised above a whisper.

“Someone has entered,” she said, “but I drew the bolt of the sitting-room door. They can come no further. Is this what God sends instead of hell?” **[205]**

There was agony in her eyes as they lingered upon his. She was shivering all over.

“I do not wish anything to happen to you,” she went on. “All I shall ask you is to remember. Look behind you.”

He obeyed. There was another door.

"That leads through his bathroom. You open the door of that and you are in a side passage. Exactly opposite you are the service stairs. Go!"

"And leave you?"

She looked around.

"Nothing can hurt me more than having to say that one word—go," she told him.

He shook his head. Then he realised that she was passionately, madly in earnest.

"Nothing is to be gained by your staying," she insisted as the knocking came once more. "At my own pace I return to the sitting room, I pass into my own room, I wake up and admit whoever it may be. I have no wish to have my body torn to pieces, as my spirit and mind will be from now on. Go!"

"I can protect you against anything in the world," he assured her. "I have authority at my back and a gun in my hand. I will take you away with me."

Her face lightened. She leaned forward and kissed him.

"Dear—my dear," she said. "I shall be thankful all my life that those were your last words before you went. Now—go!"

A sudden fire swept through him.

"No!" he cried fiercely. "Listen, you can pass through the sitting room to your bedroom. I shall unbolt the sitting room door myself when you are safe." **[206]**

She shook her head.

"Nothing can explain your presence here," she said. "Nothing will keep from him later on the sight of that empty drawer."

Again there came the knocking. The terror in her face was an inspiration to Cheshire. The thought that he had been so near leaving her shamed him. He smiled as he led her into the sitting room and saw her enter her own room.

"Lock your door," he whispered.

She obeyed him. He waited for a few seconds, he even fancied that he heard the creak of her bed. He closed the door leading from Florestan's bedroom, straightened his tie, glanced at the loading of the revolver and withdrew the bolt of the sitting-room door. . . .

One man, and one man only, was standing there waiting—a man in a black overcoat and a black Homburg hat, with his hands in his pockets. There was no appearance of haste about him, no sign of excitement, nor was there any concealment in his person or dress. It was Florestan who entered the sitting room with a grim smile upon his lips.

"My friend Admiral Cheshire," he remarked. "I have been looking forward to another meeting with you. I have been curious for a long time to know how you escaped from those cords. Is it Ludini who has lied to me or did some Good Samaritan crawl through the cellar window and show you the way to safety?"

As he spoke, he was divesting himself of coat and hat. He threw them upon the table. He appeared to be unarmed. There was nothing truculent about his voice or his bearing, but beyond a doubt it was Florestan.

CHAPTER XXII

"Queer meeting, this," Florestan remarked as he seated himself in an easy chair. "Mind if I ring for some ice?" he added, reaching out towards the bell.

"You can do what you like, I suppose, in your own apartment," Cheshire answered.

"Of course, of course," the other assented. "To tell you the truth, I had forgotten for the moment that they were my own apartments. You seem so completely at home here. May I ask—would you think it an impertinence—but is your visit here the visit of shall we say a Lothario? Have you, in short, been calling upon my wife, or have you come here on some burglarious exploit?"

"I know nothing of your wife," was the curt reply. "I came here to see if I could discover any evidence which would enable me to put you promptly under arrest for the murder of Sir Theodore Meldicott."

Florestan nodded understandingly, almost sympathetically. He showed no signs of emotion.

"I cannot think why you liaison officers between Scotland Yard and all those mysterious departments of the Navy and Military, I cannot think why you choose to do your own low-down work instead of leaving it to the underlings. You should use your brains to discover the likely places for your men to search and let them do the searching. If you had gone upon that principle you would not be in the parlous position which you occupy at the present moment."

Cheshire nodded approval.

"Spoken like a master," he admitted. "It is not the police themselves who want to butt in. It is we who are new to the job. We cannot keep from interfering. I should have telephoned, of course, to my friends at Scotland Yard and I should have said: 'Mr. Florestan is away from the rooms he occupies at the Milan Hotel in the name of Copeland. Kindly search them and see if you can find any explosive cartridges which would fit a No. 5 Webley revolver.' Instead of that I came myself." [208]

"You should not have done that," Florestan remonstrated. "You have submitted yourself to unreasonable risk and you have compromised my wife."

"Your wife has nothing to do with it," Cheshire rejoined, slipping into the opposite easy chair but keeping his hand in his

jacket pocket. “I came here on my own and I was on the point of departure when you knocked at the door.”

“Too bad that I should have to knock at the door of my own apartment, isn’t it?” Florestan complained. “However, this meeting grows even more interesting. I am learning how glibly and smoothly the real English gentleman can lie.”

“I can do better than that if you give me time,” Cheshire assured him. “I think you will agree that the principal thing we have to discuss is the fact that my search was successful. I have in my pocket the revolver with which Meldicott was shot and a few of the cartridges out of the clip which ensured his death.”

“You are a very brave man,” Florestan said, “to sit there and tell me that.”

“It does not require much courage,” Cheshire replied, “because if you showed the slightest signs of slipping either of your hands into any one of your pockets I should still have your life in my keeping before you could produce a weapon.”

“Obviously,” Florestan remarked. “I am sitting here to be shot at, if you fancy shooting people sitting down. On the other hand, I do not think that you will do it. Nor do I for one moment admit that any weapon you have found is mine, that I have ever used explosive cartridges or that I know anything about the killing of Theodore Meldicott.” **[209]**

“You may be able to prove that,” was the dry rejoinder. “It would make me look quite foolish if you did, but in the meantime I suggest that we leave off talking and try a little action. It will not be long, then, before you have an opportunity of denying my accusation.”

The waiter brought in the ice. He was on the point of leaving the room when Cheshire stopped him.

“Would it not be better,” he suggested to Florestan, “if you ordered also some whisky and a siphon of soda, or whatever it is you wish to drink?”

“I have them both in my bedroom.”

“Yes, but consider this,” Cheshire continued: “I am not likely to allow you to go into your bedroom to find them. There is something there in the third drawer which might interfere with my plans.”

“So clever of you,” the other observed, scratching his chin. “Yes, of course. There is a very handy Colt in that third drawer. You are afraid I might have got that instead of the whisky.”

“Why should I run the risk?” Cheshire demanded.

“Bring a bottle of whisky and a siphon,” Florestan ordered from the waiter.

“Also,” Cheshire added, “my compliments to Mr. Bousson, if he is on duty, or the deputy manager, and ask him if he will step this way, together with the hotel detective.”

Florestan turned his head lazily.

“If I were you, waiter,” he enjoined, “I should forget the latter part of that message.” [210]

“Certainly, sir,” the man replied.

“You will deliver my message exactly as I gave it to you,” Cheshire interjected.

The waiter took no notice. He left the room without turning his head. Florestan smiled.

“Now, my midnight visitor,” he went on, “you perhaps understand why I keep rooms in the centre of civilisation and feel myself, generally speaking, secure. That waiter is chosen by me, so is the valet on this floor, so are the chambermaids. The lift-man has also claims upon me. That is why I am faithful to my rooms 267 to 269.”

“The fact that the servants are in your pay won’t get you very far,” Cheshire observed calmly. “You may as well know what’s coming to you, Florestan. I have special powers, as I daresay you know, under a recent Home Office order, and I arrest you on the charge of murder. I am now going to ring up for a sergeant of the police.”

“This is tedious,” Florestan murmured, “but faintly amusing. Go ahead.”

Cheshire took the receiver from the telephone instrument and demanded the Exchange.

There was a moment’s delay. A man’s voice answered.

“Scotland Yard!” Cheshire said.

A wall of silence. Cheshire waited a few minutes then laid down the receiver.

“Telephone, too,” he observed.

“Switched onto a special line of my own,” Florestan explained. “If I were interested in your message I could set things right immediately. Under the circumstances, however, you understand—no telephone.”

“Well, I don’t know that it matters very much,” Cheshire remarked.

Florestan continued to lounge in his chair, his arms hanging over its sides, his expression easy and contemptuous. Cheshire returned to his own place and sat watching him for a moment in speculative silence. [211]

"Your methods interest me," Florestan observed thoughtfully. "By the by, is it not rather a strain having to keep your eyes fixed so intently upon my hands? See, I will make it more comfortable for you."

He clasped his fingers behind his head. In his new position he had the air of a man completely relaxed.

"You see," he went on, speaking in his ordinary tone, "your position is a little difficult. You cannot sit there and take pot shots at me. It is outside the rules of the game and it would be cold-blooded murder. You cannot say to yourself, well, I shall just wing him so as to render him useless in a struggle, because you know that the cartridges contain poisoned bullets and that it would be equally murder to shoot me in the arm or to shoot me through the heart. You are probably asking yourself at the present moment what you shall do. We are men of equal strength, I should say, although once I surprised and got the better of you. I have, I think, a longer reach and I am certainly very quick on my feet. So long as you sit there with a weapon of death in your hand you have the advantage of me. Directly you move and come nearer you run risks. Are you going to tire me out? Are you going to sit there all night, I wonder? Why not call for my wife and ask for her advice? She is really a very clever woman, although at times she seems stupid."

"Thank you," Cheshire remarked. "You have quite finished?"

"For the moment—yes."

Cheshire rose to his feet. He drew the revolver from his pocket and pointed it steadily at Florestan.

"And now?" the latter asked. [212]

Facing him, Cheshire walked slowly backwards towards the door of the bedroom. Florestan watched him without any sign of movement or concern. Cheshire reached the door and with his eyes still fixed upon the other he drew the key from his pocket with his left hand and turned it in the hole. The door remained immovable.

"Careless of you to have closed that door," Florestan observed. "It has a double spring lock—a little affair of my own invention. You might not believe it, but that door is easy enough to open if you know how. Pity, isn't it?"

Cheshire was not to be diverted into speech. His eyes never left Florestan.

"You see," the other went on, "I have had to think out what I

should do in many varying emergencies and prepare for them. This is one. The door opposite, as you may or may not know, leads into the bedchamber of my wife. It is her invariable custom to sleep with her door bolted. Besides, I know you too well to believe that you would willingly disturb the slumbers of a lady."

Still Cheshire remained silent. Nothing distracted his attention for a single moment from the figure in the easy chair. It seemed to him that he had almost sensed the tensing of the muscles. The man was ready to spring at any time. He moved on towards Mrs. Florestan's door and he was rewarded at last for his vigil. For a single second there was apprehension in the other's face. The mocking smile had left his lips. He leaned a little forward.

"You must not try me too high, Mr. Gunman!" he cried out. "Greater cowards than I have taken risks when they have seen men trying to enter their wives' bedrooms. Leave that alone!"

Cheshire's eyes never left his adversary's face but with his left hand he inserted the key and turned it. The door yielded at once. He passed through and slammed it. What followed was a matter of breathless seconds. Deborah, still in her white negligee, was standing only a few feet away from him. She pointed to the door on the other side of the bed. She spoke in a curiously low whisper but every word was distinct. **[213]**

"Both doors are open. Turn to the left."

He was through the first door, through the second and out in the corridor before he heard her voice raised in a cry of well-simulated alarm. There was still no other sound. There was no sign of Florestan. Cheshire ran lightly to the end of the corridor, down two flights of service stairs, into the main corridor. A few seconds later he was in the hall porter's office with the telephone instrument in his hand.

"Give me Scotland Yard," he cried.

There was a brief silence, then a voice at the other end.

"Scotland Yard speaking."

"Admiral Cheshire, XYZ. Florestan in 267 to 269 Milan Hotel is trying to escape. I have a warrant to apprehend him. Bring a squad at once."

The answer came brisk and alert.

"Understood, sir. Squad already summoned."

Cheshire rang off. In a moment he was connected with the manager's office.

"Admiral Cheshire speaking. Florestan, registered here as

Henry Copeland, in 267-269, is wanted by Scotland Yard. Murder charge. A squad is on the way here to arrest him. Have all exits blocked for the next quarter of an hour. Do you hear me?"

"Certainly, Admiral," was the prompt reply. "We will do as you say at once."

[214]

In rather less than five minutes Cheshire, with several plain-clothes men, and Bousson, the manager of the hotel, arrived at the outside of Florestan's suite. There were already two lift men and the hotel detective in the corridor. The latter answered Cheshire's unspoken enquiry.

"No one has left the suite, sir," he announced. "We were here within a minute of your message."

They opened the outside door and passed through into the sitting room. It was empty. The door of Florestan's bedroom was now open but there was no sign of any occupant there. Then Cheshire knocked at the door of Mrs. Florestan's room.

"Come in!" a sleepy voice bade him.

She turned on the light by the side of her bed as Cheshire and the Inspector unlocked her door. She sat up, looking at them with wide-open eyes.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked.

"Your husband is wanted, Mrs. Florestan," Cheshire replied.

"My husband?" she repeated. "He is not here. You can see for yourself that he is not here."

The Inspector walked round the apartment. He threw open the cupboards, he searched the bathroom. It was clear that there was no possible place of concealment.

"When did you last see your husband?" Cheshire asked quietly.

Mrs. Florestan shook her head.

"I have not seen him at all, to-night," she replied. "I thought that I heard his voice a few minutes ago. I called out but there was no answer."

[215]

The little company retired. There was suddenly a call from Florestan's room. They all trooped back into it. One of the squad who had remained there pointed towards the window. It was half-way open and a current of cold air was entering. They hurried to it and looked down into the abyss below. Bousson, with a sudden exclamation, opened the window wider and stepped out onto the balcony. Within a couple of feet were the iron steps and balustrade of the fire escape.

“When Mr. Copeland, or Florestan, as you call him, took these rooms years ago, he had that connecting handrail made,” Bousson pointed out. “He said the only terror he had in life was of fire.”

Cheshire looked downwards into the gulf of blackness. The Inspector was already at the telephone. A thin crowd from the hotel was already gathered below. Too late. Once more, Florestan had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXIII

London, during the course of the next three or four days, drifted into what was really a state of subdued panic. No one doubted any longer but that England was upon the brink of war. The conversations in the two great capitals of Europe were still being continued, it was true, but progress in both places was almost at a standstill and the air was thick with rumours as to the indignities to which the British plenipotentiaries were being subjected. Questions asked in the House of Commons ended in an uproar. It was formally moved that the British envoy to one of the capitals be instructed to break off negotiations and return to his own country. The motion was lost but its effect was serious. The Premier sent for Lord Fakenham and on the following day made a statement in the House. It was made in reply to a question by a former Cabinet Minister as to whether the Premier's attention had been drawn to the fact that violent propaganda against England was being carried on all over Europe and it was common knowledge that two of the countries in which it was state-directed were preparing for war. The Prime Minister rose to reply to the question amidst a deep and thrilling silence. He regretted very much that the question should have been asked, as, in times of crisis, such as he admitted now existed, reticence was the most politic and most dignified method of meeting the columns of falsehood and misrepresentation which were appearing day by day in certain foreign journals. He denied that the Government considered war imminent. He refused to believe that any real cause for it existed. If, however, we were dragged into a struggle, he could assure the House generally that England was in a position to deal with any form of attack which could be made.

