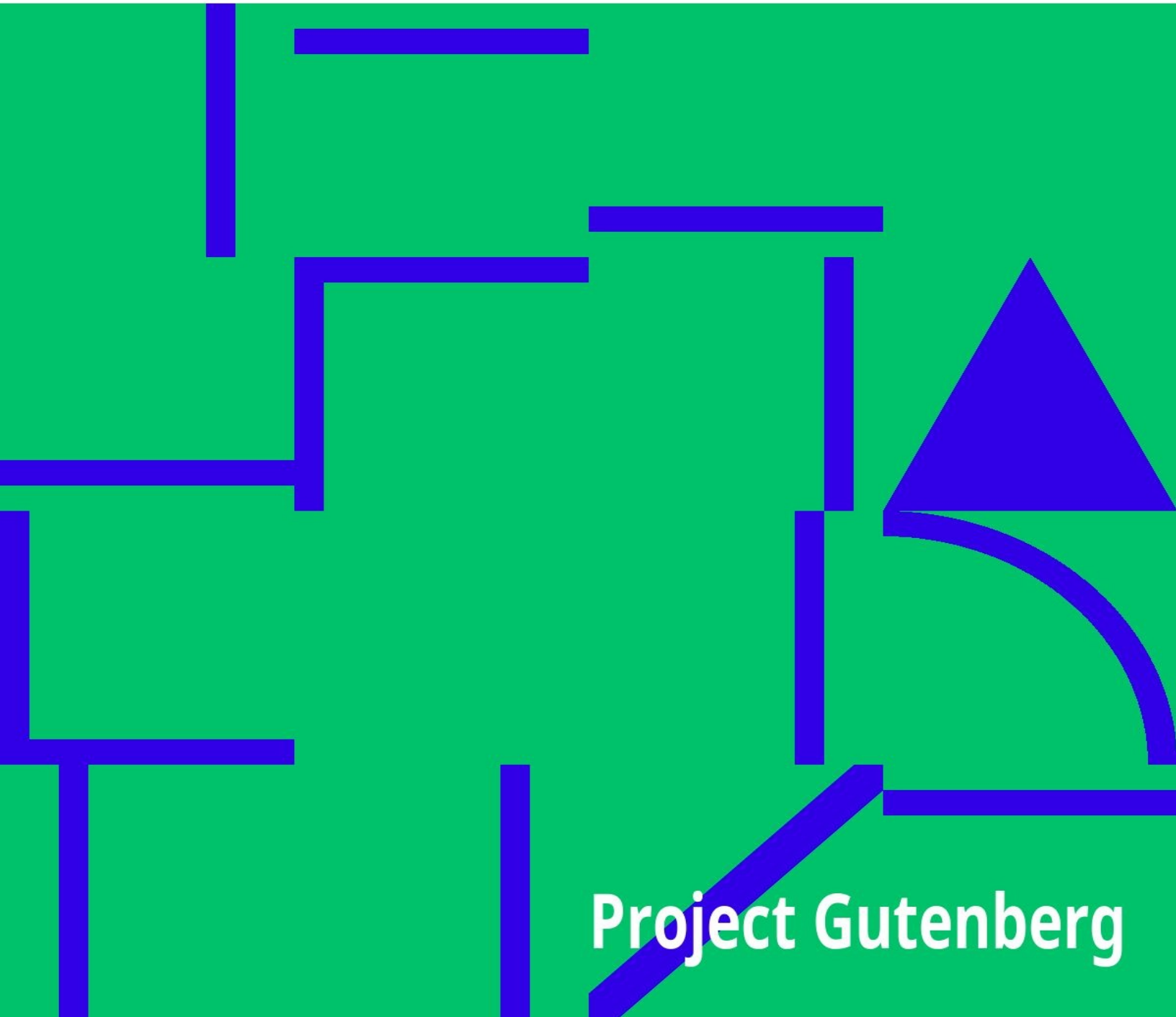
Her Royal Highness

A Romance of the Chancelleries of Europe

William Le Queux



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Chapter One.

The Nile Travellers.

The mystic hour of the desert afterglow.

A large, square wooden veranda covered by a red and white awning, above a wide silent sweep of flowing river, whose huge rocks, worn smooth through a thousand ages, raised their backs about the stream, a glimpse of green feathery palms and flaming scarlet poinsettias on the island opposite, and beyond the great drab desert, the illimitable waste of stony, undulating sands stretching away to the infinite, and bathed in the blood-red light of the dying day.

On the veranda sat a crowd of chattering English men and women of wealth and leisure—taking tea. The women were mostly in white muslins, and many wore white sun-helmets though it was December, while the men were mostly in clean suits of “ducks.” An orchestra from Italy was playing Musetta’s waltz-song from “La Bohème,” and the same people one meets at the opera, at supper at the Savoy or the Ritz, were chattering over tea and pastries served by silent-footed, dark-faced Nubians in scarlet fezes and long white caftans.

The Cataract Hotel at Assouan is, at five o’clock, when the Eastern desert is flooded by the wonderful green and crimson of the fading sun, the most select yet cosmopolitan circle in all the world, the meeting-place of those seekers after sunshine who have ascended the Nile to the spot where rain has never fallen within the memory of man.

The poor old played-out Riviera has still its artificial attractions, it is true. One can, for once in one’s life, enjoy the pasteboard of the Nice carnival, the irresponsible frolic of the Battle of Flowers, the night gaiety of Ciro’s, breathe the combined odour of perspiration and perfume in the rooms at Monte, eat the *gâteaux* at Vogarde’s, play the one-franc game of *boule* at the Casino Municipal, or lunch off the delicious trout from the tanks at the Reserve at Beaulieu. But the Cote d’Azur and its habitués, its *demi-mondaines* and its *escrocs* soon pall upon one; hence Society nowadays goes farther afield—to Egypt, the land of wonders, where there is ever-

increasing charm, where the winter days amid those stupendous monuments of a long-dead civilisation are rainless, the land where Christmas is as warm as our English August, where all is silent and dreamy beside the mighty Nile, and where the brown-faced sons of the desert kneel Mecca-wards at sunset and praise the name of Allah the One. Allah is just; Allah is merciful. There is no God but Allah!

Some winter idlers go to Cairo, and there indulge in the gaieties of Shepheard's, the Savoy, or the Gezireh Palace, or the teas and dances at Mena House, or the breath of freedom at Heliopolis. But Cairo is not Egypt. To see and to know Egypt one must ascend the Nile a farther eight hundred miles to Luxor—the town where once stood ancient Thebes, the City of a Hundred Gates, or to Assouan, the Aswan of the days of the Pharaohs.

It is there, on the borders of the glowing desert of Nubia, far removed from the stress of modern life, that one first begins to experience the new joy of existence—life in that limitless wilderness of sky and sand, life amid the relics of a mighty and wonderful age long since bygone and forgotten.

On that afternoon of early December a merry party of four young people —two girls and two men—sat at one of the small tables on the veranda.

The gay quartette, waited upon by Ahmed, an erect bronze statue, picturesque in his white caftan and red sash, were laughing merrily as the elder of the two men recounted the amusing progress of a party whom he had accompanied on camels into the desert that afternoon.

Around them everywhere was loud chatter and laughter, while the orchestra played dreamily, the music floating across the slowly darkening river which flowed on its course from unexplored regions of Central Africa away to the far-distant Mediterranean.

"I went across to Philae this morning to see the temples—Pharaoh's Bed, and the rest. Hardy pulled me out of bed at six o'clock," exclaimed the younger of the two men—a tall, clean-shaven Englishman of a decided military type. "But I must confess that after flogging the Nile for nearly three weeks and Mahmoud taking us to see every temple along its

banks, I'm getting just a bit fed up with antiquities and ruins."

"Oh, my dear fellow," cried the elder man in quick reproach, "you must never admit such a thing in Upper Egypt. It's horribly bad form. Mademoiselle will agree—eh?"

And the broad-shouldered, handsome man of thirty-five or so in a clean white linen suit leaned back in his chair and laughed at the pretty, dark-haired vivacious French girl he had addressed. She was not more than twenty, with a refined oval face, wonderfully expressive eyes, and a small delicate mouth which parted as she shrugged her shoulders and smiled back at him in assent.

"Ah, Waldron, but you're a diplomat, you know!" replied the younger man. "You fellows always say the right thing in the right place. We chaps in the Service, however, have a habit of speaking bluntly, I fear."

"It is just as easy to be diplomatic, my dear Chester, as to be indiscreet," replied the Honourable Hubert Waldron, M.V.O., who was second secretary at His Britannic Majesty's Embassy at Madrid, and was now on leave for a winter holiday.

Not yet forty, a smart, well-groomed, athletic, clean-cut Englishman, he nevertheless possessed the distinct Foreign Office air, and was, at the same time, a cosmopolitan of cosmopolitans. Essentially a ladies' man, as every good diplomat should be, he was, in addition, decidedly handsome, with pale, refined features, a strong face with straight nose, a pair of dark, deep-set, thoughtful eyes, and a dark, well-trained moustache.

At Court functions, balls, receptions, official dinners and such-like festivities when, with his colleague, he was bound to be on show in his perfect-fitting diplomatic uniform, women always singled him out as a striking figure, as, indeed, he was, and at Stockholm, Brussels, and Lima, where he had respectively served as attaché he had attained great popularity among the *corps diplomatique*, and the gay, giddy world of Society which, in every capital, revolves about it.

The quartette had made each other's acquaintance since leaving Cairo, having found themselves fellow-passengers on board the fine new river-

steamer, the *Arabia*—members of a smart party of wealthy idlers which included two of America's most famous millionaires. The party numbered thirty, all told, and during the three weeks they had travelled together and had all spent a time which each declared to be the most delightful of their lives.

The younger Englishman was Chester Dawson, son of Sir Forbes Dawson, M.P., and a lieutenant in the 19th Hussars, who, like Waldron, was on leave, while of the two ladies the younger was French, though she spoke English perfectly, and the other, ten years her senior, was slightly angular and decidedly English.

Mademoiselle Lola Duprez had attracted Hubert Waldron from the first moment when they had met on the upper deck an hour after leaving Cairo. She was bright, vivacious, and extremely *chic*, possessing all the daintiness of the true Parisienne without her irritating mannerisms. Slightly *petite*, with an extremely pretty and refined face, big eyes, a perfect complexion and a slim, erect figure, she was—judged from the standpoint of a connoisseur of female beauty as Hubert Waldron undoubtedly was—unusually beautiful and attractive. On many of the excursions into the desert when the party had landed to visit the ancient monuments, the pyramid of Sakkâra, the Tomb of Thi, the temples of Abydos Denderah and the rest, Hubert had ridden a donkey at her side, or spent the long, idle, sunny afternoon hours on deck, lolling in the padded cane-chairs sipping coffee and gossiping as the steamer, with its Arab *reis* or pilot squatting in the bow smoking cigarettes, made her way up the broad stream.

Thus, in the three delightfully lazy weeks which had gone, they had become most excellent friends, while Chester Dawson had, with all the irresponsibility of the young cavalry officer, admired a striking go-ahead American girl named Edna Eastham who, with her father, had come from Chelsea, Massachusetts. Mother, father, and daughter were a loud-speaking, hard-faced trio who bought all the false antiques offered to them by Arab pedlars.

Mademoiselle's companion, a Miss Gabrielle Lambert, was a woman of quite a different stamp. She was nearly thirty, with a rather sad, thoughtful face, but unmistakably a lady by birth and breeding, half English, half

French, though she never spoke much of herself. Travelling with the two girls was an old and peculiarly shrewd grey-haired Frenchman, an uncle of mademoiselle named Jules Gigleux, a good type of the dandified though elderly Parisian, yet to Hubert—a student of men—he was from the first something of a mystery.

Ahmed, the silent dignified servant with the face of bronze, handed mademoiselle a small plate of bon-bons. She took one, and then turning to the diplomat, exclaimed in her pretty broken English:

“I’ve at last persuaded uncle to take us up to Wady Haifa! I’m longing to see the Second Cataract. We have booked berths by the steamer next Monday.”

“Next Monday!” Waldron echoed. “Why then we shall be fellow-passengers again, mademoiselle. I booked my berth a month ago. I’ve been up there before. You will be much impressed by the rock-hewn Temple of Abu Simbel, the finest and most remarkable sight on the Nile.”

“I read all about it in the guide-books on board the *Arabia*,” she said with her pretty French accent. “It is to see the wonderful temple that I want to go there, although my uncle has been trying all day to put obstacles in the way. It takes a fortnight, and he seems to want to get back to Paris—whatever for, I fail to imagine.”

“He’s tired of the Nile, like our young friend Chester,” laughed Waldron mischievously. “I really believe Chester prefers a motor-run to Brighton with lunch at Crawley and tea at the Métropole.”

“All this jargon about Rameses, the great god, Osiris, good old Horus, Amen Ra, and all those gods with weird heads of birds and horned animals, the cartouches which the Pharaohs stuck upon everything—oh, it becomes so horribly boring,” declared the young fellow with a yawn. “And everywhere one goes some Arab appears from nowhere pestering you to buy an imitation scarab or some blue beads made in Birmingham a few weeks ago. Why on the *Prince Luitpold Regent* from Marseilles we had a man bringing over a fresh consignment of Egyptian antiques for the season! He showed me some!”

“Ah!” laughed Lola, “I see you are not held by the spell of Egypt, as we all

are. Personally, I love it, and enjoy every moment of the day. It is all so very different to everything else I have seen."

"You have travelled a good deal, eh, mademoiselle?" asked Waldron, his tea-cup in his hand.

"Ah, yes; a good deal. I've seen most of the capitals of Europe," was her rather vague reply. "But there is nothing like Egypt—nothing half so interesting as life up here, away from modern civilisation and yet so full of up-to-date comfort. I marvel at everything—even at this hotel. They tell me all the food—even the fish and poultry—comes from Europe. All that we eat is brought a couple of thousand miles!"

"Yes," Miss Lambert agreed. "The English have done marvels in Egypt without a doubt."

Waldron glanced at Lola, and thought he had never seen her looking so indescribably charming. She was slightly flushed after riding that afternoon, but in her neat, clean linen gown, with her green-lined sun-helmet set slightly back on her head she presented a delightful picture of feminine daintiness and charm.

At that moment Edna Eastham, a tall, well-built girl of twenty-two, crossed the veranda laughing loudly over to two ladies of the party who sat near, and took a vacant table for tea, whereupon Chester Dawson, with a word of excuse, rose quickly and, crossing, joined her.

"Chester seems quite fed up," declared Waldron when the young fellow had gone.

"Yes. But he's coming with us up to Wady Haifa," said mademoiselle.

"Because Miss Eastham is going," remarked the diplomat with a sarcastic smile.

"Perhaps so. But do you know," she went on, "I've had such awful trouble to persuade uncle to take me on. He is anxious to get back to Europe—says he has some pressing business and all that."

"The heat affects him, I believe; it is trying to one not used to it," the man

replied.

“Yes. But I think it would be a shame to turn back now that we have got up here so far. He was saying only last night that the trip up from Shellal to Wady Haifa was not over-safe—that the Nubians are hostile, and we might be attacked and murdered!”

“Not much fear of that nowadays,” Waldron laughed. “Our rule here has straightened things out. I admit, however, that there is a good deal of hostility about here, and I believe there are arms on board the Shellal steamers in case of trouble. But we anchor each night in mid-stream and a good watch is kept, while all the crew, though they are Arabs, have been in the service of the Steamboat Company for many years, and are quite loyal. So don’t be nervous in the least, mademoiselle, for I assure you there is really no necessity.”

“Uncle Jules is always fond of discovering dangers where none exist,” she laughed. “I haven’t given the matter a second thought. We are going on Monday—and that is sufficient.”

The broad-shouldered, rather dandified old Frenchman, Jules Gigleux, sauntered out from the hotel and joined them a few moments later. He was rather stout, grey-haired—with a small, well-clipped moustache, and a pair of sharp beady eyes which seemed to search everywhere—a man who, though burly and apparently easy-going, was nevertheless remarkably shrewd and sly.

These latter traits in Monsieur Gigleux’s character had aroused Hubert’s suspicions. He seemed ever watchful and curiously distrustful and shifty—a man who, though he made pretence of being open and straightforward and easy-going, was full of craft and deep cunning.

“Well, uncle,” exclaimed Lola, dropping into French as the man seated himself in the chair vacated by young Dawson, “we’ve just been discussing the possibility of all of us being murdered by Arabs on our way up to Wady Haifa!” and she laughed mischievously.

“It is not very safe,” snapped the old gentleman in French. “I hear that the Egyptian police have a great deal of trouble to keep the country in order between Shellal and Wady Haifa.”

“Ah!” Waldron exclaimed, “I fear, m’sieur, you are somewhat misinformed. That portion of the Nile runs through Upper Nubia, and the people are more loyal to the British than they are even in Cairo.”

“Cairo,” sniffed the old man. “Why, trouble is expected there every day. Sedition is rife all over Egypt. If your Kitchener had not taken such a strong hand a year ago the country would now be in open revolt. The British are not loved in Europe. I say that,” he added quickly, “without disrespect of your country, m’sieur, please understand.”

“Perfectly,” was the diplomat’s reply. “But while I admit what you say is the truth, and, further, that there is a growing discontent, yet I still feel that, as far as we are concerned, though a little handful of Europeans and a great country peopled by Nubians, we are nevertheless quite safe. I was up there two years ago, and we did not even have a police escort when we landed at Kalabsha or Abu Simbel—indeed, we never saw a policeman.”

“Ah, that was two years ago,” remarked Monsieur Gigleux, quite unconcerned.

“Oh, we shan’t come to any harm, Uncle Jules,” his niece assured him. “I intend to have a real good time, M’sieur Waldron,” added the girl, who, having finished her tea, rose and went to the balcony, where she stood alone watching the magnificent glories of the desert sunset.

Below, around the great grey boulders in the river came very slowly a small Arab boat gaily painted in light green, with only just sufficient wind to stretch its pointed lateen sail. The three fisher lads which constituted its crew were singing one of those weird, plaintive songs of the Nile to the accompaniment of a big earthenware tom-tom—that same tuneful invocation of Allah to assist them which one hears everywhere upon the Nile from Alexandria up to Khartoum.

That strange, rhythmic song, the chorus of which is “Al-lal-hey! Al-lal-hey!” is the song of the Nile and rings always in one’s ears at sundown—the reminder that Allah is great, Allah is merciful; there is no other God but Allah.

But does that gay, Christian, tango-dancing, bridge-playing world of

Society, who in winter occupy that great white hotel opposite Elephantine Island, ever heed that call of the black, half-naked, and, alas! often starving Arab? The call to Allah!

Chapter Two.

Arouses Certain Suspicions.

The great salle à manger of the Cataract is built like an Eastern mosque. Its interior is high domed, with old blue glass in the long narrow windows, and walls striped in yellow and dull red.

At night the scene is gay and animated—a replica of the supper-room at the Savoy—for over the thickly carpeted floor of the mosque, Society, clad in the latest *mode*, dines and makes merry at many little tables bright with electric lights and flowers, while the orchestra is just near enough to be present.

Waldron and Chester had been invited to old Gigleux's table on their arrival at Assouan; therefore on that evening the party was, as usual, a merry one. After dinner, however, the little party dispersed—Miss Lambert to the reading-room, the old Frenchman to smoke, and Chester to find Edna Eastham, leaving Waldron and Lola together.

The night was perfectly clear, with a bright and wonderful moon.

"Let's take a boat over to the Savoy?" Waldron suggested. "It's so hot here."

Mademoiselle, who was in a simple, dead-white gown, with a touch of pale salmon at the waist, was instantly agreeable, for a stroll through the beautiful gardens of the Savoy Hotel, over on Elephantine Island, was always delightful after dinner.

So she clapped her hands, summoning one of the Arab servants named Hassan, and sent him to her room for her wrap. Then when he had brought it in his big brown hands and placed it upon her shoulders, the pair descended through the garden of the hotel, where some boats were waiting in the moonlight to take parties out for a sail in the light zephyr which always rises on the Nile about nine o'clock each night.

"Good evenin', laidee," exclaimed the Arab boatman, salaaming, as the

pair stepped into his boat, for the man had often taken them out on previous occasions; then two young Arabs followed, the boat was pushed off, and the big heavy sail raised.

Waldron told the man where they wished to go.

“Ver gud, gen’leman,” the big, brown-faced giant replied, salaaming, and soon they were speeding across the face of the wonderful river into which the moon and the lights of the town were reflected as in a mirror, while the only sound was the faint ripple of the water at the bows.

“How delightfully refreshing after the heat,” Lola exclaimed, pulling her wrap about her and breathing in the welcome air to the full.

“Yes,” replied her companion, lolling near her, smoking his cigarette. He had on a light coat over his dinner clothes, and wore a straw hat. “There is nothing in Europe like this, is there?”

“Nothing,” she admitted.

And what he said was true. The moon shone with that brilliancy only witnessed in the East, and the dead silence of the river and the limitless desert beyond was wonderfully impressive after that gay and reckless circle which they had just quitted.

Presently the two young Arabs, who had been conversing with each other in an undertone, spoke to their master—who apparently gave consent.

Waldron had offered each a cigarette from his case, receiving a pleased grin and a salaam, and all were now in the full enjoyment of smoking. They smoked on gravely until they had finished their gifts.

“’Merican steamer, he come from Cairo to-night,” the boatman announced as they approached the quay at Assouan.

“He means the new Hamburg-America passenger service,” Waldron remarked, and then, turning to the Arab who was busy with their sail, preparing to tack, he asked him some questions regarding the steamer.

“He big steamer, gen’leman. *Reis*, he know me—he know Ali.” And so the Arab wandered on in his quaint English, for in Upper Egypt they are all inveterate gossips.

Then the operation of tacking concluded, one of the younger men produced a great cylinder of sun-baked clay, across the top of which was stretched a piece of parchment, and placing it across his knees began strumming upon it dexterously with his thumb, finger, and palm, after which the dark-faced trio set up that long-drawn, plaintive song of the Nile boatmen, in which Allah is beseeched to protect their beloved town, which has existed ever since the Pharaohs—the town of Aswan.

The weekly steamer from Cairo, gaily lit and filled with Europeans, was lying at the landing-stage. Hearing the song which the trio in rhythmic unison took up, a dozen or so Europeans in evening dress crowded to the side to see who was passing.

Lola, delighted, hailed them in English. They shouted back merry greetings, and then Ali, their boatman, tacked again, and they were soon sailing straight for the long, dark river-bank, where one or two lights showed like fireflies among the palms, until they reached the darkly-lit landing-stage on Elephantine, that little island whence, in the dim ages of the Sixth Dynasty, sprang the Kings of Egypt, where the ancient gods, Khnemu, Sati, and Anuquet were worshipped, and where the Pharaoh, Amenophis III, built a temple. Upon the site where the orgies of Hathor were enacted is to-day the modern Savoy, where one can obtain a whisky-and-soda or a well-mixed “Martini.” Other times, other manners.

On landing, Waldron and Lola strolled together along the moonlit, gravelled path beside the river, and presently sat beneath a great flowering oleander amid the thousand perfumes of that glorious tropical garden with its wealth of blossom.

He noted that she had suddenly grown grave and silent. Some people were sitting upon a seat near, laughing gaily and chattering in English, though in the deep shadow of the perfumed night they could not be seen. At their feet the broad Nile waters lapped lazily, while from a native boat in mid-stream came the low, rhythmic beating of a tom-tom as the rowers bent to their oars.

“You seem very melancholy,” remarked her companion suddenly. “Why?”

“I—melancholy?” she cried in her broken English, suddenly starting. “I—I really did not know, m’sieur. Oh, please forgive me.”

“No, I will not,” he said with mock reproach.

“You mustn’t be sad when I am with you.”

“But I’m not sad, I assure you,” she declared. And then, noticing that he was taking a cigarette from his case, she begged one.

Lola seldom, if ever, smoked in public, nevertheless she was passionately fond of those mild aromatic cigarettes which one gets in such perfection in Egypt, and often when with her friend, the cosmopolitan diplomat, she would indulge in one.

She hated the conventions which so often she set at naught—thus earning the reputation of a tomboy, so full of life and vivacity was she.

“Uncle is such a dreadful bore sometimes,” she sighed at last, dropping into French. “I rather wish we were, after all, going back to Paris.”

“He disagrees with you sometimes, eh?” laughed the man at her side. “All elderly people become bores more or less.”

“Yes. But there is surely no reason for such constant watching.”

“Watching!” exclaimed Waldron in feigned surprise. “Is he annoyed at this constant companionship of ours?”

“Well,” she hesitated; “he’s not exactly pleased. He watches me like a cat watches a mouse. I hate his crafty, stealthy ways. To-day I told him so, frankly.”

Waldron was considerably surprised at her sudden outburst of confidence, for through all the weeks of their close acquaintanceship she had told him but very little concerning herself. But from what she had said he gathered that she was entirely dependent upon her uncle, whose strictness and eccentricities so often irritated her.