At this juncture it was very nearly necessary to adjourn the sitting owing to the long-continued uproar and the fact that the Speaker was only able with the greatest difficulty to retain his authority. In due course, however, it was possible for the Prime Minister to continue. [217]

It was true, he admitted, that there had been grave delays in rearming the country to the fullest extent and they had suffered enormously through the cowardly murder of Sir Theodore Meldicott, who was the most energetic member of the Council of Defence and whose works were carrying out schemes of unparalleled importance with incredible speed. He was happy, however, to tell the House that the governing body of the various associated industries of which Sir Theodore Meldicott had been the head were carrying on, notwithstanding the catastrophe that had happened, without a day's loss of work and were following out exactly the lines laid down by the deeply lamented head of the concern. He would tell them and the world, as an indication of what Great Britain was capable,

that in one portion of the works alone, the newly adopted tanks were being produced at the rate of a hundred a day, a feat in engineering which had never been equalled before in any country. Furthermore, it was utterly unnecessary for Englishmen, however deeply they desired peace, to fear war. He begged the House to reassure itself. If the nation were forced to put out their full strength he had no hesitation in saying that their combined scheme of offence and defence, which had now been adopted and by which any attack upon this country would be met, was one in which the Council of Defence had the most complete and absolute confidence. The Premier therefore begged the people of Great Britain to continue with their daily tasks calmly and without any sense of panic, which he assured them was the spirit in which the Cabinet and the responsible statesmen of the country were proceeding with the needful preparations for defence.

It was necessary, afterwards, to adjourn the House, and the Premier himself left a few minutes later by one of the private exits. The Press of the entire country that night and on the following morning changed its whole tone. By some chance, which seemed almost like a miracle, for the first time for weeks the sun shone. The weather changed to a morning of brilliant sunshine. Tubes and buses and all the great arteries of life which flowed into the City were crowded with men reading their papers and talking in a new spirit. Cheshire spent two hours that morning closeted with the Chairman of the Council of Defence. He made his way back to his suite of rooms in the Admiralty in a very thoughtful frame of mind. He passed a quarter of an hour or so dealing with the little pile of letters which were waiting upon his desk, then he sent for Hincks. The young man made his appearance within a few minutes. He was looking tired, but there was all the fervour of a mighty effort in his speech and deportment. Cheshire pointed to the chair which he kept by the side of his desk for visitors. **[218]**

“Sit down, young fellow,” he invited. “I can see you have been sticking to it.”

“I hope it has not been in vain, sir.”

Cheshire looked across at the closed door.

“The Council have adopted my scheme, Hincks,” he confided. “There was a great deal of opposition, but, anyhow, they have adopted it. All that we need now is the assembling of a flotilla for the Kiel Canal work and another one for Genoa, together with the course of the Air Fleet from Malta.” **[219]**

“I am at work on that now, sir,” Hincks answered in a tone of great relief. “Thank God they are going through with it. I gathered that they meant to, after reading last night’s papers.”

“The Premier was wonderful,” Cheshire said quietly. “Fakenham has done his job. There is only one thing I fear.”

The young man leaned forward.

"Florestan?" he murmured.

Cheshire assented.

"He must have been working up for this for years," he remarked. "The Government have taken over the firm, temporarily at any rate. They seem to be doing business with every one of our subsidised factories, as well as with the Naval departments. Florestan is a very dangerous fellow and it is obvious that he has his suspicions. However, it is of no use thinking about that. I am working out the Kiel Canal scheme myself. I know every inch of the place. When shall you have finished with the Mediterranean?"

"To-morrow night, sir."

"To-morrow night," Cheshire repeated. "I shan't be sorry to have this job off my shoulders, whatever happens."

Hincks made no direct reply. His thoughts seemed to be far away. Suddenly he collected himself.

"Will you permit me, sir," he ventured, "to take what I feel to be a great liberty?"

"Be careful, Hincks," Cheshire advised him.

"It is a question I wish to ask, sir."

"You may ask it if you insist," his Chief assented. "I need not remind you that it is a somewhat unusual thing in the Service to ask questions of your superior officer." **[220]**

"Our work, sir, has been unusual," the young man pointed out. "I shall have no peace of mind until I ask you this."

"Well?"

"The Contessa Elida Pelucchi—does she know the truth?"

Cheshire looked at his companion not unkindly.

"She does," he confided. "As a matter of fact, I think I may say that the events of the last week have done away with a great deal of the reluctance which at first she quite naturally felt."

"May I ask in what way, sir?"

"Florestan, working for her country, seems to have been a little tactless," Cheshire replied. "That is all I have to say on the subject, but you must remember that both the Contessa and her sister have a certain amount of Anglo-Saxon blood in their veins. The greater part of her life the Contessa has spent with English people or Americans, and it is possible that the present

government of her country, although excellent in many ways, may not meet with her approval. Let it stay at that, Hincks. We have reached the end of it for good or for evil. To-morrow night will close your work in this special department. The next day I will have a talk with you about your future."

"You are much kinder to me than I deserve, sir," he acknowledged.

Cheshire pointed to the door.

"Back to work now," he enjoined. "Don't overdo it but remember that I shall be ready for you to-morrow night at any time and if you need help I am here. I shall be working at my own charts and plans until midnight to-night and most of to-morrow. The way has been prepared for their reception. The secret council will make their decision as soon as they have examined them. You can see how important it is that there should be no hitch in their despatch. If they accept them it will be peace; if Florestan has got ahead of us, if for any reason whatever they discard them, it will be war. You and I, Hincks —it rests with us." [221]

The young man took his leave. Cheshire sent for his typist-secretary. She came noiselessly into the room, as always, her notebook and pencil in her hand. Cheshire pointed to the pile of letters.

"You have been through these?" he asked.

"There is nothing which requires your attention, sir," she said. "They are mostly invitations, autographs, people begging to call about matters that belong to other departments. There are only two I did not open."

She laid them before him.

"Take the others away, then," he enjoined. "Tell them to prepare Number Three Chart Room for me. Have all materials, measures and reference books there, also the latest charts we have of Genoa Harbour. Have everything ready for me in half an hour."

"In Number Three you said, sir?"

He nodded.

"I shall not need an assistant," he continued, "but be careful that I have all the necessary materials. I shall also require a large-scale map of the Kiel Canal. I should like the one that was compiled and came to us from Rotterdam."

The girl left him alone. The first letter he opened was in large bold handwriting, sprawling from one side of the double sheet to the other. The heading was the Milan Hotel. There was no date or formal commencement. [222]

I am in despair because I fear that you may believe I led you deliberately into a trap. I had no thought of my husband's returning. His arrival was as great a shock to me as to you. You drove him, I hear, to leave the hotel by the fire escape, but he got the better of you, as he always will. He is not human, that man. Let your police headquarters take care of him. You have not a chance.

I wish to see you. I can scarcely hope that you will return here. It must be when and where you will.

DEBORAH.

P.S. I am sending you a newspaper cutting from to-night's paper. This is another instance of that man's malevolence.

He opened the cutting and read:

The body of the young woman who was found in the Regent's Canal last week has been identified as that of Rosa Bland. She was recently engaged as a domestic servant in the employ of Mrs. Horace Florestan of Colville Terrace, Kensington. There is still no clue as to whether she committed suicide or was the victim of foul play.

Cheshire's face grew hard as he read the few lines. He placed the cutting in his pocket-book. The second envelope he opened was heavily sealed. He cut open the flap of the envelope, drew out a stiff sheet of faintly tinted lavender notepaper, and read: **[223]**

Guy, my dear,

Come and tell me at once, please, whether it is something we are doing which has brought about this uproar. Sabine was talking to Broccia for over an hour last night and I have not seen her look so cheerful for ages. Even my dear brother-in-law has lost his lugubrious expression. I am opening a small Art Show at four o'clock at Number 73a, Rite Street, Chelsea. Come and fetch me away and buy a picture.

ELIDA.

P.S. May I send my love to Ronnie?

Cheshire drew a sheet of paper towards him and wrote a few lines in his neat, precise handwriting:

My dear Elida,

To-day I am a prisoner—to-morrow also. On Thursday I shall fetch you from your Picture Show, which I suppose will continue open for a few days, at the more human hour of six o'clock.

Ever yours,
GUY.

P.S. I will deliver your message.

He rung for a messenger and despatched the note, then he made his way to the little chart room he kept for himself, took off his coat, put on an overall and mounted a stool. For five hours he worked without stopping, safe from any manner of intrusion by reason of the framed notice which hung outside the door. When at last weariness came, he locked up all that he had done in a small safe let into the wall, washed his hands and bathed his head in the small lavatory attached to the room. Half an hour later he was drinking tea and eating buttered toast in the private card room of the St. George's Club. On the other side of the table Sir Herbert Melville was seated, similarly engaged. The two men were alone in the room. The Deputy Commissioner, who had been exceedingly blunt, was very much in earnest.

"I don't want you to misunderstand me, Cheshire," he said. "Our affiliation has been tremendously useful and we can pride ourselves upon having done some wonderful work. Where you have needed our help you have always had it. All the same, I am not entirely satisfied about this Florestan business." **[224]**

"Then you are hard to satisfy," was the terse rejoinder. "Some days ago I passed over into safe-keeping at Scotland Yard the revolver with which Florestan shot poor Meldicott, and a case of the rotten cartridges—very easily identified. With the evidence of the car, you already have a clear case."

"Yes, but we have not got Florestan," Melville said drily.

"Admittedly, but you must agree that I did some good work that night, nevertheless. I came across Mrs. Florestan, who I thought might know something of his whereabouts, gave her supper, danced with her. Could your most zealous detectives have done more than that? I took her up to the apartments and I did what I cannot help thinking that your men ought to have done long ago—I searched them. I found the revolver and I found the cartridges."

"And nearly got yourself into a hell of a mess," Melville grunted.

"Would you have missed the chance?" Cheshire asked. "Not on your life! If I didn't catch Florestan, I got the next best thing—the evidence. As regards the former, I suppose I handled the matter stupidly, but it's not easy to see how I could have done

otherwise. The fellow was unarmed. I could not shoot him. I didn't see any sense in a scrap fight. I never thought he could get away from the hotel. Fire escapes! Who thinks of that sort of thing outside the cinema? I had your men in the rooms two minutes after I left. Both lifts, the main stairway, the service stairs and every exit from the hotel was guarded. What more could I have done?"

"I am not complaining," Melville said, a little subdued, "but you must remember even that car with its false numbers, and the possession of the revolver and the cartridges, is not final evidence. We might prove that it was the revolver with which the trick was done and it was one of those cartridges that hit Meldicott, but we have still to prove that it was Florestan who pulled the trigger." [225]

Cheshire shrugged his shoulders.

"Your chaps can frame him up when they get hold of him," he remarked. "You've got your records round at the Yard. I can double them for you. He has sold the Admiralty material that he knew was bad. We put him on our suspected list, and if he was not going to hang for Meldicott's murder, he would have been shot as a spy before very long."

"What about his wife?"

"Sorry I can't introduce you," Cheshire replied. "She is an amazing woman—amazing in appearance, manners and her way of talking, but I can tell you one thing, she is ready to give Florestan away for what she knows. The only trouble is that I do not think she knows much. He seems to have kept his life a closed book against everyone."

"Seeing her again?" Melville enquired.

Cheshire considered the point.

"Yes, I think so," he admitted. "There was a poor girl drowned in the Regent's Canal a short time ago who has just been identified as a domestic servant at Florestan's Kensington house. That's the girl who cut my ropes in the cellar and disappeared from the car outside the police station, you know."

"I remember," Melville observed. "And you had not seen her since?"

"Not a sign—but you see from this cutting what has happened to her. I want to find out whether she has any people and arrange for her having a decent funeral, and that sort of thing." [226]

Melville made a note in his pocket-book.

"We'll see to that end of the affair for you," he promised, "but we are badly stuck up about Florestan, Cheshire. None of our men seem to have a line on him at all and there's not a soul

who saw him come down that fire escape."

"I have turned Florestan over to you for the immediate present," Cheshire announced. "It is not that I am not desperately anxious to bring him in, it is not that I don't realise he is a hideous danger to us, but for twenty-four hours I am busy on an even bigger job."

"Secretive devil, aren't you?" Melville observed.

Cheshire finished his tea and lit a pipe.

"I hear Fakenham's voice," he said, "and here comes Prestley. Good egg, we shall get a rubber, after all. I have had to lay off my work waiting for a cable from Singapore. Come along," he added, rising to his feet and making for the card table. "Here's the newspaper man looking as pleased as Punch. He will want us to believe that he himself wrote that leading article which has made the nation joyful."

"Soldiers may fight," Fakenham remarked, lighting his cigar, "and sailors, too, may make a show of it, but it is the Press that always steps in and saves the country."

CHAPTER XXIV

There was a look of concern upon the valet's face as he entered his master's salon in the Milan Court that evening. He came over to the table where Cheshire was writing.

"Well, what is it?" the latter asked without looking up. "You know my orders."

"There's a lady here who wishes to see you urgently, sir," he announced.

"Worse and worse," was the gruff comment.

"If I have done wrong, sir, I am very sorry. The lady's name is Florestan—Mrs. Horace Florestan."

Cheshire laid down his pen and swung round in his chair.

"Do you mean to say that she is here now?" he demanded, with sudden interest in his tone. "You are a wonderful chap, Greyes," he added with a kindly smile. "Always know when to disobey orders, don't you? You have done a jolly sensible thing this time, let me tell you. Show the lady in."

"Very good, sir."

He hurried out to the inner hall of the suite and in a moment the door of the apartment was thrown open.

"Mrs. Florestan to see you, sir."

She crossed the floor very casually, smothered in furs—there was an east wind blowing outside—and wearing a turban hat with a half veil. Cheshire rose to his feet and, although kindly, there was something faintly ironical in his bow.

"You honour me, my dear lady," he said. **[228]**

She was entirely composed, glanced round the room, selected a comfortable easy chair not too far from his desk and sank into it pensively.

"Why did you not answer my note?" she demanded.

"For at least a dozen reasons," he replied. "One may do, perhaps. I had an idea that you might have left, and all letters in that case addressed to you would go with your husband's to Scotland Yard. I could not bear the idea of the minions of that establishment smiling at my outpourings."

"So that was the sort of letter you were going to write to me, was it?"

He sighed.

“Why not? The last time we met you probably saved my life. Now I shall not have to write you a letter of thanks. You are here. That is better.”

“You are glad to see me?”

“More than glad—delighted.”

“Then give me a cigarette and tell me, if you please, why.”

He handed her the box of cigarettes, held his lighter steadily in front of the one she selected, and resumed his seat.

“Because I want your husband’s address.”

She laughed—a deep but not unpleasant expression of mirth. She had raised her veil since she had commenced to smoke and again Cheshire wondered what a great sculptor would have made of her mouth.

“Well, I think I can surprise you, even if I do not give you his postal address or telephone number,” she replied. “An hour ago I talked with him.”

“Viva voce?”

“On the telephone.” **[229]**

“Where was he?”

“Rome.”

“I shall have to talk to the Deputy Commissioner about this,” Cheshire muttered with a gesture of despair. “He never should have been allowed to reach Rome.”

“I will say this for my husband, although I dislike him immensely,” she confided. “If he wants to go to a place he goes there.”

“He didn’t catch cold struggling down that outside fire escape, I hope?” Cheshire asked with gentle sarcasm.

“I have never known him have a cold in his life,” she answered. “I have never heard him plead guilty to a headache. I have never seen him ill. I have never known him consult a doctor. He seems somehow removed from all human weaknesses.”

“What did he ring up about?” he enquired. “To wish you good night?”

“Just an effort of gallantry, I suppose,” she remarked. “Anyway, it cost him nothing. He spoke on a private wire.”

Cheshire shook his head.

"I am having nothing whatever to do with that effort of gallantry," he scoffed. "Please be reasonable and tell me what he wanted."

"He rang up to ask me to go to Regent's Park House, enquire there for the Contessa Elida Pelucchi and to give her a message."

"So you came to me?"

"So I came to you," she agreed. "The new order of things. I hope you approve."

She drew off her gloves, and smoothing them out laid them upon the table.

"So I came to you," she repeated reflectively. "Tell me, is it not the custom when a lady calls upon you at this hour of the evening to offer her an *apéritif*?" **[230]**

Cheshire leaned over and touched the bell.

"I should like an Italian Vermouth with Campari Bitters," she went on.

"Sounds good," he admitted. "I will try one myself. We have the Campari, I think, Greyes?" he asked as the servant entered the room.

"Yes, sir. I will mix the drinks at once."

"There are times," Cheshire explained as Greyes closed the door, "when we make our own cocktails. This is one of them. So you have a message to take to the Contessa Elida Pelucchi, and you came here with it. That is a very gracious action on your part."

"I do not think," she told him, "that my husband intended you to share the knowledge of that message. In fact his only reference to you was rather blasphemous."

"I really cannot see why," Cheshire objected. "I consider he is one up on me. When I think of the hours I spent in your miserable cellar, in that rotten house of yours, I am inclined to believe that my dislike of him will last throughout my life. Of course," he went on, "it is quite true that I did force him to descend an outdoor fire escape in most inclement weather, and if you like to give me that message and save me the worry of going over to Regent's Park I might consider balancing the account, so far as I personally am concerned. What do you think about that?"

"Well, what I think is," she confided, "that you must like me to be here or you would not be so long-winded. Who cares **[231]**

whether your accounts with Horace are balanced or not? I consider that he is a most unpleasant type of man. I cannot imagine why he married me and I am dizzy with bewilderment when I ask myself why I married him. I have my sane moments, of course, but I can assure you that I spend most of my days, and nights, too, in a state of terror when I even think about him."

Greyes came quietly into the room bearing on a silver salver two glasses filled with a most fascinating-looking decoction. The visitor sipped hers and approved. Cheshire followed suit.

"Just a shade on the sweet side," he remarked, "but excellent, all the same. That will do, Greyes. I will ring if I want you again."

The man took his leave. Deborah Florestan lit another cigarette.

"My friend," she began, looking steadfastly at her companion, "has it not occurred to you, I wonder, that our intercourse is rather a one-sided affair?"

"In what way?"

"Well, I consider that I have given you a great deal of valuable information," she said. "I have also, in all probability, saved your life. Now you are asking me, in the language of the novelists, to betray my husband's confidence."

"But, my dear lady," he expostulated, "think what I have done for you!"

She looked at him steadily. Again that puzzling mouth of hers intrigued him.

"Well, what have you done for me?" she asked.

"I stood you a very excellent supper the other night, I accepted your invitation to visit your rooms, after distinct assurances from you that your husband was nowhere about, and I then went through several very uncomfortable moments wondering whether he was going to kill me or I was going to kill him. Notwithstanding all this I have not uttered a single word of remonstrance."

She laughed derisively.

"I should not talk too much about that," she said. "I do not think you were at all clever that evening. You were armed and he was not. I do not think that you should have allowed him to get away."

"I suppose I mucked it, somehow," Cheshire acknowledged. "So far as being armed is concerned, though, I don't see what advantage that gave me. I couldn't have shot him with one of

those filthy cartridges. We might have had a good stand-up fight, of course, but the commotion would have awakened you from your first sleep, and, although I rather fancy myself at a scrap, the consequences might have been unpleasant."

"You did not get the better of that other scrap," she reminded him.

"Only a trifling affair, that," he exclaimed with a wave of the hand. "He was just a thought too quick for me, that was all. Look here, we are wrangling like a couple of children, wasting time, too. What about that message for the Contessa?"

"Are you jealous?"

"No."

"Why should I be like all these other foolish women—give, give, give with no return? Why should I not make a bargain with you?"

"In what coinage must I pay?"

She stretched herself a little in her chair, took off her turban with its beautiful sapphire and diamond ornament and laid it upon the table. Her long fingers played for a moment or two with her hair.

"I can think of only two things you might have to offer," she decided. "Money and—love."

"And which do you choose?"

"I think that I shall choose love."

"A doubtful commodity," he warned her. "Now let us get on with the message, please."

"My husband said that it is the urgent wish of a certain great personage that she present herself in Rome before the end of the week."

"For any particular reason?"

She shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"He seems to be in everyone's confidence," she said. "He may know it. He did not share his knowledge with me."

"And that was all the message?"

"Every word. Am I to deliver it or not?"

Greyes made discreet entrance, his replenished salver in his hand, in answer to the summons of the bell. Deborah Florestan, who had sunk very low in her chair, stretched out her hand

greedily to the tray of hors d'oeuvres he was carrying. He laid them on the table before her, half filled her glass with Vermouth and added the Campari. Cheshire strolled over to the table and helped himself.

"I shall change in half an hour, Greyes," he announced.

"Very good, sir," the latter replied as he left the room.

Cheshire moved his chair closer to his visitor's.

"You have not answered my question," she reminded him.

"Since you have confided the message to me it really makes very little difference," he replied. "I shall take good care that the Contessa remains at Regent's Park. I don't think that Rome would be at all a healthy place for her just now."

"Well," Mrs. Florestan observed, "I will do as I think best about delivering the message. What about payment?"

"A very short time ago," he acknowledged, "I might have been murmuring the word 'deferred.' The situation, however, is changed. I am waiting for a cable before I can continue my work. As a preliminary I can offer you dinner, a little early, I'm afraid, and the other half of two stalls for *Tristan und Isolde* at Covent Garden." [234]

"Quite a good start," she agreed, a joyous gleam lighting up her eyes. "Norvena as Isolde and Tauber as Tristan—it will be wonderful! I do not fancy him very much, but how he will sing the part!"

He was almost startled by her enthusiasm.

"You are fond of the Opera?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You perhaps sing yourself?"

"I have sung in Grand Opera," she told him simply. "I have sung at Milan, Berlin and Vienna."

He did not doubt her word for a moment. As a matter of fact it explained her to him. There were so many times when she had seemed unreal. She possessed, he realised now, the theatrical sense in its most flamboyant development. All the same, she might well have been an artist.

"What made you leave the stage?"

"My husband insisted. He has always led a curiously secretive life and he would never have allowed me to become a prominent person. Whether he is a millionaire or a pauper I do not know. We have lived at different times as though he might

have been either."

"Is he really English?"

She hesitated.

"Again, I do not know," she replied, and he fancied that she was telling the truth. "He speaks English, French, German and Italian faultlessly. He stands when they sing the National Anthem here, his hand is as high as anyone's in Germany and I know that he has been received by and is on friendly terms with the greatest man in Italy, but if you ask me which is the country of his birth I cannot tell you."

"And you yourself?" [235]

She finished the contents of her glass and set it down.

"My mother was a Dutch actress, a very well-known one," she confided. "Her husband, my father, was an Italian officer. I was married in Vienna and I have lived nearly all the time since either in Paris or London. It has not been altogether a pleasant life," she went on, "but it certainly will not last much longer if my husband knows that I have visited your rooms here and sat by your side at the Opera."

"He is jealous?"

"Not of you. He is suspicious that I may know more than he believes I know and that I may have taken you into my confidence."

"Well, you are going to, aren't you?"

She loosened her furs and he saw that she was wearing a gown which left her neck bare.

"Why should I?"

"You know best."

"You play a great deal with words," she said. "You are very clever at that. It seems to me that you are a little slow, even for an Englishman, in other ways."

"Because I do not make love to you?"

"It may be that."

"It seems to me," he meditated, "that my few opportunities in that direction have been subject to interruptions."

"Is that the reason?"

"I suppose so," he assented. "I am only an ordinary man, Deborah, and you are an extremely attractive woman when you

want to be."

Again he was held for a moment by the flame in those strange eyes.

"Will you invite me to supper to-night?" she asked. "And afterwards shall I sing to you the song that Isolde sang to Tristan when she had drunk the potion?" [236]

He smiled at her from the depths of his chair.

"With a stretch of the fancy," he observed, "I could just imagine you and me as Isolde and Tristan, but your husband would make a strange King Mark. Can you see him descending upon us as he did the other night, waving his famous sword instead of that revolver with the poisoned bullets?"

The corners of her mouth twitched. Cheshire felt that a dreadful moment had been postponed.

"Nor can I fancy Horace Florestan looking in the least like King Mark descending the outside fire escape at the Milan. It is an absurdity, perhaps, to try and draw even the threads of romance into the life we are living . . . Tell me, are you in love with either of these Pelucchi women?"

"I have been all my life," he confessed. "Both of them. The elder was a debutante in Washington when I was Naval attaché there. I was certainly one of the crowd who worshipped her. The younger one—"

"It is the younger one whom I should fear if I were a jealous woman," she interrupted.

Greyes had entered the room, as always with that quiet air of apology. There was a letter on the salver he carried.

"A Foreign Office messenger has just brought this, sir," he announced. "It would appear to be of extreme importance."

Cheshire glanced at the superscription upon the envelope and with a word of excuse to his visitor tore it open.

"The man is waiting?" he asked.

Greyes shook his head.

"He had three more letters to deliver, sir," he replied. "So long as they were placed in the hands of the persons to whom they were addressed there was to be no reply. He recognised me as your personal servant and I assured him that in your case it would be done." [237]

Cheshire waved him away. He held the letter clenched in his fingers. The woman was watching him anxiously.

"It is bad news?" she enquired.

"I am afraid there will be no *Tristan und Isolde* for us to-night," he answered. "I am summoned to Downing Street at nine o'clock."

"What do you mean by 'Downing Street'?"

"The residence of the Prime Minister," he told her. "There is an urgent meeting of the War Council."

"Are you a member of it?"

"Yes."

"There is to be war?"

"There are certain indications of it."

She was silent for a few moments.

"I seem to be the most unfortunate woman," she sighed. "Show me the letter."

"It is in cipher," he explained, holding it out to her, "a very simple cipher but we use it for messages even amongst ourselves. If you doubt that I am telling you the truth, though, take my stalls and search the house to-night. Four members of the War Council have boxes. They will be empty."

Her eyes were dry but there was a sort of dumb pain in them which touched him. He was almost ashamed of his fencing with her.

"Deborah," he said kindly, "you see that I am quite powerless. There is no room for any discussion. I am afraid that what we have been fighting against is going to happen after all."

He opened a drawer and drew out an envelope.

"Here are the tickets," he said. "You may find that before the last curtain they will be playing 'God Save the King.'" **[238]**

"What will that mean?" she asked.

"That we are at war."

She took the tickets, tore them in two and flung the pieces upon the table. Then she rose to her feet.

"If I may not hear that music with you to-night," she cried, "no one else shall hear it from those places. Forgive me—I shall make apologies when I am sane again."

She swept from the room and he saw that her whole body was shaking with suppressed sobs. He had no time to reach the door, he could think of no words save dangerous ones. He did

what was perhaps the wisest thing—he remained silent.

CHAPTER XXV

The Premier made his confidential announcement that evening very briefly. He spoke to a representative gathering of the three Services—the Air, the Army and the Navy—six statesmen and Lord Fakenham.

"You have all been kept closely in touch," he said from his chair at the head of the long table, "with the progress or rather the lack of progress which has been made by Orson-Meade and Dunkerley, our plenipotentiaries on the Continent. We have had a telephone message from the latter this evening to the effect that he had an appointment with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Chief of the State fixed for five o'clock this afternoon. He presented himself at the rendezvous and was informed by a private secretary that the appointment was cancelled, that a note of apology had been sent to the Embassy explaining that neither the Chief nor the Foreign Secretary was able to keep the appointment. He found a curt note to that effect upon his return. We have also heard from Orson-Meade that notwithstanding two efforts, he was unable to obtain the promised audience for this afternoon and he was seriously contemplating, with the approval of our Ambassador, leaving the city. That is the position, gentlemen."

One of the statesmen, a Cabinet Minister and a world-renowned pacifist, rose to his feet.

"May I point out, Mr. Prime Minister," he begged, "that the breaking off of negotiations in this matter with a plenipotentiary is not equivalent to refusing to receive our Ambassador. We are entitled to an explanation, of course, but I do earnestly suggest that both our Ambassadors be instructed to ask for that explanation with the utmost courtesy, and that the fullest consideration be given to the replies from the two governments." [240]

The Premier nodded thoughtfully.

"I have had in mind the point raised by our friend," he acknowledged. "I suggested to Dunkerley on the telephone that he request Pontifex not to interfere for the moment, as anything he said would, of course, be official. I begged him to remonstrate in as moderate terms as were possible, preserving, of course, his dignity, but to see that from the Embassy itself no formal protest was made. I have addressed the same request to Orson-Meade."

There was a little murmur of approval. The Premier remained upon his feet.

"Such an ominous, I may say such a sinister, action on the part

of these two countries," he said quietly, "can, I fear, bear but one interpretation. It is, at any rate, our duty to consider it from that point of view. I was obliged to summon everyone on the Council so that they should understand the position. I suggest that we now dismiss this meeting and go into Committee. The representatives of our Forces are all present, I am glad to see, and also Admiral Cheshire, who represents the link between the Navy and the Intelligence Department, and General Mallinson, who occupies the same position with regard to the Army. I only regret that I have to part with you at such an anxious moment. I suggest that we hold another meeting at midnight. If further news has arrived it shall be laid before you. One word with you, Fakenham, and you, Cheshire."

The members of the Council left the room almost in silence.

"You realise, sir," Fakenham said, as soon as the three men were alone together, "that there are twenty or thirty newspaper correspondents in both capitals sending messages every half-hour. This breaking off of negotiations cannot possibly be censored out of the Press altogether." **[241]**

"Negotiations are not broken off," the Premier said firmly. "We take the attitude that they are only suspended. This is why I wanted just a word with you, Fakenham, about your morning articles. You control two important morning newspapers and another one with a wide circulation which appears at midday. I do not ask you who writes your leaders, but I believe you sometimes do so yourself. The tone of them is almost universally correct but to-night, when these are written, I beg of you to exercise the utmost discretion. Don't say a word of a provocative nature. Keep a calm note. Remember this—if war were to come in four months, in three months, even in two, we could be ready for it. If it comes to-morrow we are not quite in the same position. You know that as well as we do, so, unfortunately, do they. One begins to think that these offers of *pourparlers* through a plenipotentiary were somewhat of a bluff, but do not, of course, suggest that."