“Yes,” she went on, “I’ve really grown tired of being spied upon so constantly. It is most annoying. Gabrielle, too, is always telling tales to him—telling him where I’ve gone, and how long I’ve been away, and all that.”

The man at her side paused.

“In that case,” he said at last, “had we not better keep apart, mademoiselle—if it would render your life happier?”

“I only wish I could get rid of that old beast,” she cried wistfully. “But, unfortunately, I can’t. I’m entirely and utterly in his hands.”

“Why?” asked her companion slowly.

But she remained silent, until he had repeated his question.

“Why? Well, because I am,” was her vague, mysterious reply.

“Then he often complains of me?” Waldron asked.

For answer she laughed a nervous little laugh.

“He doesn’t like me, I suppose. Well, there’s no love lost between us, I assure you, mademoiselle. But if you think it best, then we will exercise a wiser discretion in future.”

“No, no,” she replied hastily. “You quite misconstrue my meaning, M’sieur Waldron. You have been exceedingly kind to me, but—” and then she sighed without concluding her sentence.

Again a silence fell between them.

From across the broad dark waters, in the bosom of which the stars were reflected, came the low, strident voices of the Arab boatmen chanting their monotonous prayer to Allah to give them grace. The still air was heavy with a thousand sweet scents, while about them the big nocturnal insects flitted and buzzed.

A peal of English laughter broke from out the deep shadows, and from

somewhere in the vicinity came the twanging of a one-stringed instrument by an Arab, who set up one of those low, haunting refrains of the Nile bank—the ancient songs handed down through the Pagan ages before the birth of Christendom.

Waldron was reflecting deeply. Old Gigleux had always been a mystery. That he was a crafty, cunning old fox was undoubted, and yet he had, he remembered, always treated him with marked friendliness. It was surprising that he should, on the other hand, object to his niece being so frequently in his company.

Lola's companion questioned her regarding the mysterious old fellow, but all she would reply was:

"There are certain matters, M'sieur Waldron, which I would rather not discuss. That is one of them."

With this chilly rebuff her companion was compelled to be content, and no amount of diplomatic cross-examination would induce her to reveal anything further.

"Ah," she cried at last, clenching her small hands and starting to her feet in a sudden frenzy of despair which amazed him, "if you only knew the horror of it all—ah! if you only knew, m'sieur, you would, I am sure, pity me."

"Horror of it!" he gasped. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing—nothing," she said hastily, in a voice thick with emotion. "Let us return. We must get back. He will be so angry at my absence."

"Then you really fear him!" Waldron exclaimed in surprise.

She made no reply. Only as he laid his hand lightly upon her arm to guide her back along the dark path to where the native boat was moored, he felt her shudder.

He walked in silence, utterly bewildered at her sudden change of demeanour. What could it mean? In his career as a diplomat in the foreign capitals he had met thousands of pretty women of all grades, but

none so sweet or so dainty as herself; none with a voice so musical, not one whose charm was so ineffable.

Yes, against his own inclination he had become fascinated by her, and already he felt that her interests were his own.

They stepped into the boat, being greeted by salaams from the black-faced crew, and then began to row back.

She uttered not a word. Even when one of the boys brought out the big tom-tom from beneath the seat, she signed to him to put it away. Music jarred upon her nerves.

Waldron sat in wonder, uttering no word, and the black-faced crew were in turn surprised at the sudden silence. Ali spoke some low, soft words in Arabic to his companions which, had the pair been acquainted with that language, would have caused them annoyance. “They are lovers,” he remarked wisely. “They have quarrelled—eh?” And to that theory the two boys agreed.

And so there was silence in the boat until it touched the landing-steps opposite the great hotel, rising dark in the white desert moonshine.

On returning to his room Hubert Waldron found a telegram from Madrid awaiting him. It was from an intimate friend of his, signed “Beatriz.”

He flung himself into a cane chair and re-read the long and rather rambling message. Then he rose, lit a cigarette savagely, and stood gazing across the broad moonlit waters. That telegram was a disquieting one. Its sender was Beatriz Rojas de Ruata, of the Madrid Opera, the tall, thin, black-haired dancer, who had of late been the rage in Petersburg and Paris, and who was now contemplating a season in London.

From life in the slums of Barcelona, where her father was a wharf labourer, she had in three short years risen to the top of her profession, and was now the idol of the *jeunesse dorée* of Madrid; though, be it said, the only man she really cared for was the calm-faced English diplomat who had never flattered her, and who had always treated her with such profound and courtly respect.

But that message had sorely perturbed him. It was an impetuous demand that he should return from Egypt and meet her in London. A year ago he had promised to show her London, and now that she had accepted a most lucrative engagement she held him to his promise.

“Yes,” he murmured to himself as he paced the room with its bed enshrouded in mosquito curtains, “I’ve been a confounded fool. I thought myself more level-headed, but, like all the others, I suppose, I’ve succumbed to the bright eyes and sweet smiles of a pretty woman.”

For a full twenty minutes or so he pondered, uncertain what reply to send. In any case, even if he left for London on the following morning, he could not arrive at Charing Cross for fully ten days.

At last he took up his cane and hat, and descending in the lift, crossed the great hotel garden, making his way down the short hill towards the town. It was then nearly eleven o’clock, and all was silent and deserted except for the armed Arab watchman in his hooded cloak. On his right as he walked lay a small public garden, a prettily laid out space rising on the huge boulders which form the gorge of the Nile—a place filled by high feathery palms, flaming poinsettias, and a wealth of tropical flowers.

But as he passed the entrance in the shadow there suddenly broke upon his ears a woman’s voice, speaking rapidly in Italian—a language with which he was well conversant.

He halted instantly. The voice was Lola’s! In the shadow he could just distinguish two forms, that of a man and a woman.

He drew back in breathless amazement. Mademoiselle’s eagerness to return across from Elephantine was now explained. She had kept a secret tryst.

As he watched, he heard her speaking quickly and angrily in an imperative tone. The man was standing in the full moonlight, and Waldron could see him quite plainly—a dark, short-bearded man of middle-age and middle-height, wearing a soft felt Tyrolese hat.

He made no response, but only bowed low at his unceremonious dismissal.

The stranger was about to leave her when suddenly, as though on reflection, she exclaimed, still speaking in perfect Italian:

“No. Return here in half an hour. I will go back to the hotel and write my reply. Until then do not be seen. Gigleux must never know that you have been here—you understand? I know that you will remain my friend, though everyone’s hand is now raised against me, but if Gigleux suspected that you had been here he would cable home at once—and then who knows what might not happen! I could never return. I would rather kill myself?”

“The signorina may rely upon my absolute discretion,” declared the man in a low, intense voice.

“*Benissimo*,” was her hurried response. “Return here in half an hour, and I will give you my answer. It is hard, cruel, inhuman of them to treat me thus! But it is, I suppose, only what I must expect. I am only a woman, and I must make the sacrifice.”

And with a wave of her small, ungloved hand she dismissed him, and took a path which led through the public garden back to the hotel by a shorter cut.

Meanwhile Waldron strode on past the railway station to the quay, glanced at his watch, and then, half an hour later, after he had dispatched his telegram he was lurking in the shadows at that same spot.

He watched Lola hand a letter to the stranger, and wish him “*Addio e buon viaggio*!”

Then he followed the bearded man down to the station, where, from a European official of whom he made a confidential inquiry, he learnt that the stranger had arrived in Assouan from Cairo only two hours before, bearing a return ticket to Europe by the mail route via Port Said and Brindisi.

With curiosity he watched the Italian leave by the mail for Cairo ten minutes later, and then turned away and retraced his steps to the Cataract Hotel, plunged deep in thought.

There was a mystery somewhere—a strange and very grave mystery.

What could be that message of such extreme importance and secrecy that it could not be trusted to the post?

Who was old Gigleux of whom Mademoiselle Duprez went in such fear? Was she really what she represented herself to be?

No. He felt somehow assured that all was not as it should be. A mystery surrounded both uncle and niece, while the angular Miss Lambert remained as silent and impenetrable as the sphinx.

Diplomat and man of the world as was Hubert Waldron—a man who had run the whole gamut of life in the gay centres of Europe—he was naturally suspicious, for the incident of that night seemed inexplicable.

Something most secret and important must be in progress to necessitate the travelling of a special messenger from Europe far away into Upper Egypt, merely to deliver a letter and obtain a response.

“Yes,” he murmured to himself as he passed through the portals of the hotel, which were thrown open to him by two statuesque Nubian servants, who bowed low as he passed. “Yes; there are some curious features about this affair. I will watch and discover the truth. Lola is in some secret and imminent peril. Of that I feel absolutely convinced.”

Chapter Three.

In the Holy of Holies.

Five days later.

Boulos, the faithful Egyptian dragoman, in his red fez and long caftan of yellow silk reaching to his heels, stood leaning over the bows of the small white steamer which was slowly wending its way around the many curves of the mighty river which lay between the Island of Philae and the Second Cataract at Wady Haifa, the gate of the Sudan.

No railway runs through that wild desert of rock and sand, and the road to Khartoum lies by water over those sharp rocks and ever-shifting shoals where navigation is always dangerous, and progress only possible by daylight.

Boulos, the dark, pleasant-faced man who is such an inveterate gossip, who knows much more of Egyptology than his parrot-talk to travellers, and who is popular with all those who go to and fro between Cairo and Khartoum, stood chatting in Arabic with the white-bearded, black-faced *reis*, or pilot.

The latter, wearing a white turban, was wrapped in a red cloak though the sun was blazing. He squatted upon a piece of carpet in the bows, idly smoking a cigarette from dawn till sundown, and navigating the vessel by raising his right or left hand as signal to the man at the helm.

A Nile steamer has no captain. The Nubian *reis* is supreme over the native crew, and being a man of vast experience of the river, knows by the appearance of the water where lie the ever-shifting sand-banks.

“Oh yes,” remarked the *reis* in Arabic; “by Allah’s grace we shall anchor at Abu Simbel by sunset. It is now just past the noon,” added the bearded old man—who looked like a prophet—as he glanced upward at the burning sun.

“And when shall we leave?” asked the dragoman.

“At noon to-morrow—if Allah willeth it,” replied the old man. “To-night the crew will give a fantasia. Will you tell the passengers.”

“If it be thy will,” responded Boulos, drawing at his excellent cigarette.

“How farest thou this journey?”

“Very well. The Prophet hath given me grace to sell several statuettes and scarabs. The little American hath bought my bronze of Isis.”

“I congratulate thee, O wise one among the infidels,” laughed the old man, raising his left hand to alter the course of the vessel. “Thy bronze hath lain for many moons—eh?”

“Since the last Ramadan. And now, with Allah’s help, I have sold it to the American for a thousand piastres.”

Old Melek the *reis* grunted, and thoughtfully rolled another cigarette, which he handed unstuck to his friend, the sign of Arab courtesy. Boulos ran his tongue along it, and raising his hand to his fez in thanks, lit it with great gusto, glancing up to the deck where his charges were lolling beneath the awning.

Lola, in white, and wearing her sun-helmet, leaned over the rail and called in her broken English:

“Boulos, when do we arrive at Abu Simbel?”

“At ze sunset, mees,” was the dragoman’s smiling reply. “To-morrow morning, at haf-pas tree we land, and we watch ze sun rise from inside ze gr-reat Tem-pel of Rameses.” Then raising his voice, so that all could hear, as is the habit of dragomans: “Ze gr-reat Tem-pel is cut in ze rock and made by Rameses to hees gr-reat gawd, Ra, gawd of ze sun. In ze front are fo-our colossi—gr-reat carved statues of Rameses seated. Zees, la-dees and gen’lemens, you will be able to see first as we come round ze bend of ze Nile about seex o’clock. To-morrow morning we land at haf-pas tree, and ze sight is one of ze grandest in all our Egypt.”

“Half-past three!” echoed Chester Dawson, who was sitting in a deck-chair at Edna’s side. “I shall still be in my berth, I hope. No Temple of

Rameses would get me up before sunrise."

"Say, you're real lazy," declared the buxom American girl. "I'll be right there—you bet."

"But is the old ruin worth it? We've seen the wonderful works of Rameses all up the Nile."

"Waal—is it worth coming to Egypt at all?" she asked in her native drawl. "Guess it is—better than Eu-rope—even if you're fed up by it."

"Oh, I don't know. This beastly heat makes me sick," and he gave a vigorous stroke with his horsehair fly-whisk with which each traveller was provided. Beelzebub assuredly lived in Egypt, for was he not the god of flies. Everything has a god in Egypt.

Boulos had resumed his comfortable chat with Melek, the *reis*. His thousand piastre deal of that morning had fully satisfied him. Not that he ever overcharged the travellers for any antiques which he sold them. As everyone on the Nile knows—from Cairo to far Khartoum—Boulos the laughing, easy-going though gorgeously attired dragoman, is a scrupulously honest dealer. He is a friend of the greatest Egyptologists in the world and, unlike the common run of dragomans, has studied Egyptian history, and possesses quite a remarkable knowledge of hieroglyphics. Many a well-known European professor has sat at the knee of Boulos, and many an antique is now in one or other of the European national collections which originally passed through the hands of the ever-faithful Boulos.

Waldron was sipping an innocuous drink composed of Evian water with a lime squeezed into it, and chatting in French with old Jules Gigleux, passing one of those usual mornings of laziness, away from the worries of letters and newspapers, which are so delightful up the Nile.

Beneath the wide awning the soft, hot breeze pleasantly fanned them, while away on the banks rose the feathery palms on the tiny green strip of cultivated mud, sometimes only a few feet in width, and then the desert —that great glaring waste of brown sand—stretching away to the horizon where the sky shone like burnished copper.

Mademoiselle, as full of mischief as ever, was the very life and soul of that smart party of moneyed folk which included two English peers, three American millionaires, an Austrian banker, a wealthy Russian prince, and two Members of Parliament who had paired. It had been whispered that she was daughter of Duprez, the millionaire sugar-refiner of Lyons; and, as everyone knows, the sugar of the Maison Duprez is used in nearly every household throughout France.

Yet Waldron had heard quite a different story from her own lips while they had been seated together on deck the previous evening drinking coffee.

“Ah?” she had sighed, “if I were only wealthy like the several other girls of this party, it would be different. Perhaps I could break away from uncle, and remain independent. But, alas! I cannot. I owe everything to him—I am dependent upon him for all I have.”

This surprised Hubert considerably. Hitherto he had believed her to be the daughter of a wealthy man, because Miss Lambert showed her such marked deference. But such apparently was not the fact. Indeed she had declared later on to Waldron that she was very poor, and to her eccentric old uncle she was indebted for everything she received.

Hers was a curious, complex character. Sometimes she would sit and chat and flirt violently with him—for by her woman’s intuition she knew full well that he admired her greatly—while at others she would scarcely utter a word to him.

Hubert Waldron detested old Gigleux. Even though he sat chatting and laughing with him that morning, he held him in supreme contempt for his constant espionage upon his niece. The old fellow seemed ubiquitous. He turned up in every corner of the steamer, always feigning to take no notice of his niece’s constant companionship with the diplomat, and yet his sharp, shrewd eyes took in everything.

On more than one occasion the Englishman was upon the point of demanding outright why that irritating observation was so constantly kept, nevertheless with a diplomat’s discretion, he realised that a judicious silence was best.

That long, blazing day passed slowly, till at last the sun sank westward

over the desert in a flame of green and gold. Then the thirty or so passengers stood upon the deck waiting in patience till, suddenly rounding the sharp bend of the river, they saw upon the right—carved in the high, sandstone cliff—the greatest and most wonderful sight in all Nubia.

Lola was at the moment leaning over the rail, while Waldron stood idly smoking at her side.

“See!” he cried suddenly. “Over there! Those four colossal seated figures guarding the entrance of the temple which faces the sunrise. That is Abu Simbel.”

“How perfectly marvellous!” gasped the girl, astounded at the wonderful monument of Rameses the Great.

“The temple is hewn in the solid rock—a temple about the size of Westminster Abbey in London. In the Holy of holies are four more seated figures in the darkness, and to-morrow as we stand in there at dawn, the sun, as it rises, will shine in at the temple door and gradually light up the faces of those images, until they glow and seem to become living beings—surely the most impressive sight of all the wonders of Egypt.”

“I am longing to see it,” replied the girl, her eyes fixed in fascination at the far-off colossi seated there gazing with such calm, contented expression over the Nile waters, now blood-red in the still and gorgeous desert sunset.

On the arid banks there was no sign of life, or even of vegetation. All was desert, rock, sand, and desolation. Where was the great, palpitating civilisation which had existed there in the days of Rameses, the cultured world which worshipped the great god, Ra, in that most wonderful of all temples? Gone, every trace save the place where the sun god was worshipped, swept out of existence, effaced, and forgotten.

Over the vessel a great grey vulture hovered with slowly flapping wings. Then from the bows came a low chant, and the passengers craning their necks below, saw that the black-faced crew had turned towards Mecca and sunk upon their knees, including even the gorgeous Boulos himself, and with many genuflexions were adoring Allah.

“Allah is great. Allah is merciful. He is the One,” they cried in their low, musical Arabic. “There is no god but Allah!”

The sun sank and twilight came swiftly, as it does in the glowing, mystic East. And the white-bearded *reis*, his prayers finished, pushed on the steamer more quickly so as to anchor opposite Abu Simbel before darkness fell. The excitement among the passengers grew intense, for, on the morrow, ere the first pink of the dawn, the travellers were to stand within that rock-hewn temple, the most wonderful of all the works of the Pharaohs.

The evening proved a merry one, for after dinner, with the vessel anchored in mid-stream—to obviate thieves—opposite the great temple, the Nubian crew gave a fantasia, or native song and dance, for the benefit of the travellers.

On each trip from Shellal to Wady Haifa this was usual, for European travellers like to hear the weird native music, and the crooning desert songs in which Allah is praised so incessantly. Besides, a collection is made afterwards, and the sturdy, hard-working crew are benefited by many piastres.

On the lower deck, beneath the brilliant stars the black-faced toilers of the Nile beat their tom-toms vigorously and chanted weirdly while the passengers stood leaning over, watching and applauding. The crew squatted in a circle, and one after the other sprang up and performed a wild, mad dance while their companions kept time by clapping their hands or strumming upon their big earthenware tom-toms.

Then at eleven, the hour when the dynamos cease their humming and the electric light goes out, the concert ended with all the crew—headed by the venerable, white-bearded old pilot—standing up, salaaming and crying in their broken English:

“Gud nites, la-dees and gen’lemens. Gud nites?”

It was just before three on the following morning when the huge gong, carried around by an Arab servant, aroused everyone, and very soon from most of the cabins there turned out sleepy travellers who found the black giant Hassan ready with his little cups of delicious black coffee.

Boulos was there, already gorgeous in a pale green silk robe, while the steamer had half an hour before moved up to the landing-place.

“La-dees and gen’lemens!” cried the dragoman in his loud, drawling tone, “we no-ow go to see ze gree-at tem-pel of ze gawd, Ra—gawd of ze sun—ze tem-pel of ze sun-rise and ze greatest monument in all our Eg-eept. We shall start in fif mineets. In fif mineets, la-dees. Monuments tick-eets ve-ry much wanted. No gallopin’ donkeys in Abu Simbel!”

Whereat there was a laugh.

Then the under-dragoman, a person in a less gorgeous attire, proceeded to make up a parcel of candles, matches, and magnesium wire, and presently the travellers, all of whom had hastily dressed, followed their guide on shore, and over the tiny strip of cultivated mud until they came to the broad stone steps which led from the Nile bank to the square doorway of the temple.

Here a number of candles were lit by the under-dragoman; and Waldron, taking one, escorted Lola and Miss Lambert. Within, they found a huge, echoing temple with high columns marvellously carved and covered by hieroglyphics and sculptured pictures.

Through one huge chamber after another they passed, the vaulted roof so high that the light of their candles did not reach to it. Only could it be seen when the magnesium wire was burned, and then the little knot of travellers stood aghast in wonder at its stupendous proportions.

At last they stood in the Holy of holies—a small, square chamber at the extreme end.

In the centre stood the altar for the living sacrifices, the narrow groves in the stones telling plainly their use—the draining off of the blood.

All was darkness. Only Boulos spoke, his drawling, parrot-like voice explaining many intensely interesting facts concerning that spot where Rameses the Great worshipped the sun god.

Then there was a dead silence. Not one of that gay, chattering company dared to speak, so impressive and awe-inspiring was it all.

Suddenly, from out of the darkness they saw before them slowly, yet distinctly, four huge figures seated, their hands lying upon their knees, gradually come into being as the sun's faint pink rays, entering by the door, struck upon their stone faces, infusing life into their sphinx-like countenances until they glowed and seemed almost to speak.

Expressions of amazement broke from everyone's lips.

"Marvellous!" declared Lola in an awed whisper. "Truly they seem really to live. It is astounding."

"Yes," answered Waldron. "And thus they have lived each morning in the one brief hour of the sunrise through all the ages. From Rameses to Cleopatra each king and queen of Egypt has stood upon this spot and worshipped their great gods, Ra and the all-merciful Osiris. Such a sight as this surely dwarfs our present civilisation, and should bring us nearer to thoughts of our own Christian God—the Almighty."

Chapter Four.

Contains a Bitter Truth.

When Hubert returned on board the *Arabia* and entered his deck-cabin, one of a long row of small cubicles, he started back in surprise, for Gigleux was there.

The Frenchman was confused at his sudden discovery, but only for a second. Then, with his calm, pleasant smile, he said in French:

“Ah, m’sieur, a thousand pardons! I was looking for the book I lent you the other day—that book of Maspero’s. I want to refer to it.”

Waldron felt at once that the excuse was a lame one.

“I left it in the *fumoir* last night, I believe.”

“Ah! Then I will go and get it,” replied the white-haired old fellow fussily. “But I hope,” he added, “that m’sieur will grant pardon for this unwarrantable intrusion. I did not go to the temple. It was a trifle too early for me.”

“You missed a great treat,” replied the Englishman bluntly, tossing his soft felt hat upon his narrow little bed. “Mademoiselle will tell you all about it.”

“You took her under your charge—as usual, eh?” sniffed the old fellow.

“Oh, yes. I escorted both her and Miss Lambert,” was the diplomat’s reply. “But look here, M’sieur Gigleux,” he went on, “you seem to have a distinct antipathy towards me. You seem to be averse to any courtesy I show towards your niece. Why is this? Tell me.”

The old man’s eyes opened widely, and he struck an attitude.

“*Mais non, m’sieur*!” he declared quickly. “You quite misunderstand me. I am old—and perhaps I may be a little eccentric. Lola says that I am.”

“But is that any reason why I should not behave with politeness to

mam’zelle?”

The old man with the closely cropped white hair paused for a few seconds. That direct question nonplussed him. He drew a long breath, and as he did so the expression upon his mobile face seemed to alter.

In the silence Hubert Waldron was leaning against the edge of the little mosquito-curtained bed, while the Frenchman stood in the narrow doorway, for, in that little cabin, there was only sufficient room for one person to move about comfortably.

“Yes,” responded the girl’s uncle. “Now that you ask me this very direct question I reply quite frankly that there is a reason—a very strong and potent reason why you, a man occupying an official position in the British diplomacy should show no undue courtesy to Mademoiselle Lola.”

“Why?” asked Hubert, much surprised.

“For several reasons. Though, as I expect she has already explained to you, she is a penniless orphan, daughter of my sister, whose wealthy husband lost every *sou* in the failure of the banking firm of Chenier Frères of Marseilles. I have accepted the responsibility of her education and I have already planned out her future.”

“A wealthy husband, I suppose,” remarked the Englishman in a hard voice.

“M’sieur has guessed the truth.”

“And she is aware of this?”

“Quite,” was the old man’s calm reply. “Therefore you now know the reason why I am averse to your attentions.”

“Well, at least you are frank,” declared the other with a laugh. “But I assure you, M’sieur Gigleux, that I have no matrimonial intentions whatsoever. I’m a confirmed bachelor.”

Gigleux shook his head wisely.

“When a girl of Lola’s bright and irresponsible disposition is thrown hourly into the society of a man such as yourself, my dear friend, there is danger—always a grave danger.”

“And is she fond of this man whom you have designated as her husband?”

“Nowadays girls marry for position—not for love,” he grunted.

“In France, yes—but scarcely so in England,” Waldron retorted, his anger rising.

“Well, m’sieur, you have asked me a question, and I have replied,” the Frenchman said. “I trust that this open conversation will make no difference to our friendship, though I shall take it as a personal favour if, in the future, you will not seek Lola’s society quite so much.”

“As you wish, m’sieur,” replied the diplomat savagely. He hated the crafty, keen-eyed old fellow and took no pains now to conceal his antipathy.

The blow which he had for the past fortnight expected had fallen. He intended at the earliest moment to seek Lola, and inquire further into the curious situation, for if the truth be told, he had really fallen deeply in love with her, even though she might be penniless and dependent upon the old man.