"You shall have a copy of our two principal leaders by midnight," Fakenham promised. "Harrison will write the one and I myself shall do the other. Copies of both shall be sent round to you as soon as they are ready for press. We shall be at the end of the line all night if you have anything to say."

"We can ask no more than that," the Premier declared.

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Fakenham took his leave. The Prime Minister ushered Cheshire back into his small private study across the hall. Silently they each stood before the sideboard. Cheshire, who had neither eaten nor drunk since his *apéritif* in his rooms at the Milan several hours before, helped himself sparingly to the whisky and soda. The Premier was served with Ovaltine from a patent heater but he followed Cheshire's example in lighting his pipe

afterwards.

"We are up against it, my friend," the former observed. "You are in a worse plight than I am, though. If things go well, not a living soul will ever know the reason. If they go badly, the energies of XYZ will form the subject of discussions in the House, violent diatribes in the Press and abuse from every writer of memoirs of the day throughout the future of history."

Cheshire smiled confidently.

"I am not afraid, sir," he declared. "We are simply doing what one other nation at least has done in years gone by. We have carried this war of espionage into the enemy's country. We have double-crossed him. I am proud of my work, although I say it to you now for the first time. I have only one regret. A single week, sir, a single week and our big card would have been played without risk and we could have sat back and laughed while their thunders faded away. Four days, even, would give us a chance. Our big effort will still be made, but forty-eight hours is running it a little close."

"That sounds good," the Premier acknowledged. "I shall be very much surprised if we cannot manage as much as that. The enemy diplomacy is of the bullying type but after all there are neutral journalists and neutral countries in the world to be considered and neither of these bellicose nations will want to go down into history as having been absolutely crude in the finishing touches. Both Dunkerley and Orson-Meade have had it from my own lips. All that we want is a brief delay. I quoted you—the maximum one week's delay, if possible, the minimum forty-eight hours. Remember that unless our enemies are guilty of a diplomatic *faux pas*, Dunkerley and Orson-Meade have to make their report not to our Ambassadors in foreign capitals, but to me here. To do that they will have to come back to London. I can see an extraordinarily good chance of a trifle more than forty-eight hours, Cheshire."

"A week," Cheshire assured him, "would see a more or less dignified withdrawal on the part of both countries or the German Fleet all in the scrap basket and the Mediterranean in our hands. London might be in a pitiful state and there would be horrible shows all over Great Britain, but on the other hand, no army can ever be landed in this country from even ten thousand aeroplanes. Fight for that week, sir, however much our *amour-propre* may have to suffer."

"We have been quite as near war before," the Premier reflected. "On that occasion, also, it was the enemy who climbed down. I think I can promise you the next four days, Cheshire. I believe, honestly, that you will have the week."

Cheshire drained the last drop of his whisky and soda and set down the glass empty.

"You will find, sir," he declared confidently, "that I shall be as good as my word. If I may say so," he added, "it is an inspiration to find that you, who have the greatest responsibility of all, can maintain all the time so steadfast an attitude."

The Premier smiled.

"The greatest crime of which a statesman can be guilty, Cheshire," he said firmly, "is over-optimism, yet as we two are here alone at a critical moment I will tell you this. I do not think that these two nations who are being so troublesome were ever made to be allies. I don't think that they would ever be able to fight a winning war against the Empire. The people who as a nation are giving us the greatest trouble are disposed to follow the man they worship like a crazed mob, but then, after all, he has only led them to easy victories and all the time he dopes their vanity with fantastic and bombastic addresses. I don't even believe that the Italian people themselves want another war. The Germans do, of course, and they will probably get it in time. You know I am a man of peace, Cheshire, but if these two troublesome countries really carry out what seems to me their present intention, I think it will be, in the end, a great blessing for us all. Mind you, I do not want them to embark upon this diabolical enterprise, because of the wave of misery throughout the world which war must bring, but if they are insane enough to do so, they cannot win. If Germany were to wait another ten years, I don't know that we could ever compete. She would have to regain her colonies then, or some of them. If she starts this trouble now—well, in the long run I should say that her present ruler is making as wicked a mistake as the Kaiser did in '14." [244]

"It is an inspiration to hear you talk like that, sir," Cheshire declared.

"Now, we have done enough talking for the moment," the Premier observed, finishing his Ovaltine. "Are you going back to the Admiralty?"

"I shall be working all night, sir," was the prompt reply. "In forty-eight hours, if all goes well, the plans I am engaged on will be in the hands of our prospective enemies. If they once get there we are saved."

"A trifle confident, aren't you?"

"I am confident because I know," the other insisted. "It is a ghastly thing to have to talk about one's own work like this but there is something that seems, even to me, almost like a thread of genius the whole of the way through these plans. Admiral Maddox, who is the only person who has seen them, agrees with me." [245]

The Premier walked arm in arm with his departing visitor to

the hall door.

"Well, we know where to find you for the next twenty-four hours, Cheshire," he said. "You've a big job to tackle working all alone, but I suppose you know the limits of your own strength. As soon as you have passed on the dope let me know. We will keep in touch all round."

The butler, who was waiting at his post, threw open the door. There was an unusually large crowd of loiterers outside. A few drops of misty rain were falling but the sky above was clear. The man leaned forward.

"The police have done their best to clear the street, sir," he announced. "Some of them are rather hard to get rid of but there is a special squad of Scotland Yard men here waiting for the Admiral."

A car drove up. Cheshire shook hands with his Chief and ran lightly down the steps. An uneasy-looking Inspector stood at the open door of the automobile with his hand at the salute.

"Admiralty—side entrance," Cheshire directed. "Thanks very much, Inspector. You really need not have troubled."

"The Deputy Commissioner sent us down, sir," was the respectful reply. "We are to wait and take you over to the Milan."

"Not likely!" Cheshire exclaimed scornfully. "You take me to the Admiralty and leave me there. My compliments to the Deputy Commissioner and thanks, but I am working all night and will find my own way back to my rooms."

"If you do leave the Admiralty before daylight, sir, I hope you will ring us up," the other persisted. "The reason we are a little extra careful is because there have been one or two queer characters hanging around Downing Street for the last twenty-four hours. We have raked the street through several times but I can't say I'm comfortable about it." **[246]**

"They wouldn't go for small fry like me," Cheshire grinned as he stepped past the Inspector to enter the car.

There was a crash of glass. Both windows in the automobile seemed to fall away and the air for a moment was thick with flying fragments. The Inspector reeled and nearly lost his balance. Cheshire staggered, but only for a moment. Then there was a Babel of police whistles, a rush to one particular portion of the street opposite. Cheshire settled himself down in a corner. His voice was hard and pregnant with authority.

"Drive at once to the Admiralty side entrance," he ordered.

The chauffeur obeyed. In ten minutes the man who had undertaken the mighty task of saving his country was seated at

his desk.

CHAPTER XXVI

The following day was one of repression. Contrary to early reports, the Stock Exchange remained open. “Business as Usual” was the slogan faithfully observed. There was a complete absence of news, which puzzled everyone except the man who sat working at his desk or in his chart room hour after hour. There was a vague report in some of the papers that a revolver had been discharged at a passing motor car in Downing Street, but apparently no one had been hurt except the would-be assassin, an unknown man now under arrest, who had fought fiercely for his liberty and was lying unidentified and unconscious in a ward of the nearest hospital. Of definite news from abroad there seemed to be none. The journals of the day had all adopted the same note, they all preached the same advice. The *pourparlers* had reached their most difficult crisis and reflection was being indulged in upon both sides. The Envoys—Orson-Meade and Dunkerley—had both flown to England and upon receipt of their reports a Cabinet Council was summoned to be held on the following day, after which it was understood that they would both return to their posts. There was something exceedingly deliberate about the attitude of the Press and the politicians. All the time, Cheshire was working upon a scheme which was to remain for years afterwards in the archives of the Admiralty as a triumphal and magnificent piece of tactical exposition.

The solitary worker, paler, with an extraordinarily bright light in his eyes, fell back exhausted in his chair soon after midday. [248] He refused lunch but drank an unusual quantity of brandy and ate two biscuits. Then after a strong cup of coffee he lit his pipe and continued. He spent most of the afternoon in the chart room but completed his task at his desk. At eight o’clock Hincks found him lying comatose, sprawled over his table. He looked up at his assistant’s entrance and addressed him with something of his old briskness.

“Another glass of brandy, Hincks,” he directed. “Bring it yourself. I have some instructions for you.”

The young man returned in less than a minute with a plate of biscuits and the brandy. He carried also a siphon but Cheshire shook his head.

“Presently, perhaps,” he said, gripping the tumbler. “I am not thirsty, only a little tired. Listen, Hincks,” he went on, after a gulp from the glass. “My task is finished. If this scheme of our projected offensive can get into the hands of those who think that every move we could make is known to them over in Rome, if it could reach them before the first shot has been fired, we shall have done our job. There will be no war.”

Hincks was speechless as he picked up sheet after sheet of plans and explanation.

"This is a miracle, sir," he faltered at last.

"It might have been true," Cheshire said in a low tone, "if we had had the ships and the sailors to man them—another thousand sea-planes and the new guns. We could have wiped them off the face of the sea, Hincks, as surely in fact as we have done here on paper. Now listen—how long will it take you to copy this?"

"I can do it in twelve hours, sir."

"I shall leave it to you to carry on, then," Cheshire decided.

"And when I have copied it?" Hincks asked anxiously. "Am I to bring it to you?"

"I have other work on hand," was the somewhat enigmatic reply. "I might not be here. You are to make your own appointment with Elida Pelucchi. You are to represent me and hand her over the plans. She knows what to do with them. She will be waiting for you, as soon as you have finished them, in my rooms at the Milan Court. They are for her and her only."

For a moment or two Hincks stood like a man turned to stone, then a slow flush of colour stained his cheeks. His fingers began to tremble. He stretched out his hand and leaned on the desk.

"Sir," he stammered, "I am to see the Contessa? You trust me with this?"

"Don't be a fool," Cheshire answered. "Haven't I trusted you ever since that trouble? You know my weakness. I believe in my gift. I know men. I know you, Hincks. You will never falter again as long as you live. You will take my place with the young woman. You will urge upon her that not one second is to be lost in handing that over to the person who is waiting for it."

"But you, sir?" Hincks asked in bewilderment.

"I have yet another task to perform," he explained. "Shake hands, Commander Hincks," he added, holding out his hand. "I had a word with Maddox about you to-day. If the new job I am looking for takes me abroad you will get your step all right. You will be one of the youngest Captains to command a battleship."

"I don't quite understand, sir—" Hincks began.

"It is not your business to understand," was the prompt reply. "You are to obey. Leave me alone now for a time. Commence your copying."

"What shall I do with our own copy, sir?" [250]

"Deliver it personally to Admiral Maddox. He had better take it to the First Lord."

Hincks gathered up the papers, dazed though he was. There was something in his Chief's appearance which filled him with dismay.

"I wish you would let me send you something, sir," he begged. "You have had nothing to eat for twenty-four hours and more."

"I am quite all right," Cheshire assured him. "I shall be starting my other job directly and I shall have enough people fussing round then. And Ronnie—"

The young man drew himself to attention.

"Yes, sir."

"Elida Pelucchi—she has a weak spot in her heart for you, I think."

"It isn't possible, sir," Hincks declared brokenly. "I will get over that."

"Don't be a damn' fool," Cheshire told him. "The girl's fond of you. It doesn't matter who she is. You've got plenty of money of your own—well-born, all that sort of stuff."

"But I thought, sir, that you—"

"You thought wrong, then. Remember that. Out you get."

Hincks left the room more dazed than ever. From his mind, however, he tore all these amazing suggestions. He ceased to marvel even at the mighty effort his Chief had made. He set himself to fight the minutes as they passed in complete concentration upon his work. Nothing else mattered, but behind it all he knew there was a new urge to life, a new store of boundless energy of which he made feverish and abundant use.

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It was a couple of hours later when Cheshire prepared to leave his rooms. He sent for his typist-secretary and cleared up some letters. She looked at him strangely.

"Anything I can do for you, sir?" she asked. "If you will pardon my saying so—you look tired."

He hesitated.

"Well, if that is the case," he decided, "I'll take a little more brandy before I go."

He raised the glass, which still stood upon the desk, to his lips,

but set it down in a moment. Then he left the room, passed through the general offices and descended in the lift. The commissionaire hurried forward.

"Your car is here, sir," he announced. "The police car that brought you had its windows smashed but another one arrived to take its place early this morning. It has been waiting about all day."

"Fetch it along," Cheshire directed.

"Where to, sir?"

"I must call and see a friend before I go to my rooms," he said. "St. George's Hospital, tell the driver."

Life was a little hazy afterwards. Cheshire found his way across the pavement and into the private consulting room on the ground floor of the hospital. Word got about as to his identity and in a moment a surgeon he knew quite well hurried in.

"Admiral," he exclaimed anxiously, as they shook hands, "what's wrong?"

"I have been doing a long stunt of work," Cheshire told him, "and I've got a bullet in my shoulder you had better see to. It's been there twenty-four hours."

He reeled even as the words left his lips. He arrived at his private room on a stretcher.

CHAPTER XXVII

"Commander Hincks calling, Madam," Greyes announced the next morning, throwing open the door of Cheshire's salon in the Milan Court.

Elida sprang from her chair and held out her hands. Her eyes shone with excitement.

"Ronnie!" she exclaimed in amazement. "I had no idea. Where is Guy?"

Hincks was holding her hands tightly. For a moment or two he seemed too overcome to speak.

"Elida," he confided, "I am his deputy. One thing and one thing only for us. I have your packet here."

"Well?"

"This must be taken to wherever you take the papers without a single second's delay. You read the journals. You know there is a great crisis. The Chief worked on these twenty-four hours without stopping. I have had to do my bit, too. Now you must do yours."

"My dear boy, I am ready," she exclaimed. "Give them to me! I understand."

He took her into his arms for an instant and kissed her. Then he pressed the sealed package into her hands.

"Listen," he said, "there's a Service car waiting at the Embankment entrance. I can guess where you are taking this, but I don't need to know. If you happen to see the person who is responsible for receiving them from you you are to say that this is the last effort."

"Aren't you even coming down with me?" she asked.

"The Chief thought it best not. Greyes is waiting—his servant —in the corridor. He will take you. You see what a state I am in. I have been working all night without stopping. You deliver those plans, and if you like—" [253]

"Well? I am sure I shall like!"

"You can come back here and we will have lunch together. It was the Admiral's suggestion that our meeting should take place in these rooms."

"I shall fly," she declared. "See, I have brought my despatch box."

He placed the packet inside. She tucked the case under her arm.

“Greyes is waiting outside,” he told her again, throwing the door open.

She hurried off. Hincks found his way to the bathroom, took off his coat and plunged his head into a basin of cold water. Then he locked the door, stripped and indulged in a hot bath. He was a different-looking young man when he re-entered the sitting room in about twenty minutes’ time. Elida returned to find him walking restlessly up and down the room.

“It is delivered?” he cried eagerly.

She showed him the empty despatch case.

“Straight from here into the hands of my friend at the Embassy,” she assured him. “No harm in telling you that now, I suppose. Not a sign of a Ludini or a Florestan. This horrible business is finished.”

His thankfulness was expressed only by a hoarse, unintelligible exclamation. It shone, however, from his face. He pressed the bell. He handed her the menu.

“Two Dry Martinis,” he told the waiter. “The Contessa will order luncheon when you bring them.”

The man disappeared with a bow. Elida saw the fever still in her companion’s face.

“Do not worry any more, Ronnie,” she begged. “It is done—successfully accomplished. The plans leave Heston in an hour. They will reach their destination this evening.” **[254]**

He drew a long sigh of relief. They sat side by side on the divan. The eagerly desired cocktails arrived. Elida studied the menu and ordered luncheon. They were alone again together.

“This is the end, Elida,” he told her once more. “The Chief has pronounced it. The stunt is finished.”

“And oh, how glad I am!” she cried joyfully. “It has all been so hateful. Tell me, Ronnie, are you really re-established?”

“Absolutely,” he assured her. “The Admiral has been too wonderful. He has stood by me all the time. I am really in charge of the department until he comes back.”

“Where is he?” Elida asked.

He shook his head.

“I don’t know. Somewhere where he can rest, I hope. He was absolutely worn out when he left. I should think that probably he went to Downing Street.”

"I must be reassured, Ronnie. It is really finished—all this Secret Service business?"

"Yes," he told her. "And you don't need to be too unhappy about it, either, Elida. If you seem to have been working a little against your country, remember that what you have really been working against is war. The better side of your country does not want war. The better side of ours doesn't. We are the altruists of the world, even if we have worked behind the curtain."

"I wish I could make Sabine see that," she sighed.

"She will see it before long," he assured her.

"The whole world appears to be suffering from a sort of paralysis, Ronnie," she went on. "I came through the streets here and it seemed to me that the people were all walking as though they were in a dream, as though some pestilence were threatening them, as though they were hurrying under the umbrellas of fear to escape a storm. And the posters—they are all terrible, too. They seem to be announcing every possible horror except the actual declaration of war. In the Strand a bus tyre burst and people ran for their lives. Everyone seemed to think it was a bomb falling." [255]

He smiled a little wanly.

"This is the worst time," he muttered.

The waiter wheeled in the luncheon table.

"I hope I have ordered what you like," she said. "Oysters for both of us, a clear consommé, a plainly roasted chicken and a *soufflé*."

"Delicious," he agreed.

She listened for a moment to the rumble of traffic in the street below. The newsboys' voices were plainly audible. She made a little grimace.

"I think," she decided, "we need something to keep our spirits up. Do perfectly well-brought-up English girls ever drink champagne in the middle of the day, Ronnie?"

"Veuve Clicquot '21," he ordered promptly. "The oysters look marvellous."

The waiter took his leave. The door was scarcely closed before Hincks turned once more to his companion.

"Let's not talk any more about impending calamities," he suggested. "Let's forget that there is such a thing as ugly work for an honourable purpose. I am telling myself all the time that I shall be back at sea in less than a month. In the meantime—"

"Well, what shall we talk about?" she asked.

"Ourselves." [256]

"I am going to be horrid," she told him, patting his hand across the table. "I do not wish to talk about ourselves just now. My mind is full of one person."

"The Chief!"

"Quite true," she acknowledged. "I cannot help thinking about him. I would like to know where he is now. Every time I have seen him—especially since the reception at Regent's Park—he has seemed to me entirely unlike himself. He has seemed like another man living in another world."

"He has been rather like that," Hincks admitted, "ever since he took up this job at the Admiralty. He has worked magnificently but it doesn't suit him. He hates duplicity. Why do you want to talk about him? You are not going to tell me that you are in love with him?"

She shook her head very convincingly.

"Quite sure I am not," she told him. "I do not think that Guy is very much of a woman's man. I think his profession and his country come first in his life, but if ever he has been in love with anyone it was with Sabine."

"With your sister?"

She nodded.

"I saw him very soon after the engagement was announced," she continued, "and I thought he looked awful. He went on leave almost immediately afterwards. There was talk of his retiring but everyone said that the Admiralty would not let him go. He had an extended leave and I think there is not a port in Europe or Asia that he has not visited."

"That's right," Hincks agreed. "It was his work at Singapore [257]
and the report he presented to the Admiralty which really gave him the position he holds to-day. I have heard a lot of them say that the modern Singapore would never have been built but for him. Afterwards, he went to sea again and just as everyone thought he was going to be appointed to the command of the North Sea Fleet he took up this new branch of work—XYZ, they call it. They started that after he had spent nearly a year in Malta and Cyprus."

"I always look upon my brother-in-law, Henry," Elida said, "as being one of the best judges of humans, and he declares that Admiral Cheshire is the most wonderful Englishman he ever met."

"So do I," Hincks agreed. "I have reason to. He has saved me,

body and soul. I made one ghastly mistake. It was not so bad as it seemed but if he had stood by the rules and regulations he would have broken me, Elida. He ought to have done it. He was big enough and strong enough to defy them and save me."

"Poor Ronnie," she murmured. "I am very thankful that he did."

He rose to his feet and took her gently into his arms. For a moment he was articulate. She drew away half laughing, though her eyes were suspiciously dim.

"Is this muddle of words meant to be a proposal?" she asked.

"It was meant to be one," he assured her. "Will you marry me, Elida? Do you really care for me?"

"My dear Ronnie, if I did not care I should not be here," she told him, smoothing out the wrinkles by his eyes.

[258]

The world went on very much as usual. The noises from the street still reached them. Ronnie was back in his place with a new flush of colour in his cheeks and the light of happiness once more in his eyes. They had drunk their little toast together. Luncheon was drawing towards its close.

"Your busy day, this, my dear, is it not?" she asked smiling. "You can feel that together we have probably stopped a European war and that you have certainly committed yourself for life, all within a few hours. I am feeling very contented about it because you look so much happier."

"I am as happy as all the kings in a row from the time of William the Conqueror," he assured her. "There's just one more thing I should like to hear."

"What can I have forgotten?" she murmured.

"You have really never been in love with Guy Cheshire?"

"All my life," she declared. "So has Sabine. We both love him. Sabine married Henry quite happily and any little feelings she might have had she has kept to herself, and you see, Ronnie, my being in love with Guy was nothing that mattered in the least because there has never been anyone else I would have married but you."

They lingered for some time over their coffee. Outside, a constant stream of human beings was passing backwards and forwards from Fleet Street, all eager for the latest news, all tense with the drama of the moment. Now and then, the two young people paused in the midst of their eager talk to listen. They, too, felt the dramatic significance of the passing hours.

"I wonder what time Guy will be back," Elida remarked.

"Soon, I hope," Ronnie answered.

She sprang to her feet and lit a cigarette, walked to the window, looked out and returned. She stood for a moment with her arms around his neck.

"I cannot keep still, Ronnie," she confessed. "Somehow or other I feel that life has come too quickly to-day, in too fierce doses. I have never taken the journey I took to-day, talked with the grim person who took the packet from me, without my heart beating madly all the time, and now with you, too, to think of and this other terrible business finished, and all the excitement of war or peace vibrating in the air—I feel hysterical!" [259]

"Sit down, dear," he begged. "We can't do any good. Tell you what," he added, "I'll send down for all the latest editions."

"We can find out how things are going easier than that," Elida pointed out. "I can ring up Henry. He loves news. He can never keep away from the radio these days."

Henry Prestley, however, as they soon heard, had also been drawn into the maelstrom. He was engaged at a small international conference of bankers being held at some unknown spot. Sabine was at a matinée. Elida abandoned the telephone in disgust. She stood at the window instead, watching the crowd. Her lover came over and stood by her side. He, too, was watching. He looked upwards to the sky cheerfully.

"No chance for a surprise attack to-night, anyway, unless the weather changes," he observed. "Elida, will you promise me one thing?"

She smiled up at him.

"Ronnie," she confessed, "I feel like promising you anything in the world."

"If the war should really come, Cheshire has promised me active service at once. Would you marry me quickly?"

"Whenever you say."

There was the sound of someone moving about behind them. They turned round startled. Greyes was standing like a ghost in the middle of the apartment. His voice was almost inaudible.

"I was sorry to have to leave you, sir," he apologised. "I received an urgent message to take some things over to the hospital." [260]

"Hospital?" Hincks repeated. "Who is in the hospital, Greyes?"

The man's face twitched. His voice broke.

"The—the Admiral, sir."

"In hospital?" Elida exclaimed. "Why is he there?"

"What's the matter?" Hincks demanded.

Greyes came a little nearer to them.

"I'm sorry, Commander," he said. "I quite thought that you and the Contessa knew. The Admiral went direct to St. George's Hospital when he left the Admiralty last night. This morning's report is not altogether satisfactory. The operation has been postponed until to-morrow."

"What operation?" Hincks gasped.

Greyes drew a slight breath.

"It seems that the Admiral was working all day yesterday and all the night before with a bullet in his shoulder," he groaned. "He was shot in that scuffle in Downing Street. It is only briefly mentioned in the morning papers and not even the policemen who were on duty knew that anyone was hurt. The Admiral went straight back to the Admiralty without saying a word about it. When he arrived at the hospital last night he collapsed."

"My God!" Hincks exclaimed. "He looked like hell all day. Who fired the shot?"

"I could not be sure of the name, sir, but it was one of the men who had been turned out of Downing Street earlier in the day. He was very roughly handled when he tried to get away."

"I must go to the hospital at once," Hincks declared. "Elida, will you drive round with me?"

Greyes shook his head.

"It would be quite useless, sir," he assured them. "I myself was not allowed to see the Admiral and he has just been given a powerful opiate. The Prime Minister's secretary and Sir Herbert Melville were both there and both sent away when I was."

"They do not think," Elida asked fearfully, "that he is in danger?"

"It is impossible to say, Madam. The fact that the bullet remained in his shoulder all the time he was at work has complicated matters."

The expression on Hincks's face was one of sheer agony. He turned away and stood with his back to them before the window. That terrible vision seemed to haunt him—the sight of Cheshire, calm and composed, although the sweat was standing

upon his forehead, finishing his work, giving his instructions when all the time he must have been suffering torture. His finger nails bit into his palms as he stood there with clenched hands. A few minutes before he had glanced at the few kindly words of instruction and advice which Cheshire had scrawled out for him. It was terrible to think that that might be the last message he would ever receive from his Chief.

"There is someone always on night duty, who will give reports," Greyes said quietly. "At present, it is useless to go near the hospital. I will let you know if there is any further news."

"And me, too, at Regent's Park House," Elida begged.

"Certainly, Madam," Greyes promised.

They were left alone once more. . . .

"A sad end to this glorious day, dear," Elida whispered. "I am so sorry for you, and terribly, terribly sorry for Guy."

"He will get over it," Hincks declared. "He must get over it. He is the fittest man I ever knew. When I saw him drinking that brandy I should have known there was something more than ordinary fatigue the matter with him. . . . I am not to be seen outside with you, Elida, so I cannot offer to take you home. Could you let Greyes—" [262]

"I do not need anyone," she interrupted. "Five minutes alone, Ronnie, and then I will go."

Their five minutes, however, were never to come. They heard no knock, they heard no opening door. It was the voice behind only, which disturbed them.

"I have come to pay a visit to Admiral Cheshire. Perhaps you can tell me where to find him?"

They both swung round. To Elida the man who stood there, with his hard, thin face with the prominent cheekbones and strange mouth, was the re-embodiment of a nightmare. Hincks, too, although he asked the question, had more than an idea as to his identity.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"My name," the other replied, "is Florestan." [263]

CHAPTER XXVIII

There was an odd little silence in the room. Florestan stood with his back to the door, his eyes looking from one to the other of its occupants.

"I believe," he said, "I have the honour of speaking to the Contessa Pelucchi."

"You have had the honour of speaking to her once before," the girl acknowledged quietly. "You escaped from the police that time. Perhaps, to-day, you will be less fortunate."

"A mistake, I can assure you," Florestan replied. "I am a very law-abiding person. The police have nothing against me. . . . And you, sir, I must have heard of," he went on, turning to Hincks.

"I don't see why," was the guarded response. "I am Commander Hincks."

"You are associated with Admiral Cheshire, I believe, in his work at the Admiralty."

"May I ask what business that is of yours?"

"It is my unfortunate mission in life to interfere at times in other people's affairs. If you are an associate of Admiral Cheshire's, young man, it seems to me that you are in the same line of business. As for the Contessa, I have for a long while looked forward to the pleasure of seeing her again."

"Look here," Hincks demanded, a trifle puzzled. "What's all this talkie-talkie about? You came to see Admiral Cheshire. I tell you that he is not here. He is unable to see anyone. As a matter of fact, there is no secret about it—he is in a hospital ill. You will excuse me if I point out to you that you are an intruder." [264]

Florestan smiled faintly. It was far from being a pleasant gesture.

"I am sorry," he said, "because you will have to put up with my intrusion for a moment or two longer."

Hincks moved towards the bell. Florestan stretched out his arm. He was barring the way.

"In Admiral Cheshire's much to be regretted absence," he continued, "my business is with you, sir, and the young lady. The Contessa has been in the habit of sending various communications to the country which employs me as an agent.

The communications, I gather, are handed by you to the young lady and from her to a mutual friend. This time, *I* am commissioned to be that mutual friend."

"You are talking nonsense," Hincks said curtly. "I have never seen you before in my life and what I have heard of you under the name of Copeland, I think it was, I don't like. Supposing what you have said is the truth, you are the last person with whom I should recommend the Contessa to hold any communication whatever."

Florestan was an ugly sight as he stood, his lips slightly apart, his teeth showing, a small but very sinister-looking gun in his right hand. His fingers had seemed only to flash through the air towards his pocket. Neither of the two could have told whence the gun came, but it was there with all its unpleasant significance. Elida shrank a little back. Hincks hesitated for a moment.

"I am here for straight talk and quick action," Florestan said. "What you are doing, young man, in Admiral Cheshire's rooms I do not know—I do not much care. The Admiral must be of a very forgiving nature. He lets Ryson shoot himself and keeps you on in your place. I don't care. Only, since you are here, you have got to do as I say. I want those plans your Chief was working on all yesterday. I want them and I am here to get them." [265]

"That seems a little unfortunate," Hincks rejoined firmly. "You seem to know so much you shall know the whole truth. The Contessa was entrusted with those plans. She has already delivered them at their destination."