When old Gigleux had passed along the deck he sat down upon the bed and lighting a cigarette, reflected. He was a younger son with only seven hundred a year in addition to his pay from the Foreign Office. Madrid was an expensive post. Indeed, what European capital is not expensive to the men whose duty it is to keep up the prestige of the British Empire abroad? Diplomacy, save for the “plums,” is an ill-paid profession, for entertaining is a constant drain upon one’s pocket, as every Foreign Office official, from the poverty-stricken Consul to the Ambassador, harassed by debt, can, alas! testify.

Many an Ambassador to a foreign Court has been ruined by the constant drain of entertaining. Appearances and social entertainments are his very life, and if he cuts down his expenses Britain’s prestige must suffer, and at Downing Street they will quickly query the cause of his parsimony. So

the old game goes on, and the truth is, that many a man of vast diplomatic experience and in a position of high responsibility is worse off in pocket than the average suburban tradesman.

Hubert Waldron bit his lip. After all, he was a fool to allow himself to think of her. No diplomat should marry until he became appointed Minister, and a bachelor life was a pleasant one. Curious, he thought, that he, a man who had run the whole gamut of life in the capitals, and who had met so many pretty and fascinating women in that gay world which revolves about the Embassies, should become attracted by that merry little French girl, Lola Duprez.

Breakfast over, the party went ashore again, now in linen clothes and sun-helmets, to wander about the temple till noon, when they were to leave for Wady Haifa.

He saw Lola and Edna Eastham walking with Chester Dawson, so, following, he joined them and at last secured an opportunity of speaking with Lola alone.

They were strolling slowly around the edge of the sandstone cliff, away from the colossal façade of the temple, and out of sight of the steamer, for the old Frenchman had fortunately still remained on board—the blazing heat being too much for him.

“Lola,” her companion exclaimed, “I have spoken to your uncle quite openly this morning. I know that he hates me.”

She turned quickly and looked straight at him with her wonderful dark eyes.

“Well—?” she asked.

“He has told me the truth,” Waldron went on seriously. “He has explained that the reason he objects to our companionship is because you are already betrothed.”

“Betrothed?” she echoed, staring at him.

“Yes. To whom? Tell me, mam’zelle,” he asked slowly.

She made no response. Her eyes were downcast; her cheeks suddenly pale. They were standing beneath the shadow of an ancient wide-spreading tree which struggled for existence at the edge of the Nile flood.

“He has said that I am betrothed—eh?” she asked, as though speaking to herself.

“He has told me so. Your future husband has been already chosen,” he said in a low, mechanical tone.

Her teeth were set, her sweet, refined countenance had grown even paler.

“Yes,” she admitted at last, drawing a deep breath. “My past has been bright and happy, but, alas! before me there now only lies tragedy; and despair. Ah! if I were but my own mistress—if only I could escape this grip of evil which is ever upon me!”

“Grip of evil! What do you mean?” he inquired eagerly.

“Ah! you do not know—you can never tell!” she cried. “The evil hand of Jules Gigleux is ever upon me, a hard, iron, inexorable hand. Ah! M’sieur Waldron, you would, if you only knew the truth, pity a woman who is in the power of a man of that stamp—a man who has neither feeling, nor conscience, neither human kindness nor remorse.”

“He’s a confounded brute—that I know. I feel sure of it,” her companion declared hastily. “But look here, mam’zelle, can’t I assist you? Can’t I help you out of this pitfall into which you seem to have fallen. Why should you be forced to marry this man whom your uncle has chosen—whoever he may be?”

She shook her head mournfully, her lips quite white.

“No,” she sighed. “I fear your efforts could have no avail. It is true that I am betrothed—pledged to a man whom I hate. But I know that I cannot escape. I must obey the decree which has gone forth. Few girls to-day marry for love, I fear—and true love, alas! seems ever to bring poverty in its wake.”

“That’s the old sentimental way of looking at it,” he declared. “There’s many a rich marriage in which Cupid plays the principal part. I’ve known lots.”

“In my case it cannot be,” the girl declared hopelessly. “My future has been planned for me, and admits of no alteration,” she went on. “To me, love—the true love of a woman towards a man—is forbidden. My only thought is to crush it completely from my heart and to meet my future husband as I would a dire misfortune.”

“Not a very cheerful outlook, I fear.”

“No, my future can, alas! be only one of tragedy, M’sieur Waldron, so the less we discuss it the better. It is, I assure you, a very painful subject,” and again she sighed heavily, and he saw hot tears welling in those splendid eyes which he always admired so profoundly.

Her face was full of black tragedy, and as Waldron gazed upon it his heart went out in deepest sympathy towards her.

“But surely this uncle of yours is not such an absolute brute as to compel you to wed against your will!” he cried.

“Not he alone compels me. There are other interests,” was her slow reply, her voice thick with suppressed emotion. “I am bound, fettered, hand and foot. Ah! you do not know!” she cried.

“Cannot I assist you to break these fetters?” he asked, bending to her earnestly. “I see that you are suffering, and if I can do anything to serve your interests I assure you, mademoiselle, I will.”

“I feel certain of that,” was her answer. “Already you have been very good and patient with me. I know I have often sorely tried your temper. But you must forgive me. It is my nature, I fear, to be mischievous and irresponsible.”

At that instant the recollection of the night in Assouan crossed Waldron’s mind—of that mysterious messenger who had come post-haste from Europe, and had as mysteriously returned. He had never mentioned the affair, for had he done so she would have known that he had spied upon

her. Therefore he had remained silent.

They stood together beneath the shade of that spreading tree with the heat of the desert sand reflected into their faces—stood in silence, neither speaking.

At last he said:

“And may I not know the identity of the man who is marked out to be your husband?”

“No; that is a secret, M’sieur Waldron, which even you must not know. It is my affair, and mine alone,” she replied in a low tone.

“I’m naturally most curious,” he declared, “for if I can assist you to extricate yourself from this impasse I will.”

“I thank you most sincerely,” was her quick response, as she looked up at him with her soft, big eyes. “If at any time I require your assistance I will certainly count upon you. But, alas! I fear that no effort on your part could avail me. There are reasons—reasons beyond my control—which make it imperative that I should marry the man marked out for me.”

“It’s a shame—a downright sin!” he cried fiercely. “No, mademoiselle,” and he grasped her small hand before she could withdraw it; “I will not allow you to sacrifice yourself to your uncle’s whim.”

She shook her head slowly, answering:

“It is, alas! not within your power to prevent it! The matter has already been arranged.”

“Then you are actually betrothed?”

“Yes,” she replied in a hoarse voice. “To a man I hate.”

“Then you must let me act on your behalf. I must—I will?”

“No. You can do nothing to help me. As I have already explained, my life in future can only be one of tragedy—just as yours may be, I fear,” she

added in a slow, distinct voice.

“I hardly follow you,” he exclaimed, looking at her much puzzled.

She smiled sadly, turning her big eyes upon his.

“Probably not,” she said. “But does not half Madrid know the tragedy of your love for the dancer, Beatriz Rojas de Ruata, the beautiful woman whose misfortune it is to have a husband in the person of a drunken cab-driver.”

“What!” he gasped, starting and staring at her in amazement. “Then you know Madrid?”

“Yes, I have been in Madrid,” was her answer. “And I have heard in the *salons* of your mad infatuation for the beautiful opera-dancer. It is common gossip, and most people sigh and sympathise with you, for it is known, too, that Hubert Waldron, of the British Embassy, is the soul of honour—and that such love as his can only bring tragedy in its train.”

“You never told me that you had been in Madrid!”

“Because you have never asked me,” was her calm reply. “But I know much more concerning you, M’sieur Waldron, than you believe,” she said with a mysterious smile. Then, her eyes glowing, she added: “I have heard you discussed in Madrid, in Barcelona, and in San Sebastian, and I know that your love for the beautiful Beatriz Rojas de Ruata is just as fraught with tragedy as the inexorable decree which may, ere long, bind me as wife to the one man whom I hate and detest most in all the world!”

Chapter Five.

A Surprise.

Egypt is the strangest land, the weirdest land, the saddest land in all the world.

It is a land of memories, of monuments, and of mysticism; a land of dreams that never come true, a land of mystery, a great cemetery stretching from ancient Ethiopia away to the sea, a great grave hundreds of miles long in which is buried perhaps as many millions of human beings as exist upon our earth to-day.

Against the low-lying shore of the great Nile valley have beaten many of the greatest waves of human history. It is the grave of a hundred dead Egypts, old and forgotten Egypts, that existed and possessed kings and priests and rules and creeds, and died and were succeeded by newer Egypts that now, too, are dead, that in their time believed they reared permanently above the ruins of the past.

The small white steamer lay moored in the evening light at the long stone quay before the sun-baked town of Wady Haifa, close to the modern European railway terminus of the long desert-line to Khartoum.

On board, dinner was in progress in the cramped little saloon, no larger than that of a good-sized yacht, and everyone was in high spirits, for the Second Cataract, a thousand miles from Cairo, had at last been reached.

Amid the cosmopolitan chatter in French, English, Italian and German, Boulos, arrayed in pale pink silk—for the dragoman is ever a chameleon in the colour of his perfumed robes—made his appearance and clapped his hands as signal for silence.

“La-dees and gen’lemens,” he cried in his long-drawn-out Arab intonation, “we haf arrived now in Wady Haifa, ze frontier of Sudan. Wady Haifa in ze days of ze khalifa was built of Nile mud, and one of ze strongholds of ze Dervishes. Ze Engleesh Lord Kig’ner, he make Wady Haifa hees headquarter and make one railroad to Khartoum. After ze war

zis place he be rebuilt by Engleesh engineer, as to-morrow you will see. After dinner ze Engleesh custom officer he come on board to search for arms or ammunition, for no sporting rifle be allowed in ze Sudan without ze licence, which he cost fifty poun' sterling. To-morrow I go ashor wiz you la-dees and gen'lemens at ten o'clock. We remain here, in Wady Haifa, till noon ze day after to-morrow to take back ze European mail from Khartoum. Monuments teeckets are not here wanted."

There was the usual laugh at the mention of "monuments tickets," for every Nile traveller before leaving Cairo has to obtain a permit from the Department of Antiquities to allow him to visit the excavations. Hence every dragoman up and down the Nile is ever reminding the traveller of his "monument ticket," and also that "galloping donkeys are not allowed."

"Monuments teeckets very much wanted; gallopin' don-kees not allowed," is the parrot-like phrase with which each dragoman concludes his daily address to his charges before setting out upon an excursion.

Dinner over, many of the travellers landed to stroll through the small town, half native, half European, which has lately sprung up at the head of the Sudan railway.

As usual, Chester Dawson escorted Edna and went ashore laughing merrily. Time was, and not so very long ago, when Wady Haifa was an unsafe place for the European, even by day. But under the benign British influence and control it is to-day as safe as Brighton.

Hubert Waldron lit a cigar, and alone ascended the long flight of steps which led from the landing-stage to the quay. On the right lay the long, well-lit European railway station, beyond, a clump of high palms looming dark against the steely night sky. The white train, with its closed sun-shutters, stood ready to start on its long journey south, conveying the European mail over the desert with half a dozen passengers to the capital of the Sudan.

He strolled upon the platform, and watched the bustle and excitement among the natives as they entered the train accompanied by many huge and unwieldy bundles, and much gesticulation and shouting in Arabic. Attached to the end of the train was a long car, through the open door of

which it could be seen that it contained living and sleeping apartment.

At the door stood a sturdy, sunburnt Englishman in shirt and trousers and wide-brimmed solar topee. With him Waldron began to chat.

“Yes,” the English engineer replied, “I and my assistant are just off into the desert for three weeks. The train drops us off two hundred miles south, and there we shall remain at work. The track is always requiring repair, and I assure you we find the midday heat is sometimes simply terrible. The only sign of civilisation that we see is when the express passes up to Khartoum at daybreak, and down to Haifa at midnight.”

“Terribly monotonous,” remarked the diplomat, used to the gay society of the capitals.

“Oh, I don’t know,” replied the Englishman, with a rather sad smile. “I gave up London five years ago—I had certain reasons—and I came out here to recommence life and forget. I don’t expect I shall ever go back.”

“Ah! Then London holds some painful memory for you—eh?” remarked Waldron with sympathy.

“Yes,” he answered, with a hard, bitter look upon his face. “But there,” he added quickly, “I suppose I shall get over it—some day.”

“Why, of course you will,” replied the diplomat cheerfully. “We all of us have our private troubles. Some men are not so lucky as to be able to put everything behind them, and go into self-imposed exile.”

“It is best, I assure you,” was the big, bronzed fellow’s reply. Then noticing the signals he shouted into the inner apartment: “We’re off, Clark. Want anything else?”

“No,” came the reply; “everything is right. I’ve just checked it all.”

“We have to take food and water,” the engineer explained to Waldron with a laugh. “Good night.”

“Good night—and good luck,” shouted Hubert, as the train moved off, and a strong, bare arm waved him farewell.

Then after he had watched the red tail-light disappear over the sandy waste he turned, and wondering what skeleton of the past that exile held concealed in his cupboard, strode along the river-bank beneath the belt of palms.

How many Englishmen abroad are self-exiles? How full of bitterness is many a man's heart in our far-off Colonies? And how many good, sterling fellows are wearily dragging out their monotonous lives, just because of "the woman"? Does she remember? does she care? She probably still lives her own life in her own merry circle—giddy and full of a modern craving for constant excitement. She has, in most cases, conveniently forgotten the man she wronged—forgotten his existence, perhaps even his very name.

And how many men, too, have stood by and allowed their lives to be wrecked for the purpose of preserving a woman's good name. But does the woman ever thank him? Alas! but seldom—very seldom.

True, the follies of life are mostly the man's. But the woman does not always pay—as some would have us believe.

Waldron, puffing thoughtfully at his cigar, his thoughts far away from the Nile—for he was recalling a certain evening in Madrid when he had sat alone with Beatriz in her beautiful flat in the Calle de Alcalâ—had passed through the darkness of the palms, and out upon the path which still led beside the wide river, towards the Second Cataract.

From the shadows of the opposite shore came the low beating of a tom-tom and the Arab boatman's chant—that rather mournful chant one hears everywhere along the Nile from the Nyanza to the sea, and which ends in "Al-lah-hey! Al-lah-hey!" Allah! Always the call to Allah.

The sun—the same sun god that was worshipped at Abu Simbel—had gone long ago, tired Nubia slept in peace, and the stars that gazed down upon her fretted not the night with thoughts of the creeds of men.

Again Hubert Waldron reached another small clump of palms close to the water's edge, and as he passed noiselessly across the sand he suddenly became conscious that he was not alone.

Voices in French broke the silence, and he suddenly halted.

Then before him, silhouetted against the blue, clear light of the desert night, rose two figures—Europeans, a man and a woman.

The woman, who wore a white dress, was clasped in the arms of the man, while he rained hot, passionate kisses upon her brow.

Waldron stood upon the soft sand, a silent witness of that exchange of passionate caresses. He feared to move lest he should attract their attention and be accused of eavesdropping.

From where he was, half concealed by the big trunk of a date-palm, he could distinctly hear the words uttered by the man.

“I have been here for three days awaiting you, darling. I travelled by Port Sudan and Khartoum, and then on here to meet you.”

“And I, too, Henri, have been wondering if you would arrive here in time,” was the girl’s response, as her head lay in sweet content upon her lover’s shoulder. “Imagine my delight when the Arab came on board and slipped your note into my hand.”

“Ah, Lola darling, how I have longed for this moment!—longed to hold you in my arms once again,” he cried.

Lola!

Hubert Waldron held his breath, scarce believing his own ears.

Yes, it was her voice—the voice he knew so well. She had met her lover there—in that out-of-the-way spot—he having travelled by the Red Sea route to the Sudan in order to keep the tryst.

Waldron stood there listening, like a man in a dream.

It was all plain now. The man who had been marked out as Lola’s husband she hated, because of her secret love for that young Frenchman in whose arms she now stood clasped.

He was telling her how he had left Brindisi three weeks before, and going down the Red Sea had landed at Port Sudan, afterwards taking sail to Khartoum and then post-haste across the desert to Haifa.

“Had I not caught the coasting steamer I could not have reached here until you had left,” he added.

“Yes, Henri. But you must be most careful,” she urged. “My uncle must never suspect—he must never dream the truth.”

“I know, darling. If I travel back to Cairo with you I will exercise the utmost discretion, never fear.”

“Neither by word nor by look must the truth ever be betrayed,” she said. “Remember, Henri, my whole future is in your hands.”

“Can I ever forget that, my darling?” he cried, kissing her with all the frantically amorous passion of a Frenchman.

“It is dangerous,” she declared. “Too dangerous, I fear. Gigleux is ubiquitous.”

“He always is. But leave it all to me,” the man hastened to assure her, holding her ungloved hand and raising it fervently to his lips. “I shall join your steamer as an ordinary passenger just before you sail.”

“But you must avoid me. Promise me to do that?” she implored in a low, earnest tone.

“I will promise you anything, my darling—because I love you better than my life,” was his low, earnest answer, as he tenderly stroked the soft hair from her brow. “Do you recollect our last evening together in Rome, eh?”

“Shall I ever forget?” was her reply. “I risked everything that night to escape and come to you.”

“Then you really do love me, Lola—truly?” For answer she flung her long arms around his neck and kissed him fondly. And she then remained silent in his strong embrace.

Chapter Six.

More Concerning the Stranger.

At their feet, winding its way for thousands of miles between limitless areas of sand, its banks lined for narrow distances with green fields and the habitations of men, flowed dark and wondrous the one thing that makes human life possible in all the lands of the Sudan and of Egypt—flowed from sources that for ages were undiscovered, and which even in this day of boasted knowledge are yet incompletely known—the Nile.

In the lazy indolence of that sun-baked land of silence, idleness and love, affection is quickly cultivated, as the fast-living set who go up there each winter know well. Hubert Waldron, man of the world that he was, had watched and knew. He stood there, however, dumbfounded, for there was now presented a very strange and curious state of affairs. Lola, the dark-eyed girl who had enchanted him and held him by the great mystery which surrounded her, was now revealed keeping tryst with a stranger—a mysterious Frenchman who had come up from the blazing Sudan—a man who had come from nowhere.

He strained his eyes in an endeavour to distinguish the stranger's outline, but in vain. The man was standing in the deep shadow. Only the girl's familiar form silhouetted against the starlit sky.

"We must be very careful of my uncle," the girl urged. "The slightest suspicion, and we shall assuredly be parted, and for ever."

"I will exercise every discretion, never fear, dearest," was his reassuring reply, and again he took her soft, fair face in both his hands and kissed her passionately upon the lips.

"But, Henri," she exclaimed presently, "are you quite sure they suspect nothing at home—that you have never betrayed to anyone your affection for me? Remember, there are spies everywhere."

"Surely you can trust me, my darling?" he asked in reproach.

“Of course, dear,” she cried, again raising her lips and kissing him fondly. “But, naturally, I am full of fear lest our secret be known.”

“It cannot be known,” was his confident reply. “We can both keep the truth from others. Trust me.”

“And when we return to Europe. What then?” she asked in a low, changed tone.

“Then we shall see. Why try and look into the future? It is useless to anticipate difficulties which may not, after all, exist,” he said cheerfully, again stroking her hair with tenderness.

He spoke in French in a soft, refined voice, and was evidently a gentleman, though he still stood in the shadow and was therefore undistinguishable. He was holding the girl in his arms and a silence had fallen between them—a silence only broken by the low lapping of the Nile waters, and that rhythmic chant now receding: “Ah-lal-hey! Al-lal-hey?”

“My darling!” whispered the stranger passionately. “My own faithful darling. I love you—ah! so much more than you can ever tell. And, alas! I am so unworthy of you.”

She, in return, sighed upon his breast and declared that she loved but one man in all the world—himself.

“Since that night we first met, Lola—you remember it,” he said, “my only thought has been of you.”

“Ah, yes,” was her reply. “At my aunt’s ball in Vienna. I recollect how the Baron von Karlstadt introduced us, and how you bowed and invited me to dance. Shall I ever forget that evening, Henri—just over a year ago.”

“And old Gigleux? Is he still quite as troublesome as ever?”

“Just. He has eyes in the back of his head.”

“And Mademoiselle Lambert—is she loyal to you?”

“I fear not, alas!” was Lola’s reply. “She is paid to spy upon me. At least

that has latterly become my impression. I have wanted to become her friend, but she is unapproachable."

"Then we must exercise every discretion. On board I shall avoid you studiously. We can, of course, meet again in Cairo, for it is a big city, and you will sometimes be free."

"Yes. Till then, adieu, Henri. But," she added, "it will be so hard to be near you for the next three weeks and never speak."

"It must be. Gigleux is no fool, remember," the man replied.

"I must be getting back. They will miss me," she said wistfully. "How shall I be able to pass you by dozens of times a day, Henri, maybe sit down at the same table with you, and betray no sign of recognition? I really don't know."

"But you must, darling! You must—for both our sakes," he argued, and then he once again clasped her in his strong arms and smothered her with his fierce passionate caresses.

Hubert Waldron witnessed it all. He held his breath and bit his lip. Who could be this mysterious Henri—this secret lover whom Lola had met by appointment in that far-off, out-of-the-world place?

He recollected that Lola had flirted with him and that she had amused herself by allowing him to pay her compliments. Yet the existence of one whom she loved so devotedly in secret was now revealed, and he stood aghast, filled with chagrin at the unexpected revelation.

The pair, locked in each other's arms, moved slowly forward in his direction.

She was urging him to allow her to get back, but he was persuading her to remain a little longer.

"Think of all the long weeks and months we have been parted, sweetheart!" he was saying. "Besides we must not speak again until we get to Cairo. I shall remain at the little hotel over to-morrow. But it would be far too dangerous for us to meet. One or other of the passengers

might discover us."

"Yes," she sighed; "we shall be compelled to exercise the greatest caution always. All my future depends on the preservation of our secret."

Waldron slipped from his hiding-place and away behind another tree, just before the pair passed the spot where he had been standing.

He watched them as they went forth into the light, and at last realised that the man was tall and slim, though, of course, he could not see his face.

He watched their parting, a long and tender farewell. The ardent lover kissed her upon the lips many times, kissed her cheeks, kissed her soft white hands, and then at last reluctantly released her and stood watching as she hurried on to the next belt of palms back to the landing-stage.

Afterwards he strode leisurely on behind her, and was soon lost to view in the black shadows.

A fortnight—fourteen lazy days of idleness and sunshine—had gone by.

The white double-decked steamer descending the Nile had left modern Luxor, with its gorgeous Winter Palace Hotel on the site of ancient Thebes. It had passed the wonderful temple standing upon the bank, and was steering due northward for Cairo, still a week's journey distant.

In the west a great sea of crimson spread over the clear sky, and shafts of golden light fell upon the sand-dunes that barred the view in that direction. Away in the farther distance to the west the steel-like rim of the utter desert also seemed somewhat softened by that mellow light which diffused all the face of nature. During all the full hours of the day that rigid desert ruin, where lay the valley of the tombs of the kings, had seemed to repel, to warn back, to caution that there lay the limit beyond which the human being might not go. But in the falling light it had surrendered, and in its softer appearance it seemed to promise that it, like destiny and death, would surrender its uttermost secrets to those whose hearts were brave enough to approach it without fear.

The tea interval was over, and it was the lazy hour before dinner. Most of the travellers were in their cabins dressing, for the European ever clings

to the dinner-jacket or evening blouse. On board that small steamer were men—Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Americans—whose wealth could be reckoned at over a hundred millions sterling, men who wore bad hats and rather shabby clothes, but whose women-kind were always loud-speaking and bizarre. Truly the winter world of Egypt is a strange one of moneyed leisure, of reckless extravagance, and of all the modern vices of this our twentieth-century world.

The white steamer, with its silent, pensive reis squatting in the bows with his eternal cigarette, ever watchful of the appearance of the broad grey-green waters, puffed onward around the sudden bend.

To the east, the Arabian Desert—beautiful beyond words, but where, save in a few narrow oases, Nature forbade the habitancy of man—stretched away to the Red Sea and far on into Asia. And to the west, frowning now as though in hatred of the green Nile with its fertility, lay the Libyan Desert, which, with its great mother the Sahara, held so much of Africa in its cruel grasp, and which was as unlovely and repelling as its sister of Arabia was bright and beautiful.

And Egypt—the Egypt of life and fertility, of men and history, tradition, and of modern travel—lay a green and smiling land between the two deserts as a human life lies between the two great eternities before birth and after death; or as a notable writer once put it: as the moment of the present lies between the lost past and the undiscovered future.

Waldron had already dressed, and was lying back in a long deck-chair enjoying a cigarette, and gazing away at the crimson sunset, when a tall, thin-faced man of thirty passed along the deck. He, too, was in the conventional dinner-jacket and black cravat, but to his fellow-travellers he was a mystery, for ever since joining them at Wady, Haifa he had kept himself much to himself, and hardly spoken to anyone.

His name was Henri Pujalet, and he was from Paris. His father, Henri Pujalet, the well-known banker of the Rue des Capucines, had died two years before, leaving to his eldest son his great wealth. That was all that was known of him.

Only Hubert Waldron knew the truth—the secret of Lola’s love.

“Ah, my dear friend!” he cried in his enthusiastic French way as he approached the Englishman. “Well—how goes it?”

“Very well, thanks,” responded the diplomat in French, for truth to tell he had cultivated the stranger’s acquaintance and had watched with amused curiosity the subtle glances which Lola sometimes cast towards him.

The secret lover sank into a chair at the diplomat’s side and slowly lit a cigarette.

He was a good-looking—even handsome—man, with refined and regular features, a smiling, complacent expression, and a small, well-trimmed moustache. But his cheek-bones were high, and his eyes rather narrowly set. To-day no young Frenchman—as was the fashion ten years ago—wears a beard. Time was when the beard was carefully oiled, perfumed, trimmed and curled. But to-day the fashion in France is a hairless face—as in America and in England.

Waldron examined his companion for the hundredth time. Yes, he was a mystery. He had given the name of Pujalet to the steward, but was that his real name? Was he the son of Pujalet, the dead banker of the Rue des Capucines?

Old Gigleux often chatted with him, for were they not compatriots? But the white-headed old fellow apparently held no suspicion that he was his niece’s secret lover who had travelled those many miles from Europe in order to be near her.

The situation was not without its humours. Of all the persons on board that gay crowd returning to Cairo to spend New Year’s Day, only Hubert Waldron knew the truth. And as a diplomat he stood by and watched in silence, aware that the looker-on always sees most of the game.

He had had many amusing chats on deck and in the smoking-room with Henri Pujalet, whom he had found to be a much more cosmopolitan person than he had at first imagined. He seemed to know Europe well—even Madrid—for he spoke of certain dishes at the Lhardy and the excellence of the wines at the Tournié in the Calle Mayor, of the “Flamenco” at the Gate Nero, and the smart teas in the ideal room in the

Calle de Alcata; all of which were familiar, of course, to Waldron.

Equally familiar to him was Petersburg, with Cubat's and such-like resorts; he knew the gay Boulevard Hotel in Bucharest, and the excellence of its sterlet, the Nazionale and "Father Abraham's" in Rome; the Hungaria in Budapest, the Adlon in Berlin, the Pera Palace in Constantinople, as indeed most of the other well-known resorts to which the constant traveller across Europe naturally drifts at one time or another.

That Henri Pujalet was a cosmopolitan was perfectly clear to his companion. Yet he was, as certainly, a man of mystery.

Hubert Waldron, a shrewd observer and a keen investigator of anything appertaining to mystery, watched him daily, and daily became more and more interested.

His suspicions were aroused that all was not quite right. Pujalet's attitude towards Lola was quite remarkable. Not by the slightest glance or gesture did he give away his secret. To all on board he was to mademoiselle a stranger, and, moreover, perfectly oblivious to her very existence.

The two men chatted idly until suddenly the dinner-gong was sounded by a black-faced, grinning Nubian, who carried it up and down the deck beating it noisily.

Then he descended to the big white-and-gold saloon, where a few moments later there assembled a merry, chattering, and laughing crowd.

In the midst of dinner Waldron rose from the table and ascended to the upper deck and got his handkerchief. As he approached his cabin, however, he saw someone leave it, and disappear round the stern of the vessel. The incident instantly impressed itself upon his mind as a curious one, and in his evening slippers he sped lightly to the end of the deck and gazed after the receding figure of the fugitive.

It was Henri Pujalet!

Waldron returned instantly to his cabin in wonder why the Frenchman had intruded there.

As far as he could see nothing had been disturbed. All was in order, just as he had left it after dressing.

Only one object had been moved—his small, steel, travelling dispatch-box, enclosed in its green canvas case. This, which had been upon a shelf, was now lying upon the bed. The green canvas cover had been unfastened, displaying the patent brass lock by the famous maker.

It had been examined and tampered with. An attempt had, no doubt, been made to open it, and the person who had made that attempt was none other than the tall, good-looking man who had so swiftly and silently descended to the saloon and now, unnoticed, retaken his place at dinner.

“Well,” gasped Waldron, taking out his keys and unlocking the steel box to reassure himself that his private papers were intact, “this is curious—distinctly curious, to say the least!”

Chapter Seven.

The Night of the Golden Pig.

It wanted thirty minutes to midnight.

The New Year's Eve fun at Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo was fast and furious.

Ministerial officers and their women-folk, British officers of the garrison, officials and their wives from all parts of Egypt, Society from the other hotels, and a sprinkling of grave, brown-faced Egyptian gentlemen in frock coats and fezes, all congregate here to dine, to dance, to throw "serpentines," and to make merry by touching the golden pig—a real pig covered with gold paint—at the coming of the New Year.

That night was no exception, for the *salons* were crowded to overflowing, champagne flowed freely, and everyone laughed heartily at the various antics of the great assembly. Cosmopolitan it was, in every sense of the word, for most European languages could be heard there. In the ballroom a great dance was in progress, while the supper-room was crowded to suffocation, and in the big *salons* one could hardly move about so dense was the well-dressed crowd.

Upon this scene Hubert Waldron gazed when he arrived in a cab from the Savoy. Though Lola, her uncle, and Miss Lambert had, on landing, obtained rooms at Shepheard's, the Englishman had failed to do so, and had therefore gone to the Savoy, whither Henri Pujalet had also gone, as well as Chester Dawson, the Easthams, and several other members of the party.

Already they had been in Cairo three days, and though Waldron had watched Pujalet continuously, the lovers had not held any clandestine meeting.

As he elbowed his way through that New Year's Eve crush in the big Oriental lounge, however, he suddenly—came upon the pair. Lola, her face beaming with supreme pleasure, was dressed in simple, yet

becoming taste in turquoise blue, with a touch of the same colour in her dark hair, while the Frenchman, erect and well-groomed, presented a particularly smart appearance. Neither noticed the diplomat, so engrossed were they in their conversation. The opportunity of meeting was, of course, a unique one, for even if her uncle discovered her how could he reprove her for dancing with a man who had been their fellow-traveller for nearly three weeks?

The girl's face was flushed with excitement and pleasure now that she hung upon her lover's arm as he led her back to the ballroom.

Hubert Waldron watched them, then sighed and turned away.

He had not gone far up the long *salon* before he was accosted by a rather thick-set, clean-shaven Englishman of about thirty-five, with blue eyes, rather fair hair, and whose clothes fitted perfectly.

"Hulloa, Waldron! By Jove! Who'd have dreamt of meeting you here! Why, I thought you were still in Madrid!"

"Jerningham!" gasped the diplomat. "My dear old Jack, how are you?" he cried, grasping his hand warmly.

"Oh, so-so," replied the other, nonchalantly. "I've been travelling about a lot of late. And you?"

"Been on leave up to Wady Haifa, and now on my way back to Madrid."

"And to the Teatro Real—eh?" added his friend with a sly grin.

"No. She's in London. An engagement there."

"And you're not in London! Why?"

"Can't get my leave extended, or, you bet, I'd be back in town like a shot. What would I give for a bit dinner at the St. James's Club and a stroll along Piccadilly."

"Of course. But how's the lady?"

“Very well—I believe. I had a wire yesterday telling me of her great success at the Palace. The newspapers are full of her photographs and all that.”

“And all the nuts in town running madly after her—eh? Beatriz likes that.”

Waldron did not reply for a few moments, then, changing the subject, he said:

“Let’s go along to the bar. This crowd is distinctly unpleasant.”

Five minutes later, when the pair were seated in a quiet corner, Waldron asked in a low, confidential tone:

“What’s the latest? I’ve been away from the Embassy for nine weeks.”

“Oh, the political situation remains about the same. I’ve been mostly in Germany and Russia, since I was last in Madrid. I had a rather good scoop about a fortnight ago—bought the designs of the new Krupp aerial gun.”

“By Jove, did you?”

“Yes. It has taken me three months to negotiate, and the fellow who made the deal tried to back out of it at the last moment.”

“Traitors always do,” remarked the diplomat.

“Yes,” admitted the British secret-service agent, as Jack Jerningham actually was. “They usually lose heart at the crucial moment. But in this case the new invention of our friends is simply a marvellous one. It’s a feather in my cap in the department, I’m glad to say.”

“You’ve had a good many feathers in your cap during the past five years, my dear Jack,” Waldron replied. “Your successes since you left the navy have been phenomenal—especially when a year ago you obtained a copy of the secret treaty signed by Austria regarding the partition of the Balkans. That was an amazing feat—never before equalled by any secret agent, I should think.”

“Bah! Nothing really very wonderful,” was Jerningham’s modest reply. “More by good luck than anything else. I’m here in Cairo to report on the growing unrest. At home the Chief suspects German influence to be at work.”

“And what’s the result of your inquiries?”

“Our friends are, no doubt, at the bottom of it all. Across the North Sea they mean business; and the ‘day’ must come very soon.”

“You’ve made that prophecy for several years now.”

“Because I happen to know, my dear boy. If one man should know the truth, surely it’s my unimportant self. My Chief has always agreed with me, although it is the fashion in the House to laugh at what is called ‘the German bogey.’ But that’s exactly what they desire in Berlin. They don’t want the British public to take our warnings too seriously. But if you doubt the seriousness of the present situation, ask anybody at the Berlin Embassy. They’ll tell you the truth—and they ought surely to know.”

Jack Jerningham and Hubert Waldron had been friends ever since their youth. The estate near Crowhurst, in Sussex, which Waldron’s father owned, though his diplomatic duties had kept him nearly always abroad, adjoined that of the Jerninghams of Heatherset, of whom Jack was the second son.

After Dartmouth he had passed into the navy, had become a full lieutenant, and afterwards had joined the Intelligence Department, in which capacity he was constantly travelling about the world as the eyes and ears of the Embassies, and ever ready to purchase out of the secret-service fund any information or confidential plan which might be advantageous to the authorities at Whitehall.

A typical, round-faced, easy-going naval officer of a somewhat careless and generous disposition, nobody outside the diplomatic circle ever suspected his real calling. But by those who did know, the ambassadors, ministers, and staffs of the embassies and legations, he was held in highest esteem as a thoroughgoing patriot, a man of great discretion and marvellous shrewdness, in whom his Chief at home placed the most complete confidence.

“There’ll be trouble here in Cairo before long, I fear,” he was whispering to his friend. “Kitchener will have a very rough time of it if the intrigues of our friends at Berlin are successful. They are stirring up strife every day, and the crisis would have arrived long ago were it not for Kitchener’s bold firmness. They know he won’t stand any nonsense from the native opposition. Britain is here to rule, and rule she will. Hence our friends the enemy are just a little afraid. I’m going back home next week to report upon the whole situation.”

“I’m getting pretty, sick of the humdrum of diplomacy,” Hubert declared wearily, between the puffs of his excellent cigarette. Though the big American bar was crowded by men, in the corner where they sat upon a red plush settee they could not be overheard, the chatter and noise being so great. “We at the Embassies are only puppets, after all. It is such men as you who shape the nation’s policy. We’re simply the survival of the old days when kings exchanged courtesies and views by means of their ambassadors, and we, the frills of the Embassy, merely dress up, dance attendance at every function, and pretend to an importance in the world which we certainly do not possess.”

“My dear Hubert, you never spoke truer words than those. Everything nowadays is worked from Downing Street, and the ambassador is simply the office boy who delivers the message. Your father was one of the brilliant men of the old regime. The Empire owes much to him, especially for what he did at Rome.”

“Yes, those days have passed. In this new century the world has other ways and other ideas. It is the age of advertisement, and surely the best advertisement manager which the world has ever known is the Kaiser William.”

“Oh, that’s admitted,” laughed the secret agent. “Why, he can’t go to his castle at Corfu for a week—as he does each spring—without some wonderful relic of Greek antiquity being unearthed in his presence. It is whispered that they sow them there in winter, just as the brave Belgians sow the bullets on the battlefield of Waterloo. To-day we are assuredly living on the edge of a volcano,” Jerningham went on. “When the eruption takes place—and who knows when it will—then, at that hour, the red-tape must be burst asunder, the veil torn aside, and the bitter truth faced—the

bubble of British bombast will, I fear, be pricked."

"You are always such a confounded pessimist, my dear Jack," laughed Waldron.

"Ah, Hubert, I'm a pessimist because I am always on the move from capital to capital and I learn things as I go," was Jerningham's quick reply. "You fellows at the Embassies sit down and have a jolly good time at balls, dinners, tea-fights, and gala performances. Why? Because you're paid for your job—paid to remain ignorant. I'm paid to learn. There's the little difference."

"I admit, my dear fellow, that without your service we should be altogether a back number. To your department is due the credit of knowing what is going on in the enemy's camps."

"I should think so. I don't pay out ten thousand a year, more or less, without getting to know something, I can tell you."

Chapter Eight.

The Great Ghelardi.

While Waldron and his friend were discussing matters, shouts suddenly arose everywhere—the golden pig had entered and was being touched for luck by everyone, and men raised their glasses to each other, to wish one another “A Happy New Year.” The Christian year had opened, but the Egyptians in fezes only smiled and acknowledged the compliment. Their year had not yet commenced.

“Well,” exclaimed Jack Jerningham at last. “You haven’t told me much about Beatriz.”

“Why should I, my dear fellow, when there’s nothing to tell?”

“Ah, I’m glad to hear that,” was his friend’s quick response, apparently much relieved, for the fascination of the handsome ballerina for Hubert Waldron was the gossip of half the Embassies of Europe. Hubert was a rising man, the son of a great diplomat, but that foolish infatuation would, if continued, most certainty stand in the way of his advancement. Many of his friends, even the Ambassador’s wife, had given him broad hints that the friendship was a dangerous one. Yet, unfortunately, he had not heeded them.

Every man who is over head and ears in love thinks that his adored one is the perfect incarnation of all the virtues. Even when Waldron had heard her discussed in the Casino, that smart club in the Calle de Alcata, he refused to credit the stories told of her, of the magnificent presents she received from admirers, and more especially from the favoured one, the septuagenarian Duke of Villaneuva y Geltru.

“Why are you so glad to hear it?” Hubert asked, his brow slightly knit, for after all it was a sore subject.

“Well, to tell you the truth, because there is so much gossip flying about.”

“What gossip?”

“Of course you know quite well. Why ask me to repeat it, old chap?”

“But I don’t,” was the other’s reply.

“Well,” exclaimed Jerningham after a pause, “perhaps you are, after all, like most men—you close your ears to the truth because you love her.”

“Yes, Jack, I admit it. I do love her.”

“Then the sooner you realise the actual truth, the better,” declared the other with almost brutal abruptness.

“What truth?”

“My dear fellow, I know—nay, everybody knows—your foolish, quixotic friendship with the girl. You love her, and naturally you believe her to be all that is your ideal. But I assure you she’s not.”

“How in the name of Fate can you know?” asked the diplomat, starting up angrily.

“Well—I’ve been in Spain a lot, remember. I’ve seen and heard things. Why, only a week ago in this very hotel I met old Zeigler, of the German Embassy at Madrid, and he began to discuss her.”

“And what did he say, pray?”

“What everybody else says, that—well, forgive me for saying so—but that you are a fool to continue this dangerous friendship with a woman whose notoriety has now become European.”

“Why should people interest themselves in my affairs?” he cried in angry protest.

“Who knows? It’s the same the world over. But I suppose you know that Beatriz has gone to London with the old Duke?”

“It does not surprise me. She asked me to accompany her and to introduce her, but I couldn’t get back from here in time.”

“She asked you, well knowing that you were tied by the leg—eh?” laughed Jack. “Well, my dear fellow,” he sighed, “I think you’re terribly foolish to continue the acquaintanceship. It can only bring you grief and sorrow. Think of what she was, and what she is now. Can any girl rise from obscurity in such a short time without the golden ladder? Ask yourself.”

“You need not cast ugly insinuations,” was Hubert’s angry retort, yet truth to tell, that fact had ever been in his mind—a suspicion the first seeds of which had been sown one night in the Casino Club, and which had now grown within his heart.

“Please forgive me if I’ve hurt your feelings, but we’re old friends and you know how very blunt I am. It’s my failing,” he said in a tone of apology. “But the name of the fair Beatriz has of late been coupled with half a dozen admirers. When I was in Madrid four months ago I heard that Enrique de Egas, the director of the opera, was her very intimate friend, and also that young Juan Ordonez had given her a pearl necklace worth eighteen thousand pounds, while there were whispers concerning Pedro de Padras, Conrado Giaquinto, Sanchez Ferrer and several other nuts of the Spanish nobility with whom you are acquainted. They laugh at you behind your back.”

“Yes,” Hubert responded, quite undisturbed. “But surely you know that it gratifies the vanity of those young bloods of Madrid if their names are coupled with that of a pretty woman. It is the same in Vienna, the same in Rome.”

“Ah, my dear fellow, I see you are hopelessly in love,” declared the other. “I was—once. But the scales fell from my eyes just in time, as I sincerely hope they will fall from yours.”

Waldron remained silent. In his pocket lay a letter which he had received only that morning from Beatriz, dated from the Carlton Hotel in London, a letter full of expressions of undying affection, and of longing to be again at his side.

Were those her true sentiments, he wondered? Had Jack Jerningham, on the other hand, told him the bitter truth? He had first met her a couple of

months after her arrival in Madrid when she, poor and simply dressed, was dancing at the Trianon, and as yet unknown. Young Regan, one of the attachés, had introduced her, and the trio had had supper together at Lhardy's, in the Carrera de San Jeronimo, and on the following day he had taken her for a drive in the El Retero, the beautiful park of Madrid, and afterwards to the Plaza de Toros where the famous Sevilian Espada Ricardo Torres, known to all Spain as "Bombita," dispatched five bulls after some marvellous *pases de pecho, redondos* and *cambiados* before giving the *estocada*, or death-blow.

He remembered the hot afternoon and the breathless tension of the multitude as "Bombita" with his red cloth met the rush of the infuriated bull, stepped nimbly aside and then plunged his sword downwards through the animal's neck into its heart. Then came the roar of wild applause in which his dark-haired companion joined with such enthusiasm that her cheeks glowed red with excitement.

In that crowded bar, thick with tobacco smoke and noisy with the laughter of well-dressed men, the beautiful face of the dancer who, since that blazing well-remembered day, had won fame all over Europe, rose before him in the mists. Did he really love her, he asked himself as Jack Jerningham sat at his side, now smoking in silence. Yes he did, alas! he did.

And yet how strange—how very foolish, after all. He, Hubert Waldron, who for years had lived the exotic social life of diplomacy, who, being a smart, handsome man, had received the smiles and languishing glances of a thousand women of all ages, had fallen in love with that girl of the people—the daughter of a drunken dock labourer.

His friend Jerningham watched him covertly and wondered what was passing in his mind.

"I hope I haven't offended you, Waldron," he ventured to exclaim at last. "Perhaps I ought not to have spoken so frankly."

"Oh, you haven't offended me in the least, my dear old chap," was the other's open reply. "I may have been a fool. Probably I am. But tell me frankly are you really certain that all these stories concerning Beatriz

have any foundation in fact?”

“Any foundation?” echoed the other, staring at him with his blue eyes. “You have only to go about the capital with your ears open, and you will hear stranger and more scandalous stories than those. There is the husband, you know, the cab-driver, who threatened the Duke with divorce, and has been paid a hundred thousand pesetas as hush-money.”

“Is that a fact?” gasped his friend. “Are you quite certain of it? I can’t really believe it.”

“I’m quite certain of it. Ask Carreno, the advocate in the Calle Mayor. He made the payment, and told me with his own lips. The story is common property all over Madrid.”

Waldron’s countenance changed, but he made no reply.

“The woman and her husband are making a very substantial harvest out of it, depend upon it, Hubert. Therefore I do, as your old pal, beg of you to reconsider the whole situation. Is it really judicious for you to be associated any longer with her? I know I have no right to dictate to you—or even to make the suggestion. But I venture to do so for your own sake.”

“I know! I know!” was his impatient reply. “Yes. I’ve been a fool, no doubt, Jack—a damned idiot.”

“No; don’t condemn yourself until you have made your own inquiries. When you get back to the Embassy look around and learn the truth. Then I hope you will become convinced of the foundation of my allegations. When you are, let me know, old chap, won’t you?”

At that moment a stout, elderly man, accompanied by another a trifle his junior, who wore the button of the Legion d’Honneur in the lapel of his dress-coat, elbowed their way laboriously up to the bar.

Jack Jerningham’s quick eyes discerned them, whereupon in amazement he ejaculated in a low whisper the somewhat vulgar expression:

“Good God!”

Hubert looked up and saw old Jules Gigleux.

“What?” he asked in surprise.

“Why, look at the elder man—that old fellow with the white, close-cropped hair. Don’t you know him?” he asked in a low voice, indicating Lola’s uncle.

“Know him? Yes. He’s been up the Nile with us. He is a Frenchman named Gigleux.”

“Gigleux!” echoed his friend. “By Gad! and a rather good *alias*. No, my dear fellow. Look at him well. He is the greatest and most cunning secret agent Germany has ever possessed—the arch-enemy of England, the Chief of the German Secret Service—an Italian whose real name is Luigi Ghelardi, though he goes by a dozen *aliases*. It is he who controls the whole service of German espionage throughout the world, and he is the unscrupulous chief of the horde of spies who are infesting the Eastern counties of England and preparing for ‘the day.’”

At that second the man referred to glanced across and nodded pleasant recognition with Waldron, though he apparently had no knowledge of his companion.

“Is that really true?” gasped Hubert, utterly astounded and aghast, staring open-mouthed at Lola’s uncle.

“Most certainly. I know him by sight, only too well.”

“Then that accounts for the fact that I found him prying into my belongings in my cabin up the Nile!” exclaimed his friend, to whom the truth had come as an astounding and staggering revelation. And so the dainty Lola—the girl of mystery—was niece of the chief spy of England’s enemies.

Chapter Nine.

At Downing Street.

Hubert Waldron mounted the great staircase of the Foreign Office in Downing Street full of trepidation.

The Earl of Westmere, His Majesty's principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, desired to see him.

On New Year's night, an hour after his conversation with Jack Jerningham, he had found in his room at the Savoy an urgent telegram from the Embassy recalling him home at once. He had, therefore, left Port Said by the Indian mail next day, and had travelled post-haste to London.

He had arrived at Charing Cross at four o'clock, driven to the St. James's Club, and after a wash, had taken a taxi to Downing Street.

The uniformed messenger who conducted him up the great staircase halted before a big mahogany door, tapped upon it, and next second Hubert found himself in that big, old-fashioned, rather severe room wherein, at a great littered writing-table, sat his white-haired Chief.

"Good afternoon, Waldron," exclaimed the tall, thin-faced statesman rising briskly and putting out his hand affably, an action which at once set the diplomat at his ease. He had feared that gossip regarding the opera-dancer had reached his ears, and that his reception might be a very cool one.

"I didn't expect you until to-morrow. You've come from Cairo, haven't you?"

"I came straight through by Brindisi," was the other's reply, seating himself in the padded chair which his Chief indicated.

"A gay season there, I hear—eh?"

“Quite. But I’ve been on leave in Upper Egypt.”

“And a most excellent spot during this horrible weather we’re having in London. Wish I were there now.”

And the Earl, a rather spare, refined man whose clean-shaven features were strongly marked, and who wore the regulation morning coat and grey striped trousers, crossed to the big fireplace and flung into it a shovelful of coals.

That room in which Hubert had only been once before he well-remembered. Its sombre walls that had listened to so many international secrets were painted dark green; upon one side was an old painting of Palmerston who had once occupied that selfsame room, while over the black marble mantelshelf hung a fine modern portrait of His Majesty, King George V.

The old Turkey carpet was dingy and worn, and about the place where the director of Great Britain’s foreign policy so often interviewed the ambassadors of the Powers, was an air of sombre, yet dignified gloom.

“I’ve called you home, Waldron,” said the Earl deliberately as he re-seated himself at his great table, piled as it was with State papers and dispatches from England’s representatives abroad, “because I want to have a chat with you.”

He was interrupted by a tap upon the door, and a man in uniform announced:

“Captain Rayne, m’lord.”

“Oh, come in, Rayne,” exclaimed the Minister for Foreign Affairs, as a smart, well-dressed, middle-aged man entered, nodding acquaintance with Waldron. “Let’s see! You’re taking the turn to Berlin and Petersburg?”

“Yes, sir,” replied the King’s Foreign Service messenger.

The Earl took from a drawer a letter he had already written and sealed in an official envelope bearing a blue cross, and handed it to him saying:

“This is for Petersburg—most urgent. I have nothing for Berlin, but Sir Charles has, I believe. You will bring me back an answer to this dispatch with all haste, please.”

“To-day is Tuesday, sir; I shall be back next Tuesday if Sir Henry is in Petersburg,” replied the King’s messenger with an air as unconcerned as though he were going to Hampstead.

“Yes, he is.”

“Then nothing else, sir?”

“Nothing, Rayne—except what Sir Charles may have. Good afternoon.”