"When?"

"Within the last two hours."

"Is that true, Contessa?" Florestan asked, fiercely swinging round on his heel.

"It is true."

"To whom have you delivered them?"

"That's no business of yours," Hincks broke in. "You may be an agent of the country for whom they are intended or you may not. I really do not care. You may as well understand, though, that supposing we were still in possession of those plans, neither the Contessa nor I would ever have entrusted them to you."

Florestan lowered his revolver. He still, however, held it tightly clenched in his right hand.

"I find your attitude towards me, Commander Hincks, unfriendly," he sneered.

"It is intended to be so," Hincks assured him.

"Almost rude," Florestan continued.

"It is still short of what you deserve," was the blunt reply.

"I am afraid," Florestan complained, "that the Contessa has been poisoning your mind against me."

"She doesn't need to do that," Hincks declared. "I have heard enough about you from other sources. You have come on a fruitless errand, Mr. Florestan. If you wanted to examine the papers which were temporarily entrusted to the Contessa Pelucchi you are too late. She has had them and parted with them. The sooner you realise that and clear out the better." [266]

The intruder shook his head.

"Oh no," he said, "I am not going to clear out."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"I am going to await the return of my kind friend, Admiral Cheshire. I am going to find out from him whether you are up to a game of your own, or whether he is in it, too. In plain words, young man, I am going to find out whether those plans are faked with the intention of deceiving the people you passed them on to or whether they are genuine."

"And where do you propose to wait?" Hincks demanded.

"In this room."

"Oh no, you are not," was the swift reply.

Hincks, who had been waiting for his opportunity, was over at the bell, his thumb pressed against it. At a different angle, Florestan's movements were just as quick. His hands ran lightly but searchingly over Elida. She was powerless to resist. Before she had summoned up her courage and her strength he had finished and stepped back.

"I am disappointed, but in a sense relieved," he said with ugly sarcasm. "So far as the Contessa is concerned she is absolved. I begin to wonder whether by some chance or other you have not both told the truth."

"We have," Hincks assured him, "whether you believe it or not."

"In that case," Florestan observed, "it is not worth while shooting either of you. If your plan of the British offensive in the North Sea and the Mediterranean has already been delivered I must change my scheme."

"What the hell do you know about these plans?" Hincks [267]

demanded, for the moment staggered.

Florestan paused in the act of listening. The silence outside was unbroken.

"To remain is scarcely worth the inconvenience to which your clumsy behaviour would expose me," he said calmly. "If I am really too late to intercept that precious document I shall relieve you of my presence. I wish you—"

"Wait a minute," Hincks interrupted. "I am not sure that we are ready to let you go. I have a fancy, Mr. Florestan, that the police would be interested to ask you a few questions."

"Let them come," was the bold reply. "I had a motor car stolen. I am not responsible for that. Your Chief found a revolver and some cartridges in my room. That, in itself, leads nowhere. There is no evidence against me of having ever broken the law. I may be an agent for a country with which England is not at present on speaking terms. What about it? I have done nothing illegal. I am a member of one of the oldest established and best known firms of merchants in the City. I have had large dealings with the Admiralty. They owe me, at the moment, over two million pounds."

Hincks, who had not quitted his position close to the bell, thrust his thumb upon the knob once more. Then he wheeled round to face the intruder.

"Look here, Florestan," he said. "You have come here and asked a good many foolish questions. I will ask you one. You admit that in England, you, a member of a firm of English merchants, are the agent of a foreign power. The Contessa here is a native of that country and has been in correspondence with them. Who, I ask you, gave you the right to interfere?"

"Capital," Florestan commented. "There is nothing so subtle as the truth. It is my object to find out on behalf of the Contessa's own country whether she is working in their interests or whether she is working against them on behalf of England." **[268]**

"How could she be working against them?" Hincks asked.

"By giving them false information."

There was a moment's tense silence. Florestan looked from one to the other of them. Elida had covered her face with her hands. She was racked with inward sobs. If this terrible man would only go away! She was more than ever thankful that she had checked her first impulse to scream at the sight of him and tell Ronnie of that horrible ride in the taxicab and her visit to the club.

"Because, you see," Florestan continued glibly, "if the Contessa is passing on information which is of service to her country with your help, Commander Hincks, and the help of

Admiral Cheshire, you two are guilty of high treason, and as a British citizen, it becomes my duty to denounce you. If, on the other hand, the information is faked, then, on behalf of the country whose agent I am, it is very important that I should denounce the Contessa to them. That is why I am so anxious to examine some of this so-called information. In Rome the name of Pelucchi is sacred. They have a great opinion of me but they will listen to no warning that I have offered them. There you are, my two friends. There's the whole position. No more mystery between us, you see. All fair and above-board. If these last plans which you have somehow or other smuggled over to Italy are genuine, show me a copy and give me twenty-four hours. I will tell you whether they are genuine or not. I will tell you whether it becomes my duty to denounce you and your Chief, Commander Hincks, to the British Government, or whether the Contessa Pelucchi is a traitress to her own country."

At last there came the sound of footsteps in the corridor, a key turning in the lock. The door of the room was opened. Greyes presented himself. He looked first at Elida, then he glanced at Hincks, and suddenly he seemed to recognise Florestan. He spoke not one single word. The perfectly-trained, quiet-voiced servant was suddenly a tiger. He sprang at Florestan's throat, seized him in an almost maniacal grip, flung him on to the divan and knelt there with his knee upon his stomach and his hands still upon his throat. **[269]**

"You dog!" he cried. "You murdering hound!"

There was a sudden reversal of the position. Florestan, with no apparent effort, slipped from the grip of the man who was holding him. He leaped to his feet and shook his aggressor as a terrier might have done a rat. Hincks rushed to the rescue but he was a moment too late. Florestan, with almost miraculous ease, had thrown his victim with a crash into the corner of the room. Greyes lay there, white and unconscious. Florestan faced the two young people with a composure which had in it something gruesome.

"Let me hear the truth," he demanded, "and I will at once relieve you of my presence."

Without a doubt, at that moment Florestan was dominant. Elida had risen unsteadily to her feet and was gazing with horrified eyes across the room towards Greyes's prostrate figure. Hincks had lost any gift of finesse which he might have possessed and was in a raging temper. He stood between Florestan and his late assailant, his eyes aflame with anger and his voice raised almost to a shout.

"Get out of this, you scoundrel! We have had enough of this melodrama. Find out the truth for yourself. Get out of this, I tell you!" **[270]**

“Or what?” Florestan enquired with deadly coolness.

“I’ll throw you out,” Hincks threatened. “You and your silly little gun and your jiu-jitsu tricks. Try them on me if you want to. Out you get!”

Hincks strode to the door and threw it open. He came back and confronted Florestan. The smile, half-taunting, half-vicious, was back on the man’s lips. He showed not a single sign of discomposure. He looked from his antagonist to the girl very much with the air of a man studying a chess problem.

“Dear me,” he said. “I always understood that officers in the British Service never lost their temper. Bad form, rather, isn’t it? In your present frame of mind further discussion is perhaps useless. Contessa, I leave you with the earnest hope that it is for your own country you are working. It will be better for your health. As for you, young man, you are either a double-crossing blunderer or a traitor to the Service which maintains you. Either is sufficiently despicable.”

Hincks, holding open the door, was moving his feet impatiently. Florestan, unhurried and not without a certain dignity, paused for a moment as he passed him.

“One word you used,” he said, “was justifiable. There is an element of melodrama about the waving of these little weapons which we so seldom use. The next time we meet I will come without a gun. There are half a dozen ways of breaking your neck.”

Hincks, who had partially recovered his composure, remained contemptuously silent. He waited until Florestan had passed out, then locked the door. He hastened back to the corner of the room where Elida was ministering to Greyes’s slow return to consciousness. The latter staggered a few minutes later to his feet. **[271]**

“I thank you, sir,” he stammered, “and you, Madam. I should have killed that man while I had the chance. I had no weapon and he has the strength of a devil.”

Hincks took him by the arm and led him into the adjoining bedroom.

“Lie down for a little while,” he begged. “Get yourself some brandy and water. The Contessa is on the point of leaving. When she has gone I will come in and see you.”

“You are very kind, sir,” Greyes replied. . . .

Hincks returned to the sitting room. Elida was nervously straightening her hat before the mirror. She was still very pale.

“Ronnie,” she faltered, “I am terrified of that man!”

“No need,” he assured her, “he won’t return.”

She gripped his shoulder and pointed to the handle of the door leading into the small hall. As they stood there together they both saw it slowly turned.

“There is someone out there,” she whispered.

“Whoever it is it won’t be Florestan,” he told her with confidence. “Wait!”

He moved softly to the door, quickly turned the key and opened it. On the threshold a woman was standing. She wore a magnificent fur coat but no hat or gloves. She was of strange appearance. Her speech—slow and carefully chosen words—was also unusual.

“I apologise,” she said. “I was looking for the bell. It is very important indeed that I should see Admiral Cheshire.”

“May I ask who you are?” Hincks enquired, gazing at her wonderingly.

“My name is Florestan,” she confided. “Deborah Florestan.”

CHAPTER XXIX

Mrs. Florestan looked enquiringly across at Elida, then back at Hincks, as she entered the room.

"I am not mistaken?" she asked. "These are the apartments of Admiral Cheshire?"

"The Admiral is away," Hincks explained. "I am occupying his rooms for a short time. I am a fellow-worker at the Admiralty."

"When will he be here?" she demanded. "My business is urgent."

"There's no chance of his being here for some time to come," Hincks told her. "It might interest you to know that someone of your name—presumably your husband—was here only a few minutes ago also hoping to see him. He went away disappointed."

Her eyes were wide, her astonishment convincing.

"My husband was here?" she repeated incredulously.

"In this room. His visit was an unpleasant one and when you appeared at the door I was regretting that I had not seen him leave in charge of the police."

"My husband's doings are no concern of mine. On the other hand, it is necessary that I should see Admiral Cheshire. Be so good as to tell me where he is."

"In hospital. It is quite impossible for you, or anyone else, to see him."

The fingers which were holding the fur coat around her distinctly trembled. Surprise gave way to terror in those strange expressive eyes.

"Tell me what is the matter with him!" she demanded. "He is not seriously ill?"

"There is nothing more that I can tell you," was the civil but curt response. "He is, at any rate, unable to receive visitors. I am his fellow worker at the Admiralty and even I am not allowed to see him."

She sat down a little abruptly. It seemed as though she had forgotten the presence of Elida.

"Has he met with an accident," she begged breathlessly, "or is it an ordinary illness?"

“I can tell you nothing more,” he repeated.

“But I must know,” she remonstrated. “You are treating me foolishly. If you are really Admiral Cheshire’s fellow worker I could tell you something serious about my husband’s visit here. Until you answer my question I can tell you nothing.”

“About the Admiral?”

“Yes. I know that he and my husband are enemies. I know that my husband is an enemy of this country. I am not. I will prove it if you will tell me where the Admiral is now and if he is in any sort of danger.”

Hincks was standing with his arms folded, looking at her steadfastly. She was a woman whom it was impossible for him to classify, yet he had a curious, although obscured, conviction of the truth. He decided that she was certainly not in league with her husband.

“The Admiral is in St. George’s Hospital. He is suffering from fatigue, owing to overwork. He is also suffering from a wound inflicted by an unknown assailant in Downing Street two days ago. From the overwork he will recover. The wound is dangerous.”

“A revolver shot?”

He nodded. For the first time, he noticed the peculiarity of those strangely-coloured eyes. There was something very much like venom now in their increased brilliance. **[274]**

“Do you believe,” she asked, “that he was shot by my husband?”

“I do not,” Hincks replied. “I do not think Mr. Florestan is anxious to take risks of that sort. He is one of those clever men who prefer to hire assassins.”

She moved her head in sympathetic understanding.

“My husband is like that,” she agreed. “Listen, the young lady is Italian?”

“She is,” Hincks said. “There is no harm in your knowing that she is the Contessa Elida Pelucchi.”

The two women looked at one another. They exchanged something in the way of salutation.

“She probably knows,” Deborah Florestan continued, “that my husband is the chief of the Secret Service of her country in England.”

“I realised that only lately,” was the quiet reply.

"You say that he was here a few minutes ago," she went on. "Shall I tell you where he has gone to now?"

"We should be extremely interested," Hincks acknowledged.

"He is on his way to a foreign country to put before the authorities there one of his latest discoveries. He believes that certain plans and documents which have been allowed to filter through to headquarters there are grievously and wilfully misleading. He believes that the most important one of all which has passed through the hands of Admiral Cheshire, and which he has been told by you I suppose has already been transmitted to Rome, is a cunningly devised document of Great Britain's combined offensive and defensive operations to commence without warning or declaration of war the moment your two plenipotentiaries who are now in Europe start on their final voyage back."

There was a moment's intense silence. Hincks's voice, when he spoke, was not altogether steady.

"He treats you with confidence."

"Sometimes—not always. That is his mistake. I now proceed to give you a word of advice which may save your country from the greatest danger she has ever faced."

"Well?"

"Stop my husband before he starts for the Continent."

"How?" Hincks snapped out. "Where is he now?"

She leaned towards the table and took up a scrap of paper. She worked on it rapidly for a few minutes with lines and dots. In the excitement of the moment none of them noticed the stealthy opening of the door leading into the bedroom.

"Here," Mrs. Florestan said, gripping Hincks's arm and tapping the paper with her forefinger. "I am trying to explain to you where my husband's fifth hidden aerodrome is. You probably know that he has a private hangar at Heston and one at Croydon and one in Suffolk. This one you do not know about. He is on his way there now. Just at the bottom of the by-way through Staines, here," she went on, touching the dot on the sheet of paper, "you turn to the right—so. The sign post may say anything. It does not matter. You get into another by-way. It is one of the national routes out of London. You turn westward and follow it three hundred yards. You come to what seems to be a country lane on the right-hand side. Never mind. Follow it. It gradually widens out until you come to a common. It was thick with furze six months ago. This has all been cleared away and there is a long, low shed hidden under the shelter of a hill. My husband has two planes there. He has planned to start for—well, you know where—immediately in one of them. If he gets

there, if he gives the people who direct the Councils his true opinion of the value of the papers drawn up by Admiral Cheshire, and passed on—the Contessa knows how—to Rome, there will be war. You should stop him."

"Why do you tell me this?" he demanded. [276]

"Because my husband has deceived me," she said bitterly. "I am one of those women who are easy in their way, but there are things they never forgive a man. I shall not tell you more than that. I am telling you what I do tell you not because I am a jealous wife, but because I have grown to hate my husband more than any living person. . . . You please yourself. You have your chance. All this underground work does not greatly interest me. I have been living in an atmosphere of it far too long. But listen—if you mean to stop my husband, you will have to take a fast car, you will have to follow him to the spot I have marked on that plan, and the rest must lie with you."

She shivered a little as she rose and drew her enveloping furs more closely around her. She half smiled at Elida. It might have been taken as a farewell salutation. From the door she looked back at Hincks, who was holding it open.

"You are a man of courage, I hope?"

"I also hope so," he answered.

"You will need all your wits with Horace Florestan," she warned him. "He is very strong, he has no fear and he has cunning. No man has ever yet got the best of him. Still, I wish you well."

"No message?" Hincks asked with faint sarcasm.

"If there is a fight and you are fortunate enough, you or anyone you may take with you, to be on the winning side, you can tell him that it was I who sent you," she wound up. "So long as it was certain that he was on his way to be shot," she added, as she passed out, "it would really give me pleasure to have him know that." [277]

"Ronnie," Elida exclaimed as the door closed, "what a terrible woman! Do you think she knows what she is talking about? Is it all true, that extraordinary story of hers?"

Hincks had disappeared into the bedroom. She heard him use one of the telephones wildly. He came out in a moment or two wearing a thick tweed coat.

"She is an amazing woman," he declared, "but Elida, I believe she is telling the truth. There have been rumours of a secret flying ground somewhere in that direction. I know Calthorpe, who is on the observation staff, was going to look into it next week. I know the spot exactly. Do you mind," he asked

wistfully, “if I send you home? It is duty, you know, Elida. I can’t let a chance go.”

She clung to him for a moment.

“Supposing it is a trap,” she suggested. “That woman might have been telling the truth or she might not. I defy anyone to tell.”

“Can’t take any risks,” he declared. “I have rung up Scotland Yard and given them all the directions I can. They will be there probably as soon as I shall. They will stop any flight from that spot, anyway, and hold anyone attempting to get away. You will be all right in a taxi, won’t you, dear, just for once?”

“No need,” she answered. “Sabine promised to send a car for me. It is probably outside now. We could not use it, I suppose, and I come, too?”

“We certainly could not,” was the firm reply. “For one thing my Bentley is faster than anything you people have in the way of town cars and another I want to go into this little affair with only myself to take care of. Come!”

They hurried off arm in arm and descended by the lift into the hall. To Hincks’s amazement, Greyes, looking a little pale but otherwise quite himself, was waiting there.

“Your Bentley is outside, sir,” he announced. “Hassall tells me she is filled up.”

“Good. I’m off.”

He handed Elida over to the care of the Prestley footman, who was waiting on the kerb, and sprang into the driving seat of his own car. Greyes, with a word of apology, scrambled into the vacant place by his side.

“What the devil are you doing, Greyes?” Hincks demanded.

“I shan’t be in the way, sir,” the man pleaded. “You will let me come along, please. I was in the bedroom all the time Mrs. Florestan was telling you her story and I know now that it is through that fiend her husband that the Admiral is lying where he is. I want to see hell coming to him.”

They were out in the Strand. If there had been a block it was Hincks’s idea to have gently assisted Greyes out. They had a clear run, though, and he forgot his companion’s presence. He had once done a little racing and the old fascination took hold of him. It was a dry, hard afternoon, foggy in patches, but considering the hour, there was extraordinarily little traffic about. They were in Pall Mall in a few minutes, through Hammersmith and on the by-way for Staines. Hincks chuckled grimly to himself.

"If we keep this up," he muttered, "we shall beat any police car. Let 'em whistle."

They easily found the narrow road into the second by-pass, six or seven miles of straight running and then the lane. Hincks swung into it, shut off his headlights and finally, trusting to his hearing, turned off the side lights also. Presently they came to the open space of which Deborah had spoken. They could see the hangars now, one with both doors open and a glow of light within. A short distance away in the level field a plane had been run out ready for starting. [279]

"Jove, we're only just in time!" Hincks said softly. "We have beaten the Yard car, anyway."

"The four or five men there are mechanics," Greyes pointed out. "Are you going to wait for the squad, sir?"

"Not I," was the fierce reply. "I am going to take my chance. You stay where you are, Greyes. I am pulling up in the shadow of the building here."

They could hear the throb of the aeroplane engines now. Hincks crept round the side of the hangar. The plane, a large and powerful one, was headed for the straight run, her lights were flashing but the steps were still down. One of the mechanics in charge turned round from his place with a growl as Hincks caught hold of the rail.

"Stand clear there!" he ordered. "We're starting directly."

"Where is your passenger?" Hincks demanded.

"He is coming right along and loiterers are not allowed here," was the threatening reply. "Stand clear, I tell you!"

A muffled-up figure, completely disguised in flying apparel, suddenly appeared from the shadows. Almost at the same moment a car turned out from the by-road. Its siren was shrieking as it approached the flying ground at full speed. The foot of the passenger was already upon the bottom step when he recognised Hincks. He laughed, a queer, unpleasant sound.

"Come to wish me *bon voyage*, my friend?" he asked.

"I have come to stop your leaving," was the harsh reply. [280]

"Stand back there!" one of the mechanics shouted angrily.

"Better do as he tells you," Florestan enjoined savagely. "My men here are rather an ugly lot. I don't like the look of this car coming down, Commander Hincks. Has it anything to do with you?"

"It is a police car from Scotland Yard. The Inspector who is in charge will want a few words with you before you start on this

journey," Hincks warned him. "You had better chuck it."

"You will have to think of a better reason than that why I should delay my departure," Florestan scoffed.

He sprang into the passenger's place with a single bound. The pilot slipped into his.

"Wish me *bon voyage*, Commander Hincks!" Florestan jeered.

Hincks had already reached the second step when a gentle touch on the arm and an almost whispered voice caused him to hesitate.

"Just a little further to the right, sir. Thank you. Horace Florestan—with my compliments!"

The bullet whizzed within a foot of Hincks's head, straight into Florestan's chest—another—two more, a fifth followed. Florestan, a huddled mass, fell over on his side. Greyes threw the revolver lightly away into the darkness as the dark forms which had tumbled out of the police car came running towards the plane.

"I must apologise, sir," he said in his smooth, patient voice. "I was perhaps a little hasty but I was afraid that if he had once got off into a foreign country there might have been diplomatic difficulties about getting him back again. I had to make sure of him, sir. It is through him that my master is lying in the hospital. I couldn't risk his getting away. I couldn't risk one bullet not killing him, either. Five in his chest, sir, all within an inch or two of one another. He couldn't get over that." **[281]**

Hincks turned his head for a moment from the men who were swarming round the aeroplane. He glanced at the huddled-up figure sprawling from the seat. Greyes looked over his shoulder with a quiet smile of triumph on his lips.

"You don't need to worry," Hincks declared. "Florestan is indeed dead."

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CHAPTER XXX

The four habitués met in the bridge room of the St. George's Club a few days later as though no crisis were holding the country breathless. Prestley remained entirely his pleasant imperturbable self. Fakenham showed signs of anxiety, in the lines under his eyes and his somewhat ruffled demeanour. Melville was, as usual, prim and self-contained. General Mallinson was grave and thoughtful. He had been the last to arrive and he at once addressed Fakenham.

"Have you the latest news from the hospital?" he asked.

The latter nodded.

"Cheshire is holding his own," he announced. "There was a consultation this morning. The general opinion was that if he got through the day and to-night, he would live."

"Thank God!"

Mallinson was visibly affected. Melville glanced at him curiously.

"I have never seen as much of Cheshire as I would have liked," Mallinson explained, "considering we had twin posts. That would have come later, of course—will come, I should say, if there is war. Up to the present, the Navy and the Air have taken everything in hand—whether in defence or offence they are first in the fray."

"Still no Continental news?" Prestley enquired.

Fakenham shook his head.

"Orson-Meade and Dunkerley," he confided, "seem completely bottled up. There has been no word from either of them for twenty-four hours." [283]

There was silence in the room of which they were the only occupants. Fakenham glanced around at the closed door.

"The Government," he continued, "have never taken the Press so much into their confidence with, I think I may say, such excellent results. To you three I see no harm in disclosing the fact that I have read the Government remonstrance addressed to a certain prominent person. It is, to my mind, perfect. It is dignified, it contrives to remain friendly in tone, but it intimates the Government's intention to break off the discussions and recall our Ambassador if the present impasse continues. Unless Dunkerley, particularly, and also Orson-Meade, receive an entirely satisfactory reply, I am afraid we shall have to make

up our minds to war."

Prestley let the cards which he had been shuffling slip through his fingers.

"If war comes," he lamented, "it will mean the end of civilisation. For generations the world will be an impossible place."

"Europe has gone crazy," Fakenham declared. "The nations have lost their heads and from the cataclysm of dissensions and misrule have belched out these dictators who aspire to govern the world. It seems strange that they cannot produce one man strong enough to be its saviour."

A pleasant smile lightened once more Prestley's face.

"Generalisations," he murmured, "are so helpless. Supposing we play a rubber of bridge."

They drew their chairs closer to the table and cut. The game proceeded.

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Over a thousand miles away, in a southern country, things were happening. In a fit of restlessness the great man had returned from the retreat of his country villa to the imposing palace where his headquarters was established. He hated conferences, he loved to come to his decisions alone, yet this time he had unwillingly discarded his predilections. In the smaller Council Chamber opening out from his private rooms he and five other men sat around a beautiful Florentine table. The room was stripped of ornaments, it lacked flowers or any form of decoration. It was as still and grey as the face of the man who sat with folded arms confronting his advisors. There was his Ambassador for many years to the Court of St. James's, who sat upon his left. There was his son, who, with a roll of plans spread out before him, sat facing his illustrious parent. There was Mazarin, Minister for War, who sat there disturbed and anxious. On his right, Count Patani, who held the unsubstantial post of Minister of Finance. Finally, there was Karl Hershfeld, arrived that morning from the northern capital of their allies, to await whose coming this vital meeting had been twice postponed. There had been much talk that afternoon. Now there had come a pause. Opinions were divided. For once there was opposition. The man whose will had before been unquestioned was disturbed. His underlip had crept outwards. The muffled note of insubordination had sounded like a death knell, and its first mutterings had come from his own family.

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"It appears to be the wish of some of you," he said coldly, "that we should abandon both the proud position we have taken up with regard to our interest in the Mediterranean and our aspirations for world power. Our Empire, at the apex of her ascent, stands now at the crossroads. Once before, Europe and

part of Africa lay shivering at her feet. The same position has arisen to-day. Let me hear, from anyone who has the courage, why we should shrink from our destiny."

Then the man whom he had loved spoke, a man not unlike himself but dressed with more fastidious nicety, a man, too, with the air of towns and civilised places in his bearing. His name was Corti, and if his words just now were mild, one was forced to remember that he had done devilish things in two campaigns.

"Lack of money for one thing," he said bluntly. "It is a detestable truth, but even a nation so gloriously placed as ours has to consider ugly facts. It has to feed its armies and pay for its munitions. The American banker, even though he was married to a woman of our race, dealt us the bitterest blow when he refused to treat with Patani. His interest in financial circles throughout the world has put him in a position which no Rothschild nor any other emperor of finance has ever occupied before. Directly he said 'No' the whole situation changed. It is not only the money he commands, but with his influence against us there is not a country in the world who could help. In the old days it was possible to make war and to pay for it by despoiling the beaten enemy. Nothing of the sort is possible to-day. We cannot keep an army in the field, our planes in the air, our cannons roaring, with empty coffers."

"The reply to that," the man at the head of the table answered grimly, "is a swift war, a war that is over in a few months."

"No Power in the world," the other said, "could enter upon a war with the British Empire and believe that it would be over in a few months. Then there is the bald, hard fact that the only thing we could gain by victory, empty glory, would not compensate for what we risk losing." [286]

"Cross out that word from your mind," the Dictator cried harshly. "My people do not know how to lose. Under my control they will never learn."

"Nevertheless," Corti persisted, "leaving out, for the moment, this mighty question of finance, Hershfeld here, the representative of our great ally, has brought sage counsels to this discussion. Together, he and I have studied what between ourselves we have called the 'Whitehall Offensive,' a plan of which has come into our hands owing to our perfect espionage system. It displays a genius equal to our own. It is an epic of strategy which I, who have seen war and planned it, declare might cost us our present glorious position. I do not speak these words in fear, I do not speak them out of friendship to England, although it is true that I have many friends there and a great respect for an ill-led but still invincible country. I maintain that we have placed ourselves in a false position. Britain has called our bluff. In a few hours we shall have to speak the words which will certainly mean war and may possibly bring

upon us humiliation, or we can adopt the rôle to which we are entitled of being the champions of civilisation, declaring before the world that notwithstanding our strength we carry a mandate for peace."

There was silence for a moment. Hershfeld nodded in grave approval.

"The leader of my country," he said, "whom I am sent here to represent, would be in accord with those words. I have studied these secret plans of the enemy, which your superb espionage system has brought into our hands. I find them faultless. I say that we should be unwise to choose this moment to precipitate an unripe war. War there must be," he went on, "if Germany is denied the return of her Colonies. That is a certainty. France has made sacrifice to us. England has given nothing. The time is surely coming when she must give or fight for what she holds, but I agree with Signor Corti that that time is not now. With all respect for your genius, Signor, I speak these words for your ally and for the country which is your greatest admirer. The time is not yet." [287]

"What does my own Minister for War say?" the Dictator asked bluntly.

Mazarin met his master's furious gaze, for the support of the last speaker had emboldened him.

"Signor," he replied, "like all great countries, we have our weak points. Whatever genius produced this plan has made himself acquainted with them. It is my regretful judgment that we have under-estimated the British resources. If they can put that Fleet into the North Sea without disturbing their power in the Mediterranean, if this great scheme of mining has really been carried out, Germany is bottled-up like a dog in its kennel. England has no more to fear the hostility of the Japanese. America will take care of the East. The Suez Canal is open. Italy, cut off from German help, would have to face a naval force far more than equal to her own. The attitude of France may be for a moment hesitant. If this attack were once launched she would hesitate no longer. Many weary years might pass during which my country would once more stand still. All that you, Signor, have done, would remain stagnant. Even a possible measure of success would be won at too great cost."

"You have spoken, Mazarin," his master said coldly. "I have still another word to add. The man Florestan has done more good work for our country in London than anyone connected with our Secret Service, except the person through whose means the 'Whitehall Offensive' plan has reached us. For the moment we have lost touch with him. He has his instructions to return and it is my desire to confront him with this document which you all seem to find so terrifying. I admit that the source from which it came is unquestionable. There have been patriots [288]

through every generation in the great House of Pelucchi, and no one would dream of treachery on the part of anyone bearing that name, but I suggest this. Let us wait for Florestan's return and put these plans into his hands."

"With what object?" his son enquired.

"To be absolutely certain that they are real and honest and that they can be carried out. That is to say, that England really has forces sufficient to carry out the plans involved. We should remember this—Florestan has done a great work. He has sold through his firm there vast quantities of material to the British Admiralty, metals of every description, miles of this supposedly non-inflammable covering for their new type of aeroplanes. Everything has been accepted without a single hitch. The only man, the great builder of aeroplanes, who seemed to have any suspicions of certain of the material, met with his death before he could interfere. To me it seems impossible that a nation who could be so completely deceived could have produced the 'Whitehall Offensive' scheme. It is my suggestion that we await the return of Florestan, show him the document and convince ourselves as to its integrity."