And the King’s messenger, who spent his days travelling to and fro across the face of Europe, placed the confidential dispatch addressed to the British Ambassador to the Court of the Tzar in his pocket, bowed, and went forth on his weary seven days’ journey to the Russian capital and back.

“As I was saying, Waldron,” the Earl continued when the door had again closed, “I asked you to come home because I consider the time has now come when you should have promotion. As a friend of your late, respected father, I have naturally watched your career in the Service with greatest interest, and have been much gratified at the shrewd qualities you have shown, therefore I am giving you promotion, and have appointed you as second secretary to Rome.”

“To Rome!” echoed Waldron, his eyes opening widely. “I—I’m sure, Lord Westmere, I cannot thank you sufficiently for your appreciation of my services, or for sending me to the one post I wished for most of all.”

“I know, Waldron,” laughed his lordship pleasantly. “You know Rome, for you lived there for some years. You were honorary attaché there under your father, and I think you speak Italian very well indeed, if I remember aright.”

“I have a fair knowledge of the language,” was the diplomat’s modest response.

“Then go to Rome and continue the career you have followed with such success. Your father’s most brilliant work was accomplished in Italy, and I hope his mantle will fall upon you, Waldron.”

“Your words are most encouraging, Lord Westmere,” declared the younger man who, on entering there, had feared a reprimand for his friendship with the Spanish dancer. “You may rely on me to do my best.”

“Of that I am quite certain. The Waldrons have been diplomats for over a century, and you will never disgrace their reputation,” said the strongest man of the British Cabinet, the man who had learned diplomacy under Salisbury and to whom the nation now entrusted its good relations with the Powers. “But,” his lordship added, “will you, quite unofficially, allow me to give you a word of friendly advice?” And he looked the secretary of the Embassy full in the face.

“Most willingly. Any advice from my Chief I will be most certain to follow,” was the other’s earnest reply.

“Well, perhaps it is a rather delicate matter, and one to which I, in my official position, ought not to refer, but as one who takes a very keen interest in your future, I feel that I must speak.”

Waldron grew paler. He knew what was coming. “It is within my knowledge,” went on his lordship, “that towards a certain lady in Madrid you have been unduly friendly—a lady whose name is not exactly free from scandal.”

“That is so,” he admitted.

“Then, Waldron, why do you not recollect Palmerston’s advice to the young man newly appointed to a post abroad?” he asked gravely. “Palmerston said that the necessary qualifications of a diplomat on being attached to an Embassy was that he should be able to lie artistically, to flirt elegantly, to dress smartly, to be polite to every woman, be she princess or laundress, but never on any account to commit the fatal error of falling in love. Remember that with the diplomat love at once puts an end to all his sphere of usefulness. Do not let this happen in your case, I beg of you.” Hubert did not reply for some seconds. At last he said in a rather a husky, confused voice:

“It is most kind of you to speak to me in such terms, Lord Westmere, and I fully appreciate the great interest which you have always shown me. Will it be sufficient to promise you that I will not repeat the folly of which I fear I have been guilty?”

“Excellent, my dear Waldron, excellent?” cried the white-haired Cabinet Minister, rising and shaking his hand warmly. “I’m glad you’ve seen the folly of it all. That dancing-girl is an unfit associate for you, that’s certain; so forget her. Take up your post at Rome as early as you can, and fulfil your promise to me to do your best.”

The Earl had risen as a sign that the interview was over. He was usually a sharp-speaking, brusque and busy man. To interviewers he was brief, and had earned for himself the reputation of the most hard and unapproachable man in the Service which he controlled. But Hubert Waldron had certainly not found him so, and as he descended the great handsome staircase and went out into the falling fog in Downing Street, he could not help a feeling of joy that he had been promoted over the heads of a dozen others to the second secretaryship of His Majesty’s Embassy to the Quirinale.

Next day the *Morning Post* told the world that the Honourable Hubert Waldron, M.V.O., was in London, and that same afternoon he received at his club a note from Beatriz, urging him to call at the Carlton.

Throughout the whole evening he debated within himself whether he should see her in order to wish her farewell. If he did not then she would regard him as brutal and impolite. He remembered those letters of hers, so full of passionate outpourings, and while he ate his dinner alone in a corner of the club dining-room they decided him.

He sent her a reply by hand that he would call at the hotel at half-past eleven, after she had finished her performance at the theatre.

Punctually at that hour a page-boy took him up in the lift, and passing along a corridor they halted at a door.

The page rapped, whereupon it opened, and next second the tall, handsome Spanish woman in a wonderful evening gown flew into Hubert’s arms crying in Spanish in wild glee:

“Ah! At last, my own dear Hubert—at last! What pleasure!”

But he only took her hand, and bowing low with grave courtliness, kissed it.

“Come, sit down,” she urged, pulling him towards a soft settee. “Tell me, when did you arrive from Egypt? The Duke saw the arrival in the paper this morning, and told me.”

“Then the Duke is still here,” he asked with affected unconcern.

“Of course. Why? He knows your English quite well, and, alas! I do not. Oh, it is so difficult! What I should do without him, I don’t know,” she went on volubly with much gesticulation. Those great dark eyes of hers and her raven-black hair gave a wonderful vivacity to her handsome Andalusian countenance. Her portraits were in all the illustrated papers, and during the day he had learnt how, by her wonderful dancing, she had taken London by storm.

“And what kind of reception have you had?” he asked gravely in Spanish, as he seated himself upon the settee before her.

“Superb!” she declared, her great eyes brightening. “Your English audiences are so intensely sympathetic. I love London. I think I dance better here in your cold, foggy city than in Madrid. Why, I do not know. Perhaps it is because I feel somehow at home with the English—because you, Hubert, are my dear friend.” And then she chattered on with hands and arms thrown about in quick gesticulation, describing to him her life during the past three weeks, and how full of gaiety and enjoyment had every moment been.

“Photographers and interviewers have pestered me to death. Ah! Your London journalists are so pressing. They are not lazy and open to bribery, as ours in Madrid. Twice I have danced at private parties and received large fees. Yes—you in London pay well—better even than Petersburg. At the Palace they want me to return for a month next September.”

“And you will accept, of course?”

She hesitated. She was standing at the table, her slim white fingers idly toying with a huge bunch of lilies-of-the-valley which had been thrown to her that night by some unknown admirer.

“Perhaps,” she replied. “At present I do not exactly know. I have also danced twice for charity—some hospital, I think. My manager, Cohen, arranged it. He is simply splendid—better even than he was in Russia.”

“I’m so glad you’re enjoying it, Beatriz,” Hubert said. “I was sorry I could not get back from Egypt. But I was nearly a thousand miles from Cairo when I got your telegram.”

“Oh, it really did not matter,” she declared. “The Duke has been most kind to me.”

“Yes—the Duke—always the Duke,” he said in a hard, changed voice.

She turned and looked at him in quick surprise.

“What—then are you jealous, you dear old Hubert?” she asked with a laugh.

“Not in the least,” was his quick reply. “But while you have the Duke you surely do not require my assistance. You have, it seems, got on in London excellently without me.”

“Because you were unable to come. Have I offended you?” she asked. “Come, forgive me if I have,” she urged, crossing to him, placing her hand upon his coat sleeve and looking up into his face. “I return to Madrid next Monday. You shall travel with me—eh?”

“I am not going back to Madrid,” was his slow reply, his eyes fixed upon hers.

“Not going back!” she echoed. “Why not?”

“I have been transferred to the Embassy in Rome. I leave for Italy the day after to-morrow.”

“To Italy,” she whispered blankly. “Then—then you will no longer be in

Spain?”

“No. My term in Madrid has ended,” he answered in a hard, strained voice, for even then he found it hard to bid her farewell.

“Ah!” she cried suddenly. “I see—I see it in your manner! You are tired of me—you are displeased with the Duke. You are jealous of him—jealous that men should flatter me. You, my dear friend, in whom I held such high respect, will not desert me.”

“Alas, Beatriz, I am not my own master. If I were, I should not leave Madrid,” he said earnestly, for that was, after all, the truth.

“And yet, knowing how fondly I love you, Hubert, you will really leave me thus!” she cried, suddenly catching his hand and carrying it to her full red lips. “No,” she went on, tears welling in her wonderful eyes, “you cannot do this. You, too, love me—you know well that you do. Come, do not let us part. I—I know I am foolish—I—ah! no! I love you, Hubert—only you!” And full of her hot Spanish passion she threw her arms about him and burst into a flood of hot tears.

Hubert Waldron bit his lip. He recollected at that moment all the stories concerning her—of the blackmail levied, with her connivance, by the drunken cab-driver whom he himself had once seen in the Puerta del Sol. He remembered his promise to his Chief, and the plain, outspoken words of his friend, Jack Jerningham.

They hardened his heart.

He shook his head and slowly but resolutely, disengaged himself from her passionate embrace.

“No, Beatriz,” he said. “Let us end this. It will, surely, be best for both our sakes. True, I have known you for a long time before you became world-famous as a dancer, but your profession and your interests, like mine, now lie apart. Let us say farewell, and in doing so, let us still remain good friends, with tender memories of one another.”

“Memories!” she cried fiercely, looking into his face with flashing eyes. “They can only be bitter ones for me.”

“And perhaps just as bitter for myself,” he added, still holding her by the wrist and looking into those great black eyes of hers.

“You are very cruel, Hubert!” she declared, her chest beneath its chiffon rising and falling in quick emotion. “You are cruel to a woman!” she repeated in reproach.

“No. It will be best for us in the end—best for both of us. You have your future before you—so have I. In my profession as diplomat I have to bow to the inevitable whenever I am transferred. You are a great dancer—a dancer who has won the applause of Europe. May I not still remain your humble and devoted friend?”

For answer Beatriz, the idol of London at that moment, fell upon his shoulder and shed tears of poignant, bitter regret, while he, with knit brows, held his breath for a moment, and then tenderly bent and kissed her upon the cheek.

Chapter Ten.

Some Curious Stories.

The *festa* of San Sebastiano fell on a Sunday.

The ancient church a mile and a half outside Rome on the Appian Way—the road constructed three hundred years before the birth of Christ—was thronged by the populace in *festa* attire, for San Sebastiano, built as it is over the Catacombs where reposed the remains of the Christian martyrs, is one of the seven churches to which pilgrims have flocked from every part of western Christendom, while in its chapel is the marble slab bearing what is held by tradition to be the footprints of Christ, and which, therefore, is held by the Romans in special veneration.

Though January, the morning was sunny and cloudless, and with Lady Cathcart, the Ambassador's wife, and young Edward Mervyn, the rather foppish honorary attaché, Hubert Waldron had motored out to watch the festival with all its gorgeous procession of priests and acolytes, its swinging censers and musical chants.

As at all the *festas* in Rome, there was the usual crowd of gaping Cookites and the five-guinea excursionists of other agencies, for is not the Eternal City the city of the tourist *par excellence*? In it he can live in a cheap *pension* for four lire a night, or he can spend a hundred lire a night in certain *hotels de luxe* on his room alone.

The road was dusty and crowded as, the ceremony over, the party sped back, past the ruins of the Baths of Caracalla—paltry indeed after those left by Rameses in Egypt—and the churches of Santi Nereo ed Achilleo and San Cesareo, afterwards re-entering the city and speeding up the broad modern Via Nazionale and into the long, straight Via Venti Settembre, at last pulling up before the great grey façade of the British Embassy.

Hubert Waldron was no stranger to Rome. For five years he had lived at the Embassy when his father was Ambassador, and in those days had been very popular in the very exclusive Society of the Italian capital.

Nowadays, however, he did not live at the Embassy, but rented the same cosy flat over a bank in the Via Nazionale which had been occupied by his predecessor—a charming, artistic little place which was the very ideal of a bachelor *pied-à-terre*.

That day there was a smart luncheon-party at the Embassy; among the guests being the Austrian and Russian Ambassadors with their wives, Prince Ghika, of the Roumanian Legation, the stout and wealthy Duca di Carpenito, the old Marchesa Genazzano, a hideous guy with her protruding yellow teeth, yet one of the leaders of Roman Society, the young Marchese Montalcino, who wore upturned moustachios and yellow boots; the pretty Contessa Stella Pizzoli, one of the Queen's *dames de la Cour*, and half a dozen others whose names in the Italian capital were as household words.

Around the luncheon-table, charmingly arranged with delicate floral decorations, the chatter had been universal, Sir Francis Cathcart, K.C.M.G., the British Ambassador, holding a long and animated conversation with Princess Bezanoff, wife of "The Russian"—as the Tzar's representative was termed in the diplomatic circle—while Lady Cathcart had been gossiping with the Duca di Carpenito, who was perhaps the greatest landowner in all Italy, and whose ancient Palazzo in the Corso is pointed out to the traveller as one of the finest mediaeval residences in the city.

Waldron, who had taken in the Contessa Stella and sat at her side, was listening to her gossip about the Court, of the doings of the Queen, and of their recent stay at Racconigi. Though most of the conversation at table was in French they spoke in Italian, Hubert speaking that language with scarce a trace of foreign accent.

"Curiously enough, Signor Waldron, I first knew of you by hearing His Majesty speak of you," remarked the pretty young woman. "I heard him telling General Olivieri, the first aide-de-camp, that you had been attached to the Embassy here."

"It is a great honour that His Majesty should remember me," replied the secretary. "He knew me, however, years ago, before he succeeded. I was here with my father, who was Ambassador."

“Yes. The King said so, and he paid your father a very high compliment. He said that he was the only diplomat whom his father, the late King Victor, ever trusted with a secret.”

Waldron smiled. Then he said:

“His Majesty is exceedingly gracious to me. I had not been back here a week before I had a command to private audience, and he was kind enough to say that he was pleased to resume my acquaintance after my years of absence from Rome. Yes, Contessa,” he added, “here I feel that I am at home and among friends, for I love Italy and her people. Your country possesses a grace and charm which one does not find elsewhere in Europe. There is but one Italy as there is but one Rome in all the world.”

“I fear you flatter us rather too much, Signor Waldron,” replied the pretty young woman. “Now that you have come back to us I hope you will honour my husband with a visit. You know the Palazzo Pizzoli, no doubt, and I hope in the autumn you will come out to us in the Romagna. We can give you a little shooting, I believe. You Englishmen always love that, I know,” she laughed.

“I’m sure I shall be very charmed to make the acquaintance of the Count,” he replied. “And if I may be permitted to call upon you I shall esteem it a great honour, Contessa,” and he smiled at the elegant *dame de la Cour* with his best diplomatic smile.

“So the young Princess Luisa is in disgrace again, I hear,” remarked the old Marchesa Genazzano, who sat on Waldron’s other hand, showing her yellow teeth as she spoke. “She’s always in some scrape or other. Girls in my day were never allowed the liberty she has—and she a Royal Highness, too!”

“We mustn’t tell tales out of school,” remarked the pretty Countess, with a comical grimace. “Her Royal Highness is, I fear, a sad tomboy. She always was—ever since she left the schoolroom.”

The old Marchesa, a woman of the bluest blood of Italy, and bosom friend of Her Majesty the Queen, grunted.

“Like her mother—like the whole House of Savoy. Always venturesome,” she said.

“But the Princess is charming. Surely you will agree, Marchesa?” protested the *dame de la Cour*.

“A very delightful girl. But she’s been spoilt. Her mother was too lenient with her, and her goings-on are becoming a public scandal.”

“Hardly that, I think,” remarked the Countess. “I know the King is pretty annoyed very often, yet he hasn’t the heart to put his foot down firmly. Even though she is of royal blood she’s very human, after all.”

“Her flirtations are positively disgraceful,” declared the old Marchesa, a woman of the ancient regime of exclusiveness.

Hubert laughed and said:

“I have not the pleasure of knowing Her Royal Highness—perhaps Her Royal Naughtiness might describe her—but as one who has no knowledge of the circumstances, I might be permitted to remark that the love that beats in the heart of a princess is the same love as that beneath the cotton corsets of the *femme de chambre*.”

“Ah, you diplomats are incorrigible,” cried the old woman with the yellow teeth. “But the Princess Luisa is becoming a scandal. The Queen declared to me only yesterday that she was intensely annoyed at her niece’s behaviour. Her latest escapade, it seems, has been to go to Bologna and take part in some motor-cycle races, riding astride like a man, and calling herself Signorina Merli. And she actually won one of the races. She carried a passenger in a side-car, a young clerk in a bank there, who, of course, was quite unaware of her real identity.”

“Quite sporting,” declared Waldron. “She evidently does not believe much in the royal exclusiveness.”

“Well, she cannot pretend that life at the Quirinale is at all dull. Since the death of her charming mother, the Princess of Milan, she has lived at the Palace, and must have had a very pleasant time.”

“Is she pretty?” asked Waldron, interested.

“Very—and most accomplished,” replied the old stiff-backed Marchesa whose word was law in social Rome. “The House of Savoy is not distinguished by its good looks on the female side, but the Princess Luisa is an exception. Personally, I consider her the best-looking among the marriageable royalties in Europe at the present moment.”

“But are her indiscretions really so very dreadful?” asked the diplomat, “or are they exaggerated?”

“Dreadful!” echoed the noble Montalcino, whose elegant attire and carefully trained moustache were so well-known during the hour of the *passeggiate* in the Corso. He had been listening to the conversation. “Why, *cara mio*,” he drawled, “only the other night I saw her with her maid sitting in the stalls at the Salone Margherita, which is, as you know, hardly the place to which a Royal Highness should go. *Madonna mia*! There are lots of stories about Rome of her escapades,” declared the young sprig of the nobility. “It is said she often escapes from the Palace at night and goes long runs in her car, driving it herself. Bindo Peruzzi found her early one morning broken down away out at Castelnuovo, and gave her a lift back in his car. She got out at the Porta Pia and Bindo pretended not to know who she was. I suppose she sent her chauffeur back for the car later on.”

“Rather a daring escapade for a Royal Highness,” Waldron said. “But, after all, Court life, Court etiquette, and Court exclusiveness must bore a girl to death, if in her youth she has been used to Society, as I suppose she had been during her mother’s lifetime.”

“Oh, of course one may easily make lots of excuses,” shuffled the old Marchesa. “But I feel sure the girl must be a source of great anxiety to both Their Majesties. It would be a great relief to them if she were to marry.”

“They say she is a favourite with the King, and that he never reproves her,” exclaimed the young fellow across the table.

“Well,” declared Hubert, “in any case she must be a merry, go-ahead little person. I shall look forward to meeting her.”

“Oh, no doubt you will, signore, very soon,” laughed the old leader of Society, when just at that moment the Ambassador’s wife gave the signal to rise, and the ladies passed out, the men bowing as they filed from the room.

A quarter of an hour later when the male guests joined the ladies in the big, handsome drawing-room overlooking the garden of the Embassy, the Marchesa beckoned Hubert over to where she was ensconced in a corner.

“Signor Waldron,” she said, “I find that Lady Cathcart has a portrait of Princess Luisa, the young lady whom we have been discussing. Look! It is yonder, on the table in the corner. The one in the oval silver frame.”

Hubert crossed to where she directed and there saw a large oval photograph which he had not before noticed, for he had never particularly examined the portraits in the room. Beneath was scrawled in a bold Italian hand the autograph—“Luisa di Savoia.”

He gazed upon the pictured, smiling face, utterly staggered.

The portrait was that of Lola!

Chapter Eleven.

Strictly Incognita.

That afternoon at half-past three o'clock, the hour when in winter all Rome goes out for its airing on the Pincio, Hubert Waldron was idling along the terrace, gazing at the wonderful panorama of the Eternal City stretched away before him in the yellow sundown.

In Rome it is the correct thing to go to the Pincio, and there pay visits to the Roman ladies who sit in their smart carriages or automobiles as they slowly file up the historic hill and down on the other side. There, in those famous gardens of Lucullus, in which in ancient days Messalina, the wife of Claudius, celebrated her orgies, modern Rome daily holds its daily alfresco reception, for everybody who is anybody in the capital goes there to see and to be seen.

Hubert had been chatting with the Baroness Lanzenhofen, an Austrian hostess very popular in Rome, but her carriage had moved on, and now he stood alone near the kerb looking out upon the wonderful view, and about to descend to the city and drive back in a taxi to his rooms in the Via Nazionale.

Behind him a procession of smart equipages of all kinds filed slowly around the terrace, when of a sudden he heard an excited cry—his name:

"Signor Waldron! Signor Waldron!"

Turning in sudden surprise, he found himself face to face with Lola who, seated alone in one of the royal carriages—a splendid landau bearing the arms of Savoy upon its panels, a footman and coachman in the royal livery and powdered hair—was smiling at him mischievously.

He raised his hat and advancing eagerly took the little white-gloved hand outstretched to him, for the carriage had already pulled up, the fine pair of bays champing impatiently at their bits.

“Well!” he cried. “This is really a great surprise!”

“Yes. I heard that you had been transferred here from Madrid,” she laughed, speaking in English. “But oh! I’ve got lots to explain. I want to see you, Mr Waldron—to see you very particularly. I came here this afternoon to find out if you were here. May I call on you this evening? I know where you live, in the Via Nazionale. When will you be at home?”

He was rather taken aback. Ever since his discovery of her portrait in the Embassy a couple of hours ago he had been plunged in thought, for did he not know her secret—the secret of this madcap Princess who had scandalised the Royal House of Savoy?

“This is really a great surprise to me, Mademoiselle Lola,” he answered, scarce knowing what he said. “I, too, would like to have a chat with you. But is it really wise for you to come to my rooms?” he asked in English, glancing at the two royal servants sitting statuesque upon the box.

“Nobody will know. These men do not know English. Shall we say at ten o’clock to-night? I can get away then—not before, I fear. We have a Court dinner.”

“Very well,” he said, looking into her splendid dark eyes. “At ten o’clock then.”

“*Addio*—eh! Till ten o’clock?” she laughed.

“But are you sure it would not be an injudicious step—to visit a bachelor in his rooms?” he queried gravely.

“I don’t care, Signor Waldron—if you don’t. I always take every precaution. My maid, Renata, is as silent as the Sphinx we saw in Egypt. Do you remember? And how I fell off my camel?”

“Shall I ever forget those days?” he remarked as he took the outstretched hand and bowed over it. “Very well, mademoiselle—at ten o’clock.”

“*Bene*. Then I will explain matters. You must be terribly puzzled. I see it in your face,” she laughed.

He smiled and as he stood hat in hand the royal carriage moved off, the onlookers staring to note that the popular young Princess should have stopped and have spoken to a man, an ordinary foot-passenger on the Pincio.

For a second the diplomat glanced after her, then he turned upon his heel and began to descend the winding roadway, past those busts of all the distinguished Italians from Julius Caesar to Marin.

Before him lay that wonderful view of Rome, where beyond the Porta del Popolo and the new quarter with the Palazzo di Giustizia, on the opposite bank of the Tiber, rose the great dome of St. Peter's from the grey mists of the sunset, while on the right stood the spire of the Church of Lourdes, the Vatican, and a portion of the Leontine wall. Away on the right rose Monte Mario with its dark funereal cypresses, while to the left of St. Peter's could be seen the round castle of Sant Angelo with the bronze angel that crowned it. The pines on the height of the castle were familiar to him, being those of the Villa Lante on the Janiculum with the Passeggiata Margherita on which the great statue of Garibaldi was the most conspicuous object.

And as he went along his mind was filled with thoughts of the strange situation, and of the amazing discovery he had that day made.

Lola, his charming little friend of the Nile, at whose side he had so often ridden over the desert, was actually a Princess of the blood-royal—the madcap Princess of the House of Savoy! And ere he had descended the hill her splendid carriage with its jingling harness flashed by him and she nodded merrily as he raised his hat, while two cavalry officers, recognising her, raised their hands in ceremonious salute.

He was reflecting upon those idle sunny days in the far-off Nile-land, those evenings when the western sky was diffused and glorified with gold and saffron, and the shades of night crept up from the silent bosom of the desert where the Bedouins and Bishareen halted their caravans to camp.

In that sunset hour he knew that the faces of the devout were now turned towards Mecca—away from that golden mystery and beauty that the sun had placed in the west—to recite their evening prayers. And up from the

mists, as he gazed away across to the low purple hills of the Campagna rose that sweet, smiling, beautiful face—the face which he had once again gazed upon, though he had believed it had passed out of his ken for ever.

Punctually at ten o'clock that evening Waldron's English valet, Peters—the faithful, clean-shaven, but hunch-backed old Peters who had been with him over ten years—ushered Lola, a sweet-faced, girlish figure into his sitting-room where he stood ready to receive her.

"Really, Mr Waldron, what awfully jolly quarters you have here!" she exclaimed, glancing quickly around the well-furnished bachelor room. The man he had succeeded at the Embassy believed in personal comfort, and had furnished his flat in English style. Therefore he had been fortunate in being able to purchase it cheaply, for its owner had been transferred to Tokio.

"Yes," her host agreed: "they're not half bad. But," he added, "do you really think it prudent to come and visit me at this hour?"

"Why not? I couldn't very well come in the daytime. Somebody might recognise me."

"But is not ten o'clock at night a rather unusual time for a young lady to visit a bachelor?" he queried.

"Well, I don't mind," she laughed gaily. "But there, you're such a dear, conventional old thing!"

He noted that, contrary to her appearance in the afternoon, when she had worn a smart costume and hat which was evidently the latest creation of the Rue de la Paix, she was now very neatly, almost shabbily dressed in a plain blue serge coat and skirt which had seen its best days, a small, close-fitting little hat which showed evident signs of wear, and sadly worn furs.

She noticed that he surveyed her as she took the armchair he offered her.

"Yes," she said, "it is very fortunate that my maid, Renata, is about the

same figure as myself, and that her clothes fit me. I usually pass as her when I go out at night. The sentries change every week, so as long as I am dressed as a maid I have no difficulty—though I sometimes have trouble to avoid the other servants."

"I should think you run very great risks of recognition," he remarked. "And if the truth leaked out would there not be some serious trouble?"

"Trouble! Oh, I dread to think of it!" she declared with a shrug of the shoulders. "I receive daily lectures about my non-observance of the social amenities, my lack of personal pride, and all that. But there—Mr Waldron, you must, I know, have been greatly surprised at meeting me to-day. I know I deceived you. But it was imperative, as I was then travelling incognita. So I hope you will forgive me."

"You practised a very cruel deception upon me," he said with mock severity. "And I don't know if I really ought to forgive you."

"Oh yes, you will—you dear old thing," she cried persuasively, laughing in his face. He was double her age, therefore the endearing terms in which she addressed him were not exactly out of place. Yet, remembering the secret lover, he wondered what had become of him.

"Then old Gigleux was not your uncle, after all?" remarked Waldron, for he remembered how Jack Jerningham had recognised him on that New Year's night at Shepheard's.

"No. Listen and I'll tell you the truth," the Princess said in very good English. She was delightfully unconventional. "You see my aunt, the Queen, was very much annoyed because I motored to Florence alone, and some gossip got about regarding me—because I went to a fancy-dress ball with a gentleman I know. Well, I fear I was a little hot-tempered, with the result that I was unceremoniously packed off on a long tour to Egypt and given into the charge of Miss Lambert and old Ghelardi, who had been in the German Service, but who had just returned to Italy and was appointed by the King as Chief of our Secret Police. I was ordered by the King to assume the name of Duprez, while Ghelardi was to be known as Jules Gigleux. And I think we kept up the farce fairly well—didn't we?"

“Most excellently. Nobody had the slightest suspicion of the truth, I feel sure.”

“I know I told you some awful stories—about my poverty, and all that. But you will forgive me—won’t you?” she implored.

“Of course,” replied the diplomat, charmed by her sweetness and frankness of manner. “It was necessary in order to preserve your incognita. I realise now the reason why your pseudo-uncle regarded me with such a decided antipathy. First he feared lest we might fall in love with each other—”

“And there was no fear of that, was there?” she laughed, interrupting.

“I don’t know exactly,” he answered half-dubiously. “You flirted with me outrageously sometimes.”

“Ah, I know I did! It was, I admit, too bad of me, Mr Waldron. But I do hope even now you’ve found me out in all those white lies that it will make no difference to our friendship.”

“Why, not in the least,” he declared. “I am greatly honoured by Your Royal Highness’s friendship.”

“No, no,” she cried impatiently, “not Highness to you, Mr Waldron. Lola—still Lola, please.”

“Very well,” laughed the man. “But surely that will sound too familiar from one in my station?”

“When we are alone, I mean. Of course in Society, or at Court I may be Her Royal Highness the Principessa Luisa Anna Romana Elisabetta Marie Giovanna di Savoia—and half a dozen other names and titles if you like. They really don’t trouble me,” and she carelessly cast her well-worn sealskin muff upon the couch near her.

“Ah,” he sighed, “I fear you are a sad breaker of the conventionalities. Before I knew that you were my little friend of the Nile I had heard several stories of your various little escapades.”

“Oh yes,” she cried quickly. “No doubt you’ve been told some awful tales about my doings—stories which get about Rome, and everyone exaggerates them as they pass from mouth to mouth. My worst offence, I believe, is because I entered for a motor-cycle race and won it. Well, haven’t your girls in England won similar races?”

“True, but what a shop-assistant may do is forbidden to a princess,” was his reproof.

“Ah, that’s just it?” she exclaimed in protest. “Merely because I happen to be born a princess I’m supposed to put on a veneer of Court manners, and observe Court etiquette day in and day out, until it all bores me stiff—as you say in English. Just because I try and behave like other girls, obtain my freedom when I can, and enjoy myself with open-air pursuits, I am held in horror by Their Majesties, and the people declare that I am a disgrace to our Royal House.”

“No—not a disgrace, Princess.”

“Lola, please,” she said, correcting him.

“Lola then—if you will have it so,” he said. “The people secretly admire you for your courage in breaking the steel bonds of Court etiquette; nevertheless remember that such escapades as yours must lead you into danger—grave personal danger. You are a girl, and remember also that there are some blackguards about who, knowing your active and daring temperament, may entrap you and then levy blackmail upon you.”

Her beautiful face instantly fell. He saw that she grew paler and more thoughtful. Her lips twitched slightly.

“You think so,” she said slowly, her voice so changed that he wondered. “You think that someone might really attempt to levy blackmail upon me—eh?”

“Certainly. And in that lies the very serious peril to which you must be exposed, if you continue to disregard the conventionalities which surround you as a daughter of a Royal House.”

“You are rather hard upon me, Mr Waldron,” she said in a low voice, quite

unusual to her.

“Not in the least. Remember I am your friend. If at any time I can serve you in any way you have only to come to me, and I will exert every effort on your behalf,” he said, speaking very earnestly. “But I would beg of you to exercise the greatest discretion. Why continue to annoy Their Majesties by this conduct which must sooner or later bring unpleasantness, and perhaps trouble, upon you?”

“Trouble!” she echoed, her great dark eyes fixed upon him. “Trouble! It has already brought trouble upon me. That is why I came here to-night to see you—to tell you—to confess—and to ask your help as my good, kind friend?”

Chapter Twelve.

The King’s Confidences.

At that moment there was a discreet tap at the door and Peters entered, saying:

“An aide-de-camp of His Majesty wishes to see you on a matter of great importance, sir.”

For a second Waldron stood confused.

“Oh! he must not find me here,” whispered the Princess, starting up in quick alarm. “Where can I go?”

“In this room,” the diplomat replied quickly, opening a door which led to his small dining-room. He switched on the light, and she passed within, closing the door noiselessly. It was all done in a few seconds, and then Hubert said in his natural voice:

“Oh, show him in.”

Next moment a tall, good-looking, dark-moustached officer, wearing his grey military cloak, entered jauntily, saying in Italian with a merry twinkle in his eyes as he grasped the other’s hand:

“Sorry to disturb you at this hour, friend Waldron—especially when you have a lady visitor.”

“Lady visitor! What do you mean?” he asked, for Count Guicciolo was an old friend of many years.

“Well, your man told me that you could not be disturbed, so I naturally formed my own conclusions,” replied the aide-de-camp airily, pointing to the muff. “But I apologise. Here is a message for you from His Majesty. I was to deliver it into your hands,” and from beneath his cloak he produced a letter which upon the flap bore the neat royal cipher of the House of Savoy.

In surprise the diplomat broke the seal and read the following formal words:

"*His Majesty the King commands to private audience the Honourable Hubert Waldron, M.V.O., this evening and immediately*," followed by the date.

Hubert noticed the neat handwriting. It had been penned by His Majesty King Umberto himself.

"Well!" he asked the Count.

"I was sent to bring you at once to the Palace, my friend," replied the other.

"What is amiss? Surely it is strange that I should receive a command at this hour!"

"Yes. But His Majesty works very late sometimes."

"Is anything seriously wrong?"

"Not that I am aware of. I was simply summoned to the private cabinet, and His Majesty gave me that letter, and ordered me to find you at once," and he took a cigarette from the silver box which Waldron handed him, and holding it in his white-gloved hand slowly lit it.

"Will you come with me now?" he asked as he cast away the match. "I'm awfully sorry to disturb you," he added with a laugh. "But it is His Majesty's orders."

"Oh, don't apologise," was the diplomat's reply. He was annoyed, for he knew what a sad gossip was Guicciolo, and that on the morrow half Rome would know that a young lady had been found in his rooms. At all hazards her identity must be concealed. Therefore, making an excuse to obtain his coat, Waldron passed into the dining-room where the Princess was standing in anxiety, whispered to her an explanation how he would have to leave unceremoniously and urging her to leave five minutes later.

"We will resume our conversation to-morrow," he added. "But not here. It

is far too dangerous."

"Where then?" she asked eagerly in a low whisper. "I will meet you anywhere after dark." He reflected a second. Then said:

"Do you know Bucci's little restaurant in the Piazza delle Coppelle?"

"Yes, I know. Quite a quiet little place. I will never be recognised there."

"Well, at half-past eight. The dinner will be over then, and the place will be empty."

"Agreed. *Addio*," she said, and they grasped hands quickly. Then he put on his overcoat, and went out with the Count, while five minutes later Peters, ignorant of her identity, showed the Princess out, and accompanied her downstairs to the door.

As Waldron and the Count entered the fine Quirinale Palace they were challenged by the sentries at the great gateway, whereupon the aide-de-camp gave the password and they saluted.

Then, crossing the great handsome courtyard, they entered by one of the smaller doors, and passing round the gallery to the huge gilded staircase where two servants in the royal livery stood on either side like statues. They ascended, and passing along a well-carpeted corridor, halted at last before a heavy mahogany door outside which stood a sentry on duty—the door of the King's private cabinet.

Again the Count uttered the password, was saluted, and was then allowed to knock.

A deep voice gave permission to enter, whereupon Hubert Waldron crossed the threshold and bowed low in the presence of a rather short, middle-aged man of smart military appearance, though he wore civilian evening dress with a single decoration on the breast of his coat, the Star of the Order of the Crown of Italy, of which he was Master.

The room was not large, but was tastefully, even luxuriantly furnished. In the centre stood a great mahogany writing-table piled with papers, from which he had just risen, while at the side was set an armchair for those to

whom His Majesty gave audience.

“Ah, Waldron, I am very glad they have found you so quickly,” he exclaimed, putting out his hand in gracious welcome. “I want to have a confidential chat with you. I want you to assist me, for I feel sure you can.”

“If I can serve Your Majesty in any way,” replied the British diplomat, “I am, as you know, only too anxious and too willing.”

“Ah! I know. I know that,” replied King Umberto briskly. “Good! Sit down.”

Then, when His Majesty had settled himself again in his padded writing-chair—at that table where for many weary hours each day he attended to matters of State affecting forty millions of his subjects—he looked straight at the man before him, and asked suddenly in Italian:

“Signor Waldron, can you keep a Secret?”

“That is my profession,” was the other’s calm reply. “And any secret of Your Majesty’s will, I assure you, be safe in my keeping.”

The King paused. He was dressed plainly, for after the banquet given that night to a Russian royalty he had changed from his striking uniform into easier clothes before commencing work. Yet in his face was a deep, earnest, noble expression, for he was a monarch who had the welfare of his nation very deeply and genuinely at heart. His dark, deep-set eyes, his slightly sallow skin, and the three lines across his brow told their own tale. Though a King, the crown bore heavily upon his head, for the responsibilities of a State run by a Ministry which was not above suspicion weighed very heavily upon him.

The Cabinet was, alas, composed mainly of men with axes to grind. Of financial scandals there had been many, and more than once there had been a public outcry when Ministers had been tried as criminals and convicted of bribery, and of peculation of the public funds.

Yet as monarch his hands were tied, and perhaps no ruler in all Europe had so many sleepless nights as he.

The silence was broken by a bugle in the great courtyard below. The Palace guard were changing.

“Listen, Waldron,” he said at last in a low voice of deep earnestness after he had ascertained that the door was closed, “I have asked you here to-night because I feel that I can trust you. My father trusted your father, and I have known you ever since we were lads. I know how shrewd and painstaking you are, and what a high sense of honour you possess.”

“Your Majesty is far too flattering,” Hubert replied modestly. “I know that my dead father always held yours in the highest esteem. And you have shown towards myself a graciousness that I never expected.”

“Because I know that you are my friend,” he said. “Even a King must have a friend in whom he can at times confide. That is why I have asked you to come and see me.”

“You do me too great an honour,” declared the diplomat.

“Not at all. It is I who am asking your favour in your assistance,” was His Majesty’s quiet response. “Let me explain the situation of which you, as a British diplomat, will at once recognise the extreme gravity.” And then drawing his white hand wearily across his brow, he leaned back in his chair and sighed. In that gay, brilliant Court—one of the gayest in all Europe—His Majesty always presented a brilliant and kingly figure in his splendid uniforms and dazzling decorations, but at heart he hated all pomp and show, and as soon as a ceremony was over he always changed into evening-clothes, or else into a navy serge suit which, being an old friend, was slightly shiny at the elbows.

A high-minded, God-fearing ruler, he carried out to the letter all the traditions of the House of Savoy and worked incessantly and untiringly for the welfare of his nation, and for the benefit of the sweated factory-hand, and the poor, half-starved *contadino*. For certain Hebrew financiers who had tried to grip the country and strangle it, he had nothing but hatred. For the present Cabinet, mostly composed of commercial adventurers and place-seeking lawyers, he had the most supreme contempt, and daily he sighed that he was not an autocrat, so that he could sweep away with a single stroke of the pen all those who stood in the way of his

beloved Italy’s prosperity.

True, by dint of his own business acumen and his resolute firmness against the various Ministers of Finance who were too often rogues, many of whom ought long ago to have been in prison, he had himself placed the finances of Italy upon a sound basis. The lire was now almost equal in value to the French franc. By this, commercial industries had been encouraged, foreign capital had been invested in Italy, the railways had been taken over by the State, and a wave of prosperity had swept upon the nation such as had never hitherto been experienced.

But this had not suited the Cabinet, every man of whom could be bought at a price. Hence he stood alone as ruler, compelled daily to combat the intrigues of that unscrupulous horde of adventurers which composed the Chamber of Deputies, and to continue the policy he had marked out as his own.

As a diplomat Hubert Waldron knew all this and deeply sympathised with him. Truly, the Palace of the Quirinale was not a bed of roses for its Sovereign.

Again the bugle sounded, and from below came the regular tramp of armed men.

The little buhl clock upon the mantelshelf chimed the hour upon its silver bell, the big fire burned cosily, and over the great writing-table the two green silk-shaded electric lamps threw their mellow glow.

“Waldron, my nation is to-day in gravest peril,” the King said at last, looking straight into the other’s eyes very gravely. “A secret—one which I foolishly believed to be safe from our enemies—has been betrayed! You are shrewd, cautious, and far-seeing. I will reveal the whole ghastly truth to you—for you must help me. I rely upon you, for though I am King of Italy you are, I know, my friend, and will help me through the most critical crisis that has occurred since my accession to the throne. Listen,” he urged, “and I will relate the whole of the remarkable circumstances.”

Chapter Thirteen.

His Majesty's Secret.

"The problem we have before us is as follows," His Majesty began, bending towards Waldron from his chair, and speaking in a low, earnest, intense tone. "Some plans of important defences now being constructed upon our Austrian frontier have mysteriously disappeared from the Ministry of War. The theft was discovered at once, but up to the present it is known only to myself, to Ghelardi, our Chief of Secret Police; to General Cataldi, Minister of War, who reported to me this evening, and to three other persons, all of whom have been sworn to absolute secrecy."

"In what circumstances have they disappeared?" inquired the diplomat.

"I will tell you," was the King's reply. "A year ago it was decided in secret by the Council of Defence to construct a chain of hidden fortresses from Feltre along the northern frontier to the Lago di Garda—eight of them, with quick-firing disappearing guns. Six have been constructed, commanding a wide sweep of our neighbour's territory, and armed with our new long-range artillery, while two others are still in course of construction, the work being carried out in strictest secrecy. For many years the Council of Defence have felt that this portion of our frontier was the most vulnerable of all, but according to our unfortunate treaty with Austria, no strengthening of the defences on either side is permitted."

"And now the secret is probably out to Austria," Waldron remarked. "Ah! I follow Your Majesty. The construction of these forts will be construed by Austria into a menace—even into an act of war!"

"Precisely. I see that you at once perceive the extreme gravity of the situation. Italy has been betrayed into the hands of her hereditary enemy, Austria. Ever since the recent riots in Trieste our relations have been greatly strained, and I am informed on the best authority that Austria-Hungary is only waiting an excuse to pick a quarrel and attack us, although her attitude is so diplomatically correct."

"Then the situation is certainly most grave. There is, I fear, a distinct and

imminent peril, Your Majesty."

"Ah! You agree with me—eh?"

"Entirely," was Waldron's answer as he sat, his chin resting upon his hand, deep in thought. "But may I not know more precisely the exact circumstances of this theft?"

"Certainly, every fact within my knowledge is entirely at your disposal, for I am seeking your assistance, I have heard of your successes as a keen investigator of diplomatic secrets, and I appeal to you, Waldron, to assist me in what is a very serious difficulty and a distinct peril to my nation."

"I am Your Majesty's obedient servant to command," was the other's prompt reply.

"Yes, yes, I greatly appreciate your words," the monarch said. "Now let me proceed further. The plans were produced at a meeting of the Council of Defence held at the Ministry of War yesterday at twelve o'clock. There had been suggested some strengthening of the fort overlooking the Lago di Garda at Gardone, also the one commanding the Austrian town of Riva, at the farther end of the lake. It was to discuss the details—the addition of guns of greater calibre and further range—that the plans were laid upon the table and examined by the Ministers of War and of Marine as well as the eight other high officers composing the Council. The proceedings were entirely private, of course, even the secretary of the Council being excluded from the council chamber, as he always is when purely confidential business affecting the nation's secret defences is in progress. On his re-entry the plans in question were handed back to him by the hand of General Cataldi, the Minister of War, but a few minutes later they seem to have been mysteriously spirited away, the secretary of the Council, Lambarini, declaring that he had passed them on to Pironti, private secretary of the Minister."

"And Lambarini?" queried Waldron. "Is he trustworthy—entirely trustworthy?"

"Entirely. Colonel Lambarini has occupied his position for the past fifteen years, and is thoroughly loyal and patriotic."

Hubert Waldron drew a deep, long breath. His estimate of the Italian functionary, of whatever grade, was but a low one. He had never yet known any Government official in Italy—be he a humble clerk or a Cabinet Minister—who could not be bought with a price. Alas! that corruption in Italy was a matter of world-wide knowledge.

The King instantly noticed his visitor's hesitation, and his brows contracted.

"Ah, I see! You suspect Lambarini. But there you are quite wrong, Waldron—quite wrong, I assure you! Too well I know the lack of personal honour at Monte Citorio and in our Government offices. But I know Lambarini. For me that is all-sufficient. When I know a man I trust him."

"Then I at once withdraw my suspicion," the diplomat exclaimed quickly. "Your Majesty can read men far better than I can. If you actually know this secretary, Lambarini, then no further word need be said."

"It is not my desire to prejudice your views in any way, my dear Waldron," the King assured him with a smile. "I want you to approach this affair with a perfectly open mind. Please understand that to you I am looking for assistance. I am powerless as monarch. I am hoping that you—the friend of my youth—may be able to solve the very serious and critical problem."

"Of course I will do my best in Your Majesty's interests," declared Waldron. "But do please tell me more. What happened after the documents were placed in Lambarini's hands?"

"He put them at once in the safe in His Excellency's room."

"Then he has a key to the safe?"

"It is a safe used for confidential documents when they are taken from the strong-room in the basement up to the Ministry, in order to be inspected. The safe is actually in General Cataldi's private cabinet."

"How many keys are there?"

"Three. The General has one," replied His Majesty. "There is a system of keeping confidential documents, for if one is removed for any purpose, a

slip of paper is left in its place bearing the signature of one or other of the three persons who have the key."

"And has no one access to this safe except the persons Your Majesty has mentioned?"

"No one," was the King's reply.

"There must be a false key."

"Even if one existed that would be useless, for a sentry is on duty outside the Minister's private cabinet day and night."

"And has this sentry been questioned?"

"I believe so."

"By Ghelardi, most probably?"

"I think so."

"Is Your Majesty aware of the views held by your Chief of Secret Police?"

"He simply declared the whole affair to be a mystery. His suspicion first fell upon Lambarini, just as yours has done. But he afterwards agreed with me that the official named is no traitor."

"Well—there must be clever espionage at work somewhere," said Waldron. "A substantial sum must have been paid for those documents, that's certain. If we could trace money, we could place our hands at once upon the culprit."

"Agreed," exclaimed His Majesty, a dark cloud upon his brow. "But I hate to think that any Italian should sell his country's secrets for foreign gold."

"Alas! Your Majesty, in every country there are to be found black sheep. Even in our patriotic England we have them, as recent prosecutions have revealed."

"Ah, yes, I know! But, Waldron, we must find this traitor who has no doubt

stirred up against us once more the bitter enmity of Vienna. Three years ago our Secret Service reported a cunning and crafty move by Austria—an intention on her part to encroach into Venetia. There was a deep conspiracy afoot against us just as there was last year against Servia in the Balkans. Had we not discovered it we might have awakened to find Venice and Milan in the enemies' hands. As it was, Ghelardi—though then in the German Service, but still a patriotic Italian—gave us a timely warning, and we were able to turn the tables upon our enemy. After this discovery the Council of War decided to strengthen our frontier defences in secret—the secret which is now, unfortunately, betrayed to those who wish to crush us."

"And does Your Majesty desire me to make inquiries independently of the Commendatore Ghelardi—or in association with him?" inquired Waldron thinking deeply, for the problem was a complex one.

"Just as you deem best, Waldron. Act as your own discretion directs you," the King replied, taking from the table a slip of yellow official paper whereon was scribbled some memoranda.

"I presume that I shall have no difficulty in obtaining the name of the sentry who was on duty outside His Excellency's door?" the diplomat remarked after a brief silence.

"I have it here," responded His Majesty. "It is Corporal Tonini, of the 19th Regiment of Bersiglieri—a loyal soldier."

Hubert took the little gold pencil attached to his watch-chain and scribbled the name on the cuff of his dress-shirt, together with that of the secretaries of Minister of War and that of the Council of Defence.

"I will order Ghelardi to give you every assistance and information, as I desire, Waldron, that you will inquire into this matter upon my own personal behalf. I ask you to do this as a favour—as one who will be very grateful to you for your services. You are independent, and a foreigner, and you have no axe to grind as, alas! they all seem to have who surround me. A king is always the centre of human avarice, of base unscrupulousness, of jealousies, and of the fierce struggle for undeserved honours and emoluments." Then with a sigh he added:

“When one is a Sovereign there is, unfortunately, revealed all the worst side of human nature.”

“Is there any suspicion of a spy of Austria being at present in Rome?” Waldron inquired after a silence broken only by the tramp of the soldiers returning to their quarters on the opposite side of the great paved courtyard.

“Austrian agents are, of course, always among us. A dozen or so are known as residing in the north. But Ghelardi and his staff are ever watchful. You know him, I suppose?”

“I have met him,” replied Hubert vaguely. He dare not tell His Majesty the curious story of their acquaintance, or the circumstances in which he had met his madcap niece.

“Ah! then you will want no introduction. You will find him at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But perhaps I had better give him instructions,” he added, and turning to his table he scribbled a hasty note, which he enclosed in an envelope and addressed. “If you wish to consult him or others that will prove an open sesame,” smiled His Majesty.

Waldron took the royal mandate with a word of thanks, and placed it securely in his inner pocket.

“Remember,” His Majesty urged very seriously, “in this affair, I beg of you, Waldron, to spare no effort. We must save the situation at all hazards, and though Ghelardi and his agents may make their own inquiries, I rely upon you alone to tell me the truth. Go to your Chief and ask him to relieve you of your present duties for a short time. Tell him that you are carrying out a personal mission for myself, the friend of your youth, and I feel sure he will raise no objection. Great Britain is ever the firm and true friend of myself, and of my beloved nation. But please keep the secret of our loss entirely to yourself.”

“I respect Your Majesty’s confidence as fully and entirely as though it were that of my own Sovereign,” was Waldron’s earnest response.

“I know that I can trust you implicitly,” declared the monarch upon whose countenance the diplomat noted a dark cloud of apprehension. The

situation was indeed one of extreme gravity, for the relations between Austria and Italy—never very cordial—had for the past year been much overstrained.

Whatever was the truth concerning the theft of those confidential plans, Waldron suspected from the very outset that one or other of the higher officials had had a hand in it. The onus might be placed upon secretaries, clerks, or sentries, but with the recollection of the many and constantly recurring political scandals in Rome he was inclined to a distinct belief that even one or other of the members of the Council of Defence might be the guilty person who had basely betrayed his country for Austrian gold.

“Then Your Majesty can give me no further details regarding this mysterious disappearance?” Hubert remarked after a pause, during which the King had been toying pensively with his fountain pen, his dark, deep eyes fixed upon the pile of documents awaiting his signature before he retired to rest.