There was a dubious silence amongst the little company. The Ambassador to England was the brave man.

"Signor," he pointed out, "Florestan is not here. There is no present certainty of his whereabouts. We have put ourselves in the wrong with these continual postponements. I can tell you this myself—it is the reason I have flown over here with your permission to give my advice. If we do not reopen the conversations courteously, as we still can do without loss of dignity, this evening or to-morrow, England will declare war. We shall have been manoeuvred into a cul-de-sac. When these postponements were commenced it was obvious that they were leading us into a false position. I am no blind lover of British arrogance but I say that in this case there was behind the suggestions made to us a real and earnest desire for peace, a reasonableness as to the bases of discussion which will place us in the wrong before the world if we break off negotiations now without some far more reasonable excuse than we possess. The splendid espionage system of our country has saved us. We realise that the present is not the moment for our great coup. Do not let us throw away our advantage. It is not too late to adopt a dignified and tolerant attitude. Let us agree in both capitals upon the same technique. Let us congratulate ourselves and everyone on the passing of your indisposition, Signor, upon your return to your capital and the reopening of conversations. They will continue at the same time in Berlin. They must be on the bases introduced by Great Britain. We must come to an agreement. It is easily done. Listen. There will be nothing binding upon us. Our agreement, let us say, shall come into force when certain concessions have been granted on both sides. The time limit imposed upon the granting of these concessions must have an elastic quality. We can play with the

final settlement. We need sign nothing, for the moment, enter into no real and binding alliance. We can choose an occasion more opportune than this one. If it should seem to us in two years' time that a successful campaign against the British Empire is possible, we can strike then. To-day," the Ambassador concluded, after a brief hesitation, "I will not say that it is impossible, but I will say that it carries too many risks."

"Risks!" the man in the chair ejaculated scornfully. **[290]**

"Signor," the Ambassador ventured, "I repeat the word. It is one which the diplomatist has learnt to respect."

The Dictator rose to his feet.

"The meeting is dissolved," he pronounced harshly. "The cowards win."

Bridge was over for the evening at the St. George's Club. The hour for *apéritifs* had arrived. The four players were still lounging in their places round the table when the tray was brought in. Simultaneously, the steward made an announcement.

"A special messenger from the Foreign Office to speak to Your Lordship," he said in a low tone to Fakenham.

The latter rose briskly to his feet and left the room.

"News at last!" Mallinson muttered.

They all showed their anxiety in different ways. Melville took his glass from the man, drained its contents almost at a single gulp, sprang to his feet and paced the room with his hands behind his back. Mallinson set down his glass before him and seemed to forget it. His eyes were fixed fiercely upon the door. Prestley sipped his sherry, set down the glass still half-full and tapped with his forefinger gently upon the table.

"It will be good news," he prophesied.

Fakenham was gone less than two minutes. The smile upon his face when he reappeared sent a thrill of joyous anticipation through the nerves of the three men. His voice was hoarse as he spoke.

"Good news!" he exclaimed. "The Foreign Office have just received a cable from Dunkerley. It consists of one word: JUBILATION. Anyone know the A6 Continental Code? No? Well, it means simply this: THINGS HERE HAVE CHANGED DEFINITELY FOR THE BETTER." **[291]**

Melville wiped his forehead and sank into his place.

"Thank God!" he murmured.

Mallinson took up the glass with which he had been toying and rose to his feet. Melville glanced at his empty tumbler in disgust and pressed the bell. Prestley regarded them all with a kindly smile.

"In times of crisis," he cried, "you Britishers think of only one thing! Order me another drink, Melville, while you're about it."

"Well, there's another thing I haven't forgotten, anyway," the General declared. "Order me what you like. I shan't be ten minutes."

He made for the door.

"Where are you off to?" Melville asked. "We can't break this up for a few minutes."

"I'm for the hospital," Mallinson answered. "I want to see the physician. If someone can breathe just one word to Cheshire it may save his life. I wonder whether he would recognise the code."

"What—Cheshire?" Fakenham demanded.

"Yes."

Fakenham laughed quietly.

"The man's a living marvel," he said. "He knows the code book backwards. One word, General. That's all that's wanted: JUBILATION."

CHAPTER XXXI

Once again, the palatial London home of Henry D. Prestley was the scene of great and gorgeous celebrations. Signor Broccia, the Ambassador from her country, bent over Sabine's fingers and there was a quiver of emotion in his tone as he greeted her. They spoke, as they always had done, naked words to one another.

"You are content?" she asked him anxiously.

"It is for the best, Princess," he replied. "Sometimes one is led away into the region of alluring dreams but there come the awakening moments. War is a horrible and brutal force. I am content. So is the better part of my country behind me."

She sighed with relief. There were things in her mind which he would never know, but his words and his manner seemed almost like absolution.

"And the Master?"

"For the time being he sulks in his cage, an angry lion. That will pass. The age of a greater wisdom comes. It must be a joy to you, dear Princess," he went on, "to know that your husband has helped as much as any other man in the world towards stopping war. It was a terrible blow to our Minister of Finance when he practically destroyed every hope we had of a foreign loan."

She smiled.

"I think there was one who did even more for his country than my husband," she murmured.

The Ambassador shrugged his shoulders. The stream of guests behind him was brought almost to a standstill. He passed on. Sabine, a minute or two later, took a quick step forward and held out both her hands to the gaunt man who was slowly climbing the stairs.

"Guy!" she exclaimed. "This is really wonderful of you! I cannot tell you—I cannot begin to tell you—how happy it makes me to think that you are here."

He smiled into her dimmed hazel eyes. There was a momentary gap in the flow of arrivals.

"Dear Sabine," he said, "you know how I always love a party. I wasn't going to miss this one. What a glorious show! You have heard the news, I suppose. I am chucked out of hospital free to eat and drink and amuse myself."

“But who is looking after you?” she asked anxiously. “You ought not to be going about alone.”

“Commander Hincks is my special attaché,” he told her. “Gazetted to-night.”

She held out her hand to the young man who was hovering round.

“I thought there was something strange about your uniform,” she remarked. “Take care of him, Ronnie. Go into the Tapestry Room and as soon as I can I will come and have a talk for a few minutes.”

Henry Prestley, who had been escorting some distinguished guests into the reception room, returned to take up his place by Sabine’s side. He clasped Cheshire’s hand warmly.

“We are missing you at the club,” he declared. “They tell me you are working again.”

“A few things to clear up, that’s all,” was the cheerful reply. “They won’t put me on the retired list yet so I am having a busman’s holiday. Harding is taking me out to Malta in his new toy.”

“The forty-five-thousand-tonner, eh?” Prestley asked with a smile.

The other nodded.

“Your country’s fault we had to build them so big,” he observed. “Come on, Ronnie, help me toddle into a quiet corner somewhere.”

“Here I am, sir,” Hincks replied. “I know just the spot where you will be comfortable. Elida and I fixed it up this afternoon. We have made a regular Holy of Holies of it.”

“I shall be there presently,” Sabine called out over her shoulder.

“And I am coming now,” Elida cried, breaking away from a group of young people.

It was a wonderful and very jealously guarded retreat. Cheshire sank into an easy chair and Elida, with a sigh of satisfaction, settled down close by. Hincks, who had sent a footman away on a not very mysterious errand, arranged a table in front of them.

“Short leave, if you please, sir,” he begged. “I will be back in a few minutes.”

He vanished in the crowd. Elida drew her chair a little nearer to her companion’s.

“Hundreds of things I want to ask you,” she confided.

“I shouldn’t,” he advised. “An over-inquisitive spirit in the young should always be checked.”

“I will be content with one question, then. Broccia looks at me sometimes curiously. Do you think that he suspects?”

“No one will ever know, because he is the type of man who never tells,” Cheshire replied. “And for the sake of your private conscience I will remind you of this. Supposing some of those documents you handled were intended to deceive; I had working against me on the other side a secret envoy of your country who succeeded in selling to various departments of the Government a great many million pounds’ worth of material which was intended to do more than deceive. It would have destroyed.”

“Why were your experts so blind?”

“They were not,” he assured her. “They acted under my instructions when they accepted all these shipments. We should never have used them, but no one else knew that. It was done with the object of instilling into our possible enemies a sense of false security.”

“But that last set of plans?”

“The last effort was different,” Cheshire admitted. “That was our *chef d’oeuvre*. Whether it was a truthful representation of our intentions is not your affair. You transmitted it. Your agent in the Embassy here eagerly accepted it. In Rome they passed judgment upon it. It was a *ruse de guerre* which, coming from the head of the British Secret Service, was perfectly justified.”

“But will there not be bad feeling if they find out?”

“No one could find out,” Cheshire assured her. “For that very reason, we are still carrying on the bluff. Imaginary ships have been moved to unknown ports, fifty mine sweepers are at work in the North Sea at the present moment destroying mines which never existed. Guns have been mounted and jealously guarded which could never fire even a cannon ball! They will be dismantled at once. Let that be sufficient.”

A footman brought champagne, filled their glasses and discreetly withdrew.

“Serious talk is now finished,” Cheshire insisted. “I have dwelt enough upon the events of the past few months in my nightmares at the hospital. There is to be no war. To stop that is worth more than the whole soul of any man or woman. When are you and Ronnie going to be married?”

“Very soon,” she confessed.

"Capital." [296]

"It might be the week after next," she told him.

"Better still," he declared. "I shall be here to give you my blessing."

Sabine swept down upon them, gorgeous in her amber satin gown with its faint suggestion of the old Court crinoline, aglow with the famous diamonds which she so seldom wore, exquisitely human with that faintly wistful light in her eyes as she crossed the room towards them. Behind her came Hincks, a changed man, debonair and happy, perfectly at ease and a very attractive figure in his new uniform.

"Elida," Sabine said, "you must go and dance with Ronnie. It is my turn in here. I am only afraid that it will be too short."

The young people departed. Sabine took her sister's place.

"Guy," she said, "Elida has not been tiring you, I hope."

"No, my dear," he replied. "I have only been trying to set her mind at rest once and for all."

"I have been so terrified for her, but those days have passed. We are in smooth waters now. . . . And you, Guy?"

"Off on a pleasure cruise," he confided. "XYZ is disbanded. Masses of our papers have already gone down to the Tower. The Aircraft Carrier Department is taking over our offices."

"And you," she asked, "what will they do for you? There are no honours which your country has to give which should not be yours. I am one of the few who know, remember."

He smiled.

"My dear Sabine," he explained, "the men who work on the [297]
lines which I have done and for the purpose which I have had in mind think nothing or know nothing of honours. We live in the shadows. I go back to my old job, except that they have given me a ship and six months' leave."

"But that is preposterous—" she began.

He stopped her.

"Sabine," he insisted, "it is common sense. Supposing I were singled out for special promotion, for special orders, for special distinction, would not the whole world want to know how I had earned these things? Then our secrets might be dragged into the light. We work for the salvation of the Empire —not for special distinction. I am absolutely content."

"It does not seem fair," she meditated.

“Life,” he pointed out, “is brim-full of compensations.”

She lifted her head. Perhaps she was listening, perhaps she was looking down the avenues of the past, perhaps she was gathering in the sense of her own great position as she caught those glimpses of the moving throng outside, heard the hum of voices, the laughter—knew herself to be the reigning spirit of this great concourse of the world’s distinguished people. Her hand fell softly upon his for a moment.

“Guy,” she asked, “have you ever loved any other woman?”

“Never,” he answered. “Nor have I for one minute,” he went on, after an instant’s pause, “regretted your decision. A poor sailor cuts no sort of show in this great life, Sabine, in this kingdom over which you rule. I have found my meed of happiness in other things. When my days of active service are over I shall have a whole crop of marvellous memories. I think that nature must have meant me for the life I have lived and the post I have held. These things which fill your world I could never have given you.”

“Perhaps,” she said quietly, “you might have given me something which has always been missing, but even you, Guy, could never have been a more wonderful husband than Henry.”

“I suppose,” he declared, “Henry Prestley is about the only man living whom I can think of with content and without a shadow of envy as your husband.”

“Are we super-romantic or ultra-practical?” she asked.

“My dear,” he answered, “we are ourselves and the lives which we have lived and are living seem good to us.”

Elida drifted back presently . . . Sabine’s private secretary came swiftly to her.

“Princess,” he announced, “word has come from the Palace that their Royal Highnesses have left. They will be here in five minutes.”

Sabine waved her hand in farewell and with her usual unhurried grace swept away towards the reception room. Elida and Cheshire were left alone. A footman hurried up and filled their glasses.

“Guy, may I ask you one more thing,” she begged, “about those affairs that lie behind?”

“Of course,” he acquiesced. “Let us finish with it, my dear. Let us put a seal upon the lot of them but before we stamp it I will gratify your curiosity. Come on, what is it now?”

“Greyes, your valet, the man who shot Florestan on the flying ground?”

"Tried by a special court called together by Act of Parliament under an almost disused statute," he confided. "Sentenced to detention during his Majesty's pleasure. As a matter of fact," he added, with a smile, "it will be a matter of another fortnight." [299]

"And the large woman, the one who came to the rooms that afternoon—I suppose Ronnie told you—and demanded you? She said she was Florestan's wife."

"So she was," he answered. "At least, for anything I know to the contrary. She had little or no share in his marvellous career. We had to break the firm with which Florestan was associated but there was plenty of money. She has a large income, a flat somewhere in Paris, where she lives with her two children, and she is taking a mature course of voice production to enable her to sing publicly again."

"One more secret—the shot in Downing Street?"

"They caught the fellow, as you may have read, and half-killed him. It was a long time before he could come into court. His case was remanded and he died in prison."

"And who was he?"

"His name was Marius Ludini and he was one of the few men in life," Cheshire told her, "whom I have specially and actually disliked. He was one of Florestan's gang, a sort of personal bodyguard, I think. I had him in custody once but he escaped from his cell. His job towards the end was to get rid of me, somehow. He was not really a good conspirator any more than he was an agreeable personality. Anyway, that was the end of him."

"And we go on," she murmured. "I am marrying Ronnie. Sabine will remain, I suppose, what Signor Broccia called her just now—the greatest feminine figure in diplomatic Europe. Henry will live, too, with his head a little in the clouds, gently detached from the world, loving his wife and bridge more than anything in life. And you are going back to the sea. There is something wrong somewhere, Guy. What is it?" [300]

All the sailor's high spirits rang out in his happy laugh but if he could have answered her question he preferred silence.

THE END

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BOOKS BY E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Mr. Oppenheim's published books, including the four omnibus volumes, total 145. 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 105 novels, of which 10 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

SHORT-STORY COLLECTIONS

Of these 35 collections of short stories, 24 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

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

Transcriber's Notes

- Preserved the copyright notice from the printed edition, although this book is in the public domain in the country of publication.
- Silently corrected a few typos (but left nonstandard spelling and dialect as is).
- In the text versions, delimited text in italics by _underscores_.

[The end of *The Spymaster* by E. Phillips Oppenheim]