“No. What I have told you comprises the whole facts as reported to me to-day. I have not sought to go further into any detail, for I considered that a shrewd, active man like yourself—and I have heard what your past record in elucidating diplomatic mysteries has been—would have greater chance of getting at the truth if allowed to make inquiries quite independently.”

“And Ghelardi?”

“I have not told him that I intended to consult you.”

“But he may resent it—most naturally he will.”

“Probably. But surely you, as my personal and private agent, will take no heed. Remember that you are working on my behalf alone.”

“But I fear, sir, that he may endeavour to place obstacles in my way,” Waldron remarked.

“And if he does then report instantly to me. I will warn him at once that you are to be given every assistance. Indeed, if you require his services,

he shall himself act under your instructions, for am I not Sovereign—and I tell you I intend at all hazards to know the truth regarding this dastardly theft!" cried His Majesty with some warmth.

"I will promise to do my very utmost towards that end," was Hubert's reply. "Your Majesty trusts me, and I will in return carry out the mission to the very best of my ability."

"Those words of yours are all-sufficient for me," replied the King, rising and gripping his visitor's hand. "Do your best. Leave no stone unturned, Waldron, and spare no expense on my behalf. Report to me frequently, as I shall be full of anxiety until this matter is cleared up. Count del Grillo will admit you to private audience at any hour. I will give him instructions. Go," the monarch added. "Do your best on my behalf, and may every good fortune attend you. Upon your efforts will mean the averting of a long and disastrous war. *Addio*!"

And he again pressed the diplomat's hand.

The latter bowed low, and with a repeated promise backed out of the royal presence, closing the door after him.

And carrying with him the secret of Italy's peril, he descended the great marble staircase, where at the foot stood the two gorgeous flunkeys in the royal livery who bowed low as he passed out.

Chapter Fourteen.

Is Mainly Problematical.

Hubert Waldron, after a sleepless night, determined to begin his inquiries independently of the famous Chief of Police, Ghelardi, whom he had not met since that memorable evening in Shepheard's.

It was news to him that the famous European spy had resigned from the service of his masters in Berlin, and returned to the land of his birth. At least, however, there was one consolation, namely, that he would, in his new position, no longer be antagonistic to England.

Waldron's first impulse when he dressed that morning was to go over to the Ministry and seek him, but on reflection he feared that the old man might be jealous of his interference in the affair. Hence it would best to act independently.

With that object he first went along to the Embassy and had a chat with his Chief and then called upon General Cataldi at the handsome Ministry of War in the Via Venti Settembre. There he explained matters to the short, alert, little white-haired man who, in his smart uniform, received him in his private cabinet. His Excellency was at first much surprised to learn that the Englishman knew so much, but soon expressed his readiness to assist him by every means in his power.

"My first object is to have an interview with Corporal Tonini, of the 19th Bersiglieri," Hubert said in Italian.

"With pleasure, signore," replied the dapper Minister who was enjoying one of those long Toscanos so dear to the Italian palate, and he at once pressed a button.

A sentry appeared instantly.

"Tell Major Brusati I wish to see him at once," he said.

"Yes, Excellency," replied the man, who saluted and retired.

“This affair, Signor Waldron, is a most serious one for us,” he said a few moments later. “You see yonder. There is the safe in which the plans were—”

At that moment he was interrupted by the entrance of a burly major of artillery in dark blue uniform with the broad yellow stripe down his blue-grey trousers.

“Brusati, I want Corporal Tonini, Number 34876 19th Regiment of Bersiglieri to be called here at once. This gentleman, Signor Waldron, of the British Embassy, desires an interview with him in private.”

“*Benissimo*, Excellency,” replied the Major, saluting. “I will telephone over to the barracks at once.”

“And let me know as soon as he arrives.”

“Immediately, Excellency.”

And the officer turned upon his heel and left.

“Your Excellency was pointing out the safe when we were interrupted,” Hubert remarked, noticing that there were three safes in the room. Two were large, heavy ones of a well-known English make, painted dark green, against the left-hand wall, while the other was a smaller one embedded in the wall behind the Minister’s chair.

“It is this,” replied the General rising and approaching the safe in the wall. “From this the documents mysteriously disappeared.”

Hubert also rose from his chair, and going behind the writing-table, stood beside the Minister of War examining the steel door carefully.

“Has Ghelardi been here?” he inquired of His Excellency.

“He was here last night.”

“What did he do?”

“He made a complete examination of it and took photographs of some

finger-prints upon the knob and door," responded General Cataldi, placing his own key in the lock and turning the handle twice, opened the heavy, steel door, disclosing a number of pigeon-holes, wherein reposed quantities of papers.

Waldron carefully inspected the door, and saw that it was by the same excellent maker as the other two.

"There is no question of the papers having been put in one or other of the racks," the General said. "Confidential papers are always placed in this drawer," and he opened a small, steel drawer in the bottom of the safe. It was empty.

"Have all these papers been examined?"

"With my secretary, Colonel Pironti, I examined each one last night. The documents in question have undoubtedly disappeared."

Hubert Waldron stood before the open safe in pensive silence.

Then he bent, and taking his gold, half-hunter watch from his pocket and opening it, used the small lens as a magnifying glass with which he carefully examined the lock of the safe.

"There are no marks of the lock having been tampered with," he remarked to His Excellency. "A false key must evidently have been used."

"That is Ghelardi's opinion."

Then the diplomat, with His Excellency's permission, removed the whole of the papers from the safe, and carefully examined the sides and back of the interior, satisfying himself that they were all intact.

"Which wall is this?" he asked, tapping it with his hand.

"The outer wall—in the courtyard," was the Minister's prompt reply. "It could not have been attacked from behind, as we are fifty feet from the ground. The exterior wall has already been examined."

Waldron made no reply. He was thinking deeply—wondering whether,

after all, His Excellency, General Cataldi, Minister of War, knew more about the affair than he had admitted? The corruptness of Monte Citorio was too universally known, and Austria would, no doubt, give a very substantial sum for such important information as that which had been stolen.

His Excellency, on his part, stood with his cigar half-smoked between his teeth, a smart figure in his General's undress uniform, with the green-and-white cross of Maurice and Lazarus at his throat, controller of an army which in case of war would consist of three and a half million men.

Was Hubert's faint suspicion correct? Regrettable as it was, few men in Italy accepted Ministerial portfolios for the sake of the small remuneration paid to them. Everyone looked to office as a means of increasing his income, from the Minister of Justice down to the most obscure prefect. Therefore, was General Cataldi an exception, or was he endeavouring to fix a scapegoat among his underlings? Such a circumstance was not at all unknown in the modern official life in Rome.

But Hubert Waldron determined not to form any premature theory. He refused to allow his mind to become prejudiced by previous events.

In several notable cases of espionage, particularly when that secret report of the British Admiralty regarding the results of our naval manoeuvres two years before had mysteriously disappeared from Whitehall, he had successfully cleared up the mystery. Indeed, he had earned the thanks of the Prime Minister and of the Sovereign, and had gained his M.V.O. for his clever and untiring efforts, by which he was actually able to wrest the precious and most confidential documents from the possession of the spy—a traitorous Englishman who had acted on behalf of Germany—a man who that same night committed suicide at his house at Richmond, in order to avoid arrest.

Probably it was knowledge of Hubert's previous successes that had induced His Majesty King Umberto III to invoke his assistance. At any rate His Majesty could scarcely have chosen a keener, or more resourceful man.

He had made a second and most thoroughly exhaustive examination of

the safe when Major Brusati entered, saluted, and remarked:

“Corporal Tonini is in the ante-room, Excellency.”

“I will see him alone,” said Hubert, “if I may be permitted?”

“Certainly, signore,” replied His Excellency politely. Then, addressing the Major, he said:

“Take Signor Waldron to the man. He wishes to see him.”

Promising the General to return and make his adieu, Hubert followed the artillery officer out into the corridor to a room on the opposite side.

Waldron opened the door, and at once a soldier, aged about thirty, with a thin face and rather crooked nose, sprang to attention. He wore the dark blue uniform with crimson facings of the renowned Bersiglieri, or riflemen, with his large, round hat with cock’s plumes at the side.

“You are Corporal Tonini?” asked Waldron kindly, as he closed the door and advanced into the bare, severely furnished room, which smelt of stale cigars, as do all the rooms in the Italian Ministries.

“Yes, signore,” replied the soldier, looking askance at the civilian foreigner who had come to question him.

“Sit down,” Waldron said, taking a seat himself. “I had better explain. I am acting on behalf of His Majesty your King, in order to clear up the mystery of the theft of those plans from His Excellency’s room.”

“The plans?” gasped the man, and by his accent Hubert knew that he was not a Roman. “Then you know, signore?”

“You come from Tuscany, Tonini?”

“*Si, signore*.”

“What part?”

“My home is at Signa, near Firenze.”

And from that moment Hubert Waldron, whose knowledge of Italian was practically perfect, spoke in the Tuscan tongue, using all the aspirated “c’s” and substituting the “r’s” for “l’s” which is the betrayal of the true Florentine or the Livornese.

“I want you, Tonini, to put yourself at once at your ease,” the Englishman said. “First, there is nothing against you, not the slightest breath of suspicion. His Excellency the Minister has told me that you have been an excellent soldier. You fought in Tripoli with distinction, as your medal shows, and you have, I see, the medal for saving life. But I want you to be perfectly frank with me—to help me, as His Majesty wishes you to do.”

“Has His Majesty been told that I was on sentry duty?” asked the corporal.

“Yes, it has been reported to him, and you, as a loyal soldier of your Sovereign, must assist in every way to help me to clear up this mystery. You know the value of those documents, I presume?”

“Yes. They are plans of our new fortresses against Austria,” replied the man in a changed voice, for Hubert’s words had greatly impressed him.

“Then you know it must be a spy of Austria who has stolen them?” Waldron said. “Either a spy in person, or an individual who has sold them to a spy. Which, we do not yet know. Now you were on duty outside His Excellency’s private cabinet, were you not?”

“*Si, signore*. From noon till four o’clock.”

“The Council of Defence met at noon—just at the time you went on duty. Now tell me exactly who entered or left His Excellency’s room.”

“I will tell you, signore, exactly. I have nothing whatever to conceal,” replied the soldier frankly.

“Of course you have not. If you tell me everything you will greatly assist me in my inquiries.”

“Well, signore, His Excellency came out of the room just as I went on sentry duty, and for half an hour no one else entered. Several clerks and

others came to the door, but I did not permit them to go in, and told them His Excellency was absent. At half-past twelve Colonel Pironti, whom I knew as His Excellency's secretary, came up the stairs, and of course I allowed him to pass in. He was there about ten minutes, when he came out again with a large orange-coloured portfolio in his hand."

"That contained the papers," Waldron remarked.

"I suppose so, signore. Then nobody entered the room until Colonel Pironti came back again at half-past two. He had the same orange-coloured portfolio in his hand, and took it inside. When he came out I saw that he had left it within. He had evidently placed it in the safe, for as he came out of the door he was putting a key attached to a chain into his trousers-pocket."

"And after that?" asked Waldron, his dark eyes fixed intently upon the man he had under examination.

"Well, signore, several gentlemen came to interview His Excellency the Minister, but I, of course, allowed no one to pass. His Excellency himself came back at three o'clock. He remained about ten minutes and then left. His chauffeur came up and told me his car had arrived. I went in and announced the fact."

"His car!" sniffed Waldron suspiciously. "He was in a hurry to get away—eh?"

"His Excellency had an appointment at the Tivoli—so his chauffeur told me."

Waldron made a mental note of that curious fact.

"And then?" he asked.

"His Excellency had left about ten minutes when Colonel Lambarini, the secretary of the Council of Defence, came up to the door, which I opened for him, as he always had access to His Excellency's private cabinet. He was inside for a few seconds when he suddenly rushed out wildly and asked: 'Who has been here since Colonel Pironti?' I replied that only His Excellency himself had been there, and had just gone. 'There has been a

theft! Some very important papers have been stolen; and you, as sentry, are responsible!' I stood aghast. Then he dragged me inside the room, and showed me the safe open, and the drawer was empty."

"Then you are sure—quite sure that nobody entered that room after His Excellency had left?" asked Waldron earnestly, for that was an extremely important point.

"Nobody, signore. I will swear that as a soldier of Italy, before His Majesty my King—if necessary."

Chapter Fifteen.

Behind the Throne.

After Hubert Waldron had left the corporal of Bersiglieri he entertained a distinct feeling that His Excellency the General knew more of the theft than he had admitted.

On his return to the Minister's private cabinet he found His Excellency in consultation with his secretary, Pironti, a tall, thin-faced, black-haired man, with whom he presently held a long discussion regarding the theft. The secretary of the Council of Defence was also called, and the quartette sat for nearly an hour putting forward various theories as to how the documents could have been extracted. Up to the present it was a dead secret. But how long it would remain so was a question.

"Secrecy is all-important," Waldron declared at last. "We must allow no word of this to leak out. It is His Majesty's express command."

"That sentry may possibly gossip," remarked His Excellency, drawing slowly at his cigar stump, for he smoked perpetually.

"I have already impressed upon him the necessity for silence," replied Waldron.

"In my own opinion the man knows something of the affair," the General went on. "He was on sentry duty, and tells us that nobody whatsoever passed in here except we three. Yet, notwithstanding, the papers were stolen! He must have neglected his duty in some way—without a shadow of a doubt."

"Yes," replied his secretary, "I quite agree with Your Excellency that if he were continuously on duty, as he alleges that he was, then he must have seen the thief."

"Probably bribed to remain silent," His Excellency grunted suspiciously.

Waldron uttered no word. He watched the General's face keenly and kept

his own counsel.

“The affair is a complete mystery,” remarked Lambarini, who had spoken but little. “I, too, incline towards the opinion that the man, Tonini, knows the identity of the thief, but will not speak.”

“If I have him arrested then we might get him to open his lips,” His Excellency exclaimed. Waldron at once said:

“No. His arrest would betray the secret of Your Excellency’s loss. Besides, such an injudicious action would place a very serious obstacle in the channel of my present inquiries.”

“Then you are against his arrest. Why?”

“Because that man has told me the truth.”

The three high officials stared at the Englishman in surprise.

“Yes,” Waldron went on boldly, “I do not believe the man knows anything more than what he has already stated.”

“But what has he told you?” inquired Pironti, whose attitude showed that he was full of resentment that a foreigner should be employed by His Majesty to investigate the scandal.

“That, signore, is my own affair,” was Waldron’s cool reply as he rose from his chair.

“Pironti, have the corporal placed under arrest, and see that nobody speaks with him,” His Excellency ordered, a trifle pale with suppressed anger at Hubert’s words.

The latter, however, turned towards the Minister and said in a hard voice:

“I wish Your Excellency to remember that His Majesty the King has vested me with full powers on his behalf—as you will see by this decree,” and he drew a letter from his pocket. “Corporal Tonini is not to be arrested, nor is he to be threatened—or even approached. This inquiry is now in my hands, General Cataldi, not in yours. Please recollect that this

is His Majesty's orders, and that I am the King's agent in this matter. Good morning." And he turned and left the trio staring at each other in silence.

As he turned the corner under the high walls of the Palazzo Albani and walked up the narrow Via Quattro Fontane in the direction of his rooms in the Via Nazionale, he felt convinced that by His Excellency's manner he had some knowledge of that package of documents.

Back in his own sitting-room he threw himself into a chair before the English coal fire—a luxury in Rome—lit his old briar pipe, and composed himself to reflect.

Ghelardi was one of the most renowned spies in Europe and would, without a doubt, know every secret agent of Austria who had recently been or was in Rome at that moment. Should he consult him? That was a very difficult problem, for from the outset he knew the old man would be antagonistic and would feel that the Englishman was usurping his position and power.

The Italian police official is remarkable for his cunning shrewdness and resourcefulness. In the Secret Police of Italy are men of remarkable, even astounding, tact and ability as investigators of crime. Even the ordinary plain-clothes policeman in Italy is, as a rule, a much more astute officer than those of the same grade in London, Paris, or Berlin. Indeed the Italian with his suave politeness, his natural shrewdness, his keen intelligence, and his suspicious nature makes a most excellent detective, and many of the cleverest officers of the Paris Sûreté and the detective departments of Berlin and New York have graduated through the Secret Police of Italy.

Old Ghelardi had all his life been brought up in that school, rising from an obscure clerk in the Questura in Naples to be a plain-clothes officer, and such distinction did he win in the capture of criminals that he quickly obtained promotion to Rome. As a young man it was he who, single-handed, captured the renowned Calabrian bandit, Bodrero, the fiend who at his trial boasted of having tortured and killed with his own hand over one hundred men, women, and children.

The anarchists, Palmera and Spineti, of Forli, he captured red-handed with their bombs, which they were about to throw at the carriage of the King's father, and again, after a whole year's diligent work, he had at last laid hands upon the two *souteneurs*, Civardi and Tedesco who, as probably will be remembered, murdered the young and pretty Countess Rinaldi in the Palazzo Rinaldi in Cremona and stole her jewels.

None could deny that Ghelardi was a very remarkable man. The German Government knew that, or they would not have seduced him from his office in Italy and given him the position of Chief of the Secret Service. A German appointment such as that is not given to a foreigner without considerable merit.

In a sense, Hubert admired him for his tact, courage, and untiring energy, and now, as he sat smoking and reflecting he remembered how, in his ignorance, he had up the Nile met the greatest secret agent of the present century and believed him to be a prosperous and rather antagonistic Frenchman!

It showed Ghelardi's resourcefulness, for Waldron, keen, shrewd, cosmopolitan man of the world that he was, was not a person easily taken in.

Time was pressing. From one hour to another the Ministry of Foreign Affairs might receive a cipher dispatch from Vienna indicating that the objectionable documents had passed into the hands of the War Department there.

He knew quite well that His Majesty—who had that morning gone to the great review, a brilliant figure in uniform and sparkling decorations—had ridden there and was standing at the saluting point with a quickly beating heart. Peril, a grave and imminent peril, existed for the nation, for Austria, who for so long had desired some excuse for picking a quarrel with her neighbour, was now in a position to declare immediate war.

And with the great armies of Austria-Hungary against her, poor Italy must be ground beneath the iron heel of the invaders!

To-day it is the fashion for the public, gulled by the Press, to talk glibly of the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance. The Man in the Street, be he in

Plymouth or in Petersburg, Margate or Madrid, Rochester or Rome, believes that treaties duly translated and made in duplicate or triplicate, signed by the Sovereign, sealed with the Great Seal, and delivered with all the pomp and ceremony which diplomacy demands, are a safeguard against war. But your modern diplomat smiles, for he knows they are not.

Truly the situation in Europe would be comic, if it were not so terribly tragic—also if it were not so full of the smell of the lyddite shell. Yet the beguiled Man in the Street is content to read and believe his halfpenny newspaper—to feed upon the daily diet which the unscrupulous journalists, bent upon money-making, provide for him, and actually give credit to the daily “story,” as it is termed in newspaper parlance, as the real gospel truth.

Ten times within our present twentieth century has Europe been upon the verge of a great and bloody war. Orders have been given to mobilise, and armies have stood ready to come to grips. Yet only the Embassies have known, and there, most happily, secrets can be kept, even in these get-rich-quick days of bribery and dishonesty.

Europe has slept in her bed in calm, blissful ignorance that at any hour the terrible weapons of modern warfare might provide a cruel awakening, or perhaps a long and fatal sleep!

Such were the thoughts which floated through Hubert’s mind as Peters came in one morning after five days of uncertainty and vain inquiry, and placed the letters at his master’s elbow.

Among them was one bearing a Spanish stamp—a long and regretful letter from Beatriz.

He read it through twice, and then tore it into little fragments and cast it upon the fire with a brief sigh.

The telephone bell rang, and he rose and answered it.

A girl’s voice spoke. It was the Princess Luisa.

“I say, Signor Waldron,” she exclaimed in English, when he had told her that it was he who spoke, “the appointment is all right. To-night at eight-

thirty—eh? I want to see you most urgently."

"I shall be there," he replied. He did not address her as "Highness," as he feared lest the telephone girl should be curious.

"*Benissimo. Addio*!" was her reply, and then she rang off.

Again he threw himself into his chair, his brow dark and thoughtful. The appointment they had made when she had visited him she had been unable to keep, as she had had to accompany the Queen to Naples; and she had only just returned, she explained.

How strange was it all. If by good chance he were successful in his inquiries he might, after all, save Italy and her Sovereign.

But could he? Was the dastardly conspiracy too clever and well sustained? Ay, that was the question.

Those very men—those Ministers who depended upon the King's good graces, and would lick His Majesty's boots, were the same men who were now betraying him and the country into the hands of their hereditary enemy. And for gold—always for gold—that most necessary commodity upon which the devil has for ever set his curse.

That afternoon he spent at the Embassy attending to dispatches brought from Downing Street by the King's messenger who had arrived in Rome that morning, and who was due to return to London at midnight.

For two arduous hours he was closeted with the Ambassador going through the various matters requiring attention, including several questions regarding the Consulates of Florence and Venice. A question had arisen in London of the advisability of reducing the Florence Consulate-General to a Vice-Consulate and making Livorno a Consulate-General in its place. Florence was without trade, while Livorno—or Leghorn as it is known to the English—was full of shipping and other interests. Florence had too long been practically a sinecure, and its Consul-General a picturesque figure, hence the question afoot—the Ambassador being asked to write his opinion upon the proposed reduction.

Durrant, the Councillor of Embassy, being absent in England on leave, it devolved upon Waldron to attend to the clerical duties, and it was nearly six o’clock ere he had sealed the last dispatch and placed it in the small Foreign Office bag of white canvas.

Then the Ambassador questioned him upon the latest phase of his inquiry, but to all questions he was discreetly evasive—even to his own Chief.

Hubert Waldron was never optimistic, though he felt that already he was on the track of the thief.

Chapter Sixteen.

Her Royal Highness.

Soon after eight o'clock Hubert descended from a rickety *vettura* outside the great dark Pantheon, and passing across the piazza, plunged into a maze of narrow, obscure, ill-lit streets until he came to a small quiet restaurant—a place hidden away in the back thoroughfares of the Eternal City, and known only to the populace.

The place which he entered was long and bare, with whitewashed walls and red plush settees—an unpretentious little place devoid of decoration or of comfort.

Upon the empty tables stood vases of paper flowers, big serviettes, and a single knife and fork lay in each place, for the Italian, though he is fond of good food and is usually a gourmet, takes no notice of his surroundings so long as the fare is well-cooked and palatable.

Upon each table stood the big rush-covered *fiasco* of Tuscan red wine in its silver-plated stand, and as Hubert entered, the *padrone*, a short, stout man, came forward to greet him. Dinner was long since over, and the proprietor believed his visitor to be one of those stray foreigners who sometimes drifted in at odd hours because his establishment was a noted one in Rome.

He was surprised when Hubert, speaking in excellent Italian, explained that he was expecting a lady, and that he wished to dine *tête-à-tête*.

"Egisto," he called to the elderly, under-sized waiter, "a private room for the signore. A lady will call at half-past eight."

"*Si, signore*," was the man's prompt reply, and at once he conducted the Englishman upstairs to a small stuffy room on the first floor overlooking the little piazza, where he began setting out the table for two.

Egisto in his black cotton coat and long white apron was surprised when his visitor, in reply to a question as to what he wished to eat, said:

“Please yourself. Something which is a speciality of the house. What is it?”

“Well, signore, our *zuppa alla Marinara* is supposed to be the best in Rome,” he replied. “And of fish, we have red mullet cooked in the Livornese fashion—and *carciofi alla guidea*.”

“Good,” the visitor answered, for Hubert knew Italian cooking and knew what to order. “A dozen *tartufi della mare*, the *ztàppa, triglie* and a *risotto* with *fegatini* of chicken.”

Egisto bowed. From that moment he held the stranger, though a foreigner, in great esteem, for he realised that he knew a good dinner. And every waiter from Liverpool to Luxor or from Tunis to Trondhjem bows to the man who can discriminate on a menu. In what contempt, alas! are our own dear Cookites our Lunnites and our other various couponists held by the man in the black tie and white apron. I have heard a tourist order a boiled haddock in Florence, another whom I overheard demanded “fish and chips” in the Grand Rue in Constantinople, and I recollect quite well a man from Oldham—evidently a cotton operative—loudly call in broad Lancashire for roast beef and Yorkshire pudding in the Grand Hotel at Christiania.

Waldron descended the stairs and waited outside for some ten minutes or so until a taxi drove up and Her Highness, in the same shabby navy blue costume, and worn furs, descended and greeted him eagerly.

When alone together in the small bare room—for only a table and two rush-covered chairs were set upon the uncarpeted floor, with a cheap sideboard against the wall—he assisted her off with her jacket, and when she was seated, Hubert said:

“Now we shall be able to resume our little confidential chat that was so unfortunately interrupted the other night. This place is quite quiet, and the waiter cannot understand a single word of English.”

“Yes,” she sighed apprehensively. “I—I really hardly know what to tell you, Mr Waldron,” she faltered, her big, expressive eyes fixed upon his. “I only know that you are my very good friend, and that I have been foolish—ah! terribly foolish.”

The waiter at that moment entered with the *zuppa*, and after it was served, discreetly withdrew.

“You hinted something about blackmail. I hope Your Highness will tell me everything. No doubt I can assist you,” he said in a low, intense voice when the door had closed.

“Not Highness, please—Lola,” she protested, with a faint smile.

“I’m sorry,” he exclaimed with an apologetic laugh. Then he added: “I suppose we must eat some of this in order to keep up appearances—eh?”

“I suppose so,” she agreed, and they both commenced to eat.

“Of course,” Waldron went on earnestly, “I don’t ask you in any spirit of mere inquisitiveness to tell me anything. I simply make the request because you have admitted that you are worried, and I believe that it may be in my power to assist you.”

“Ah, Mr Waldron,” she sighed, “I know I have been horribly indiscreet, and have greatly annoyed Their Majesties. Old Ghelardi has orders to watch me daily, but fortunately he is, after all, my friend. It is true that an agent of secret police is told off to follow me wherever I go, for my own personal protection, and because the anarchists have lately again threatened the Royal House. But our crafty old friend, whom you know as Jules Gigleux, is good enough to allow me much latitude, so that I know when the secret agent will be off duty, and can then escape his unwelcome attentions.”

“With Ghelardi’s connivance?” Hubert suggested with a laugh. “Then he is not exactly your enemy?”

She nodded in the affirmative, a sweet and mischievous smile playing about her full red lips.

“True,” she went on bitterly, a hard, haunted look in her eyes, “I am a Princess of Savoia, yet after all, am I not a girl like all the others about me? At home, at my mother’s castle at Mantova, I was always allowed my freedom to ride, to motor, to do whatever I liked. But since, alas! I’ve

been compelled to live at the Palace my life has been so horribly circumscribed. I'm tired to death of the narrowness, the pomp, the tiresome etiquette, and the eternal best behaviour one has to put on. It's all horrible. Only in the evenings when, with Ghelardi's connivance, can I go out for an hour or so, do I breathe and enjoy the freedom to which ever since a child I have been accustomed. In Society, people declare that I outrage all the conventionalities, and they hold up their hands at exaggerated stories of my motor trips, or because I go incognita to a theatre or make visits to my friends. But they do not know, Mr Waldron, all that I have suffered. They cannot realise that the heart of a princess of the blood-royal is just the same as that of a girl of the people; that every woman loves to live, to enjoy herself, and to have her own freedom even though she may live in the eternal limelight and glitter of a brilliant Court like ours."

"But permit me to say that if half what I hear be true you are—well, shall we say just slightly injudicious in the way you go about incognita," he remarked.

"Ah! Yes, I know," she replied impatiently. "But I really can't help it. Oh, how heartily I wish that I had never been a princess! The very title grates upon my nerves."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because of the utter emptiness of it all—because," and her voice changed—"because of the tragedy of it all."

"Tragedy! What do you mean?" he echoed quickly, staring at her.

The waiter again entered interrupting, yet Waldron saw from the change in her countenance that there was something hidden in her heart which she desired to confide to him, but for some reason she dare not speak the truth.

As the man busied himself with the plates, recollections of that young Frenchman, Henri Pujalet, arose before the Englishman. He remembered the passionate meeting beneath the palms, and her strict injunctions to exert every precaution so that Gigleux should suspect nothing.

Where was Pujalet? he wondered. Had their affection now cooled, and the secret lover, in ignorance of her real identity and believing her to be poor and dependent upon her uncle, had with a Frenchman's proverbial inconstancy returned to his own beloved boulevards?

From the Princess's attitude he felt convinced that it was so, and he had, in consequence, become much relieved.

When Egisto had bowed low and again disappeared, having changed the dishes, Waldron looked across at his pretty companion, and in a voice of deeper earnestness, said:

"May I not be permitted to know the nature of this tragedy? Remember, you alone know the tragedy of my own love. Is yours, I wonder, of a similar nature?"

She bit her lip, her wide-open eyes fixed upon his. He saw that her breath came and went in short quick gasps and that in her strained eyes was the light of unshed tears.

"Yes," she managed to respond.

There was silence for a few moments. She looked a sweet, pathetic little figure, for her countenance was very pale and apprehensive.

Then he bent across the table where she sat with her elbows upon it, her chin resting upon her hands, her plate untouched.

"And will you not confide in me? You know my secret and gave me certain advice which I heeded," he said.

"Ah! Then you have broken with your Spanish dancer—eh?" she asked quickly in a voice which surprised him. She laid a bitter accent upon the word "dancer."

"I have."

"Because she has, of course proved false to you—as I knew she would," declared Her Highness. "Yes, Mr Waldron, you have acted wisely, as one day you will most certainly be convinced. I heard all about it when I was

visiting the Queen of Spain. The woman would have led you to ruin, as so many women have led the men who are the most honest and best in the world. It seems by the contrariness of Fate that the life of a good man should so often be linked with that of a bad woman—and vice versa?"

He nodded in acquiescence.

"Will you tell me nothing concerning yourself—your own difficulties and sorrows?" he asked, earnestly looking into her face. "I have been perfectly frank with you, and surely you know how proud I am to believe myself your friend."

"You are proud of my friendship merely because I happen to be a princess," she remarked sharply, glancing straight at him, her dark, well-marked brows slightly contracted.

"No, not for that, Your Highness," he protested. "When we first met you led me to believe that you were poor and dependent upon your uncle. Was my attitude in any way different towards you then than it is now?"

"No. Ah, forgive me!" she replied quickly, stretching her little hand across to him in appeal. "I am, I know, too impetuous. It was foolish of me to utter such words, knowing them to be untrue! No, Mr Waldron, you have always shown yourself my friend, ever since that sunny morning when we first met on the deck of the *Arabia*. I deceived you, but under sheer compulsion, I assure you."

"I have forgiven that long, long ago," was his reply. "We are still friends and I, unfortunately, find you in distress. Yet you will not confide in me. That is what annoys me."

"I regret if my silence irritates you in the least," was her low reply, her face growing very grave. "But have you not, in your own heart, certain secrets which you do not desire divulged to anyone—certain private matters which concern your own life—perhaps your own honour?"

"Well, if you put it to me in that fashion, I cannot deny it," he said. "I suppose we all have, more or less."

"Then pray do not let my hesitation annoy you, Mr Waldron," was her

quiet, serious answer. “I know you are my friend, and I highly appreciate your friendship,—but I—I—”

And she broke off short, again biting her lip.

Then, without another word she took up her knife and fork and commenced to eat, as though to divert her thoughts from some subject intensely distasteful to her.

Waldron sat sorely puzzled.

Time after time he tried to induce her to explain further her strange hint as to blackmail, but without avail.

The meal, which proved so dismal and unenjoyable, at last ended and Egisto disappeared for the last time. Both felt relieved.

Then Waldron bent to the Princess Luisa, asking frankly:

“Now tell me what may I do to prove to you my friendship?”

“There is no necessity to prove a fact of which I am already aware,” was her reply after a few seconds’ reflection.

“Truth to tell, Princess,” he remarked, “I cannot quite make you out. Why are you so silent, and yet so distressed? As a man of the world—a freelance—I could, I am sure, extricate you from what I fear may be a pitfall in which you to-night find yourself. You have been indiscreet, perhaps. Yet all of us, in every station of life, have committed regrettable indiscretions.”

“Indiscretions!” she echoed hoarsely. “Yes, you are right, Mr Waldron. Quite right! Ah!” she cried, after a slight pause. “I only wish I were permitted to reveal to you the whole of the strange, tragic circumstances. They would amaze you, I know—but, alas! I can’t.”

“Why not?” he protested.

“For the sake of my own honour,” she faltered, and her eyes, he saw, were filled with tears.

He sprang up and took her small white hand warmly within his own, saying:

“Let me be your friend, Princess. Do, I implore you.”

“Princess!” she cried bitterly. “Will you never learn to drop that title when you speak to me.”

He apologised, still holding her hand in his strong grip as pledge of his great friendship, and of his deep admiration for her. Love was entirely out of the question, he knew. He had realised that hard fact ever since the startling discovery of that photograph in the drawing-room of the Embassy.

At last, after a long silence, she spoke in a hard, intense voice, quite unusual to her, for she was full of suppressed emotion.

“If you really are my friend I—I wonder,” she hesitated, “if you would do something for me—something to assist me?”

“Most willingly,” he cried. “What is it?”

“I—I hardly like to ask it, but I have no other true and confidential friend in Rome except Renata. And as a maid she cannot help me in this matter without arousing suspicion in a certain quarter.”

“What can I do? I’m ready to assist you in any way in my power,” he answered her quickly.

“Even though it necessitates a journey to Brussels?”

“To Brussels!” echoed Hubert in surprise. Then he added: “Of course—anywhere that may be necessary.”

“Then I want this letter delivered by hand. It is most secret and important, and I would only trust it to you, Mr Waldron, because I know that you would never betray my confidence whatever may happen.” And she drew forth with nervous fingers from within her blouse a letter sealed with a large black seal bearing the single letter “L.” Waldron took it and saw that the address read:

“Private—To Monsieur S. Petrovitch, Bruxelles.”

“See here,” she went on, showing him a small scrap of paper upon which she had written: “Slavo Petrovitch, Box 463 Bureau de Poste, Bruxelles.”

“On arrival in Brussels send word to this address that you are there, and you will be met if you make an appointment in the Café Métropole.”

“But if this letter is in such strict secrecy how am I to establish the identity of the Monsieur Petrovitch?” Waldron queried after a second’s thought.

For answer she opened the small circular golden locket she wore suspended by a thin platinum chain and exhibited to him a photograph within.

He held his breath as his eyes fell upon it. The picture was that of Henri Pujalet!

She smiled mysteriously in his face, saying:

“You recognise him, I see, as one of our fellow-travellers on the Nile?”

“Yes I do,” was Waldron’s brief response.

“And you will do this for me as my friend—and ask no questions?”

“I have already promised,” he replied, bowing before her very gravely.

“Ah, Mr Waldron!” she cried, bursting into a sudden torrent of tears, quite unable further to repress her emotion. “Yes, I know you are my real true friend! And if you will do this for me you can never know how great a service you are rendering me—a service the magnitude of which you will perhaps one day know when—when I dare to tell you the tragic and astounding truth!” And before he could be aware of it, she had raised his hand in a sudden outburst of frantic gratitude and kissed it.

Chapter Seventeen.

The Cipher Dispatch.

Next day Hubert Waldron continued his inquiry with unceasing activity.

Armed with His Majesty's authority, he had an interview with the Commendatore Bertini, the Questore, or Chief of Police of Rome. The secret or political police under Ghelardi was an entirely different department. Therefore, without telling the bald-headed Questore the reason or nature of the inquiry in which he was engaged he requested assistance in His Majesty's name, and was given the Brigadier Giovanni Pucci, a well-known and astute officer of the *brigade mobile*.

To the tall, thin, athletic-looking, clean-shaven man with small black eyes, and hair turning a trifle grey, Hubert took a fancy at once, and in a taxi they went round to his rooms to hold secret council.

Beside the fire, while the detective, a crafty, keen-eyed Neapolitan, smoked cigarettes, the diplomat explained that he required strict inquiry made into the antecedents of the corporal, Tonini. He also desired information concerning the private lives of General Cataldi, his secretary, Pironti, and the official, Lambarini.

The detective made some careful memoranda in his pocket-book and promised most minute attention to the matter.

"Remember, Signor Pucci," Waldron said, "this affair is strictly confidential and concerns His Majesty alone. I shall tell him that I have entrusted the inquiry to you."

"I will do my very utmost, signore, and place in your hands all the information I can gather. You wish for a written report?"

"Certainly. And only actual facts."

The detective showed greatest curiosity regarding the reason of such inquiries regarding public officials, but the Englishman told him nothing.

“Just make your inquiries, Signor Pucci,” he said, “this is all I require of you at present. I may be absent from Rome for a week, so while I am away please continue to work. As you know, the Questore has placed your services entirely at His Majesty’s disposal.”

“I appreciate the honour which has been done me,” was the astute officer’s reply, for he was a brigadier, and a terror to the criminal fraternity in the Eternal City. Having graduated in the underworld of Naples among the Camorra and the Mafia, he had become one of the Questore’s right-hand men. “His Majesty knows me,” he added, “for I have done duty with him many times on his journeys. I am often told off as his personal guardian.”

“In that case then I can rely upon you to treat this matter with the utmost confidence,” Hubert remarked, and soon afterwards Peters showed the tall man out.

Time after time Hubert examined the mysterious letter with which Her Highness had entrusted him. Why was Pujalet passing in Brussels as a Servian? What secret could that sealed envelope contain which could not be trusted to the post? Ah! if he could only discover it!

“Peters,” he said presently, as his man came in to stir the fire, “I may be leaving Rome for a day or two. I may even go to-night. So just pack my small suit-case.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Stay,” he said, and going to a drawer in a small occasional table which was laden with English books and magazines he took out a serviceable-looking Browning pistol, adding: “Just put that in also.”

“Very well, sir.”

It did not surprise Peters, for his master often took the weapon with him on night journeys upon Continental railways. Indeed in Italy one acquires the habit of carrying a gun.

In the afternoon Hubert strolled, as usual, up the Pincio where he met and greeted many of the great ones in Roman Society, not because he

cared for it, but because it was the correct thing to do so, and as diplomat he had to bow always to Society's decree.

He afterwards paid a call upon the Princess Altieri at the great old Grazini Palace, that fine mediaeval palazzo, the chief façades of which, as those who know Rome are aware, are in the Piazza della Valle and the Via del Sudario, that palace designed by the immortal Raphael and erected by Lorenzetto.

Entering the great portals where stood the pompous concierge in cocked hat and bearing his silver-headed staff of office, he ascended the great stone staircase at the head of which a flunkey met him and conducted him to the huge gilded *salon* wherein the Princess Altieri, a diminutive old lady in black, was entertaining a crowd of chattering friends.

After he had bowed over the old lady's hand he glanced around and recognised a number of familiar faces. His own Chief, besides the Russian and French Ambassadors were there, while there were a dozen or so marquises and Counts with their women-folk, a few foreign notables, and a sprinkling of the ornamental men from the Embassies.

Hubert found himself chatting with Count Niccoli, Colonial Secretary of State, when presently his Chief came up and whispered in his ear: "Waldron, can you be round at the Embassy in an hour? I want to tell you something."

"Certainly," was the diplomat's reply, and the two men were lost to each other in the crush.

The chatter went on, for the old Princess being highly popular in Rome, many people always came to her weekly receptions. In half a dozen tongues conversation was carried on, and the room with its ancient painted ceiling, its closed windows and high stoves, was unbearably hot. Indeed, half aristocratic Rome seemed to have dropped in after its sunset airing on the Pincio.

An hour later, however, when Hubert entered the Ambassador's room, his Chief rose from his table with a grave expression upon his pale, refined face.

“Waldron,” he said, “I fear the secret of those stolen plans of the frontier fortresses is out.”

“The secret out!” gasped the other. “Why—what is known?”

“Look at this!” he said, taking from a drawer a telegram in cipher which was deciphered upon a sheet of paper to which it was pinned. “It came in at three o’clock. Read it.”

Waldron scanned it with eager eyes, and saw that the message which had been handed in at Vienna at half-past one was from Lord Ecclesbourne, British Ambassador to Austria, and read:

“From information received through confidential channels it seems that Austria-Hungary is now rapidly and secretly mobilising on the Italian frontier. The Seventh and Eleventh Army Corps are assembled at Bozen and Klagenfurt respectively. Orders have been sent to the Austrian fleet by wireless from Sebenico, but of these I have no knowledge. The Emperor returned to Vienna last night and a meeting of the War Council was held an hour afterwards at which he was present. Though the newspapers this morning merely announce a series of manoeuvres in the Tyrol, it seems clear that a crisis has occurred and that immediate hostilities against Italy are contemplated. Please regard foregoing as confidential and report back any information which may come to your knowledge. I have to-day sent dispatches by telegram and also by special messenger to London.—Ecclesbourne.”

“By Jove! This is extremely serious!” declared Hubert, standing aghast with the dispatch in his hand. “No doubt the truth is out. Have you told them here of this dispatch?”

“Certainly not. The information is ours, and, as you see, it is strictly confidential.”

“But surely I may warn His Majesty!”

“No,” was the Ambassador’s decided reply.

“But are we not a friendly Power?” argued the secretary. “Is it not our duty to tell them what we know?”

“It may be, but I cannot betray what is sent to me as strictly confidential,” was His Excellency’s response.

“But Lord Ecclesbourne is unaware of the actual truth. If he knew it he certainly would not withhold the information,” Hubert argued.

“True. But do you not remember that any information obtained through our Secret Service is strictly confidential, and must not on any pretext be given to a foreign Power?”

“I know that, of course. But such a rule surely cannot apply in such a case as this,” urged Waldron impatiently. “We know that the plans have been stolen, and that this hostile movement is the result. We surely ought to warn Italy, so that she is not taken by surprise, which is, no doubt, the intention of her arch-enemy.”

“No doubt it is,” replied the Ambassador. “And I regret that we cannot break the rule. Indeed, I dare not—without orders from home.”

“Those we shall never get, I fear. We cannot explain the facts by wire, and a messenger to Downing Street would take fully three days. Why, in that time the Austrians will be in Venice and Milan!” declared Waldron. “Can we do nothing to avert this war?” he asked frantically.

“What can we do, my dear fellow? Even if you went to His Majesty I do not see what benefit would accrue.”

“It would put the Ministry of War upon its guard.”

“They will know. Possibly they know already. Ghelardi is a good watch-dog, and he has his spies in Vienna, just as we have. Probably he knows as much as we do,” was the Ambassador’s reply as he stood upon the red Turkey hearthrug with folded arms, a fine diamond pin sparkling in his black cravat.

“But can we do nothing—nothing?” cried Waldron in impatience and alarm. “I promised His Majesty that I would work in the interests of Italy, and if I withhold this fact from him, surely I shall be held culpable!”

“Your first duty is to your own King, Waldron,” replied His Excellency very

gravely. “To betray information obtained by our Secret Service is, by the regulations, absolutely forbidden, I repeat.”

“I know that full well. But in these circumstances is it not our duty as a friendly Power to place Italy on her guard, and save her from invasion?”

“Our first duty is to observe our own regulations,” replied the Ambassador, one of the old red-tape school, who like the ostrich hid his head in the sand and still believed in England as the chief and unconquerable Power among nations.

“And not to observe at the same time our cordial relations with a Power which has, on its own initiative, already given us plans of half a dozen improvements in modern ordnance—plans which we have used to our own advantage.”

“Well—if you desire, you are at liberty to send a cipher dispatch to Lord Westmere and try and obtain leave,” was the Ambassador’s reply. “I can, I regret, give no permission myself.”

For some seconds Waldron remained silent. He stood near the window gazing blankly out upon the broad handsome thoroughfare now lit by long rows of electric lights, the fine modern road which led to the Porta Pia.

“Very well,” he replied savagely, “I will myself obtain leave from Downing Street,” and turning upon his heel, he went away to the chancellerie and there wrote out a telegram which he reduced to cipher by aid of the small blue-covered book which he took from the strong-room, afterwards taking the message himself to the chief telegraph office and dispatching it.

The dispatch was a long one, but it was necessary to give full explanation.

It was then six o’clock by Italian time, or five o’clock in England. The night express left Rome for Paris at twenty minutes after midnight, and it was his intention to catch it, providing he received a reply in time to have audience with His Majesty prior to leaving.

He dressed and afterwards dined at the Embassy, as was his habit. Lady Cathcart, with the hauteur of the Ambassador’s wife, sat at the head of

the table, and several of the staff were present, also two Members of Parliament, men to whom ambassadors always have to be civil. But the meal proved a very dreary one. Both Members—who were quite unimportant persons, and who would never have appeared in “Who’s Who” had not their Constituents placed them there—aired their ideas upon the European situation—ideas which were ridiculous and unsound, though none present were so impolite as to say so.

“Have you sent your dispatch?” asked His Excellency the Ambassador when they were alone together for a few moments after dinner.

“Yes,” Waldron replied. “I am expecting permission, and if so I shall have audience at once.”

The Ambassador’s grey face lit up with a faint smile, as he shook his head.

“I fear, my dear Waldron, that you will not get permission. The Powers must look after their own perils.”

Hubert, glad enough to escape from the official atmosphere, left the Embassy shortly afterwards, and after killing time for an hour in the club —where he chatted with Colonel Sibileff, the Russian military attaché, and young Count Montoro, one of the *jeunesse dorée* of the Eternal City —walked back to his rooms to see if any reply was forthcoming from London. He had given orders to Sheppard, the concierge at the Embassy, to send round at once any telegram addressed to him.

“Any message?” he asked eagerly of Peters as he let himself in with his latch-key.

“Yes, sir, a telegram arrived from the Embassy only two minutes ago.”

His master tore it open with eager, trembling fingers, but, alas! it was in cipher! He had never thought of that.

Dashing downstairs he tore back to the Via Venti Settembre, and in the chancellerie sat down and impatiently worked it out, placing each decipher over the code letter until the whole message ran as follows:

“Situation already reported from Vienna. Later inquiries show report exaggerated. Tension no doubt exists, but not sufficient to warrant breach of regulations.”

Hubert Waldron ground his teeth in despair. Downing Street had given him a polite but firm refusal.

And with that he was compelled to be satisfied, even though he knew that war was contemplated and was actually imminent.

He was now upon the horns of a dilemma. To wilfully disregard his instructions from London was impossible. What, he wondered, did the later inquiries in Vienna reveal?

He remembered his promise to the Princess. At all hazards he must make a flying visit to the Belgian capital. But during those six days which he must of necessity be absent, what might not occur? A great disaster was fast-approaching.

The Ambassador had gone to the theatre, therefore he left him a note, and again returning to his rooms, he sat down and scribbled a few lines to Her Highness, telling her of his departure. This he posted later on at the railway station soon after midnight, after which he entered the long, dusty *wagon-lit* marked “Roma-Torino-Parigi.”

Chapter Eighteen.

Told in the Café Métropole.

Weary and fagged Waldron descended from the sleeping-car at the Gare de Lyon in Paris twenty hours later and dispatched a telegram to the address Lola had given him. Then he drove in a taxi across the French capital, and next morning found himself in the Grand Hotel in gay little Brussels—awaiting a reply.

About eleven o'clock it came—a message by express making an appointment to meet at noon at the Café Métropole a little farther up the boulevard.

Hubert was wasting no time. He had not lost a single moment since leaving the Eternal City, and on that rush northward his mind was ever centred upon the crisis between the two Powers which had evidently occurred.

He had left word with Peters that if any person called, or anyone rang up on the telephone, the reply was that he had left Rome on urgent business for three or four days. On no account was his man to say whither he had gone.

He flung off his coat and cast himself upon the bed to rest for an hour. But the noise in the busy boulevard outside was irritating, worse even than the roar of the great international express which had borne him half across Europe.

Presently he washed, changed his clothes, and then went forth to the café, a popular rendezvous which he had known when, six years before, he had served temporarily at the Brussels Legation.

It was a huge, square, open place, with walls tiled to represent various Bacchanalian pictures, and many tables, upon half of which were laid cloths for the *déjeuner*. Being winter there were only a dozen tables set on the pavement outside, but in summer there are a hundred spread over the broad footway, and in an evening the place, being a highly papular

resort, is crowded to overflowing by the chattering, bearded Bruxellois and their female friends.

At that hour, however, the place was nearly empty as Hubert entered, his sharp eyes gazing around. Then suddenly he saw a youngish man in grey overcoat and wearing a Tyrolese hat of dark green plush, seated in a far corner.

He rose and smiled as Waldron entered, and the latter instantly recognised him as the secret lover—the man who had travelled with them down the Nile, and whose attitude towards Lola had so completely disarmed all suspicion.

The two men lifted hats to each other in the foreign manner, and then Hubert exclaimed with a pleasant smile:

“This is a strange renewal of our acquaintance, M’sieur Pujalet, is it not?”

“Hush?” exclaimed the other warningly. “Not Pujalet here—Petrovitch, if you please!” and a mysterious expression crossed his dark, rather handsome, features.

“As you wish, of course,” replied Waldron with a bright laugh. “You, of course, know the object of my mission? The—”

He hesitated, for he was naturally cautious, and it had suddenly occurred to him at that second that this Frenchman was, no doubt, in ignorance of the true station of the woman he loved, just as he himself had been. So the word “Princess” died from his lips.

“Mademoiselle asked you to give me a letter, did she not?” said the man politely in French. “I am sure, M’sieur Waldron, I do not know how to thank you sufficiently for making this long journey in order to meet me.”

“No thanks are necessary,” the other replied. “I am simply Mam’zelle’s messenger,” he laughed, producing the letter from his pocket-book and handing it to him.

“Ah! but this is really a great service you have done both of us,” he declared earnestly. “One that I fear I shall never be able to repay,” he

declared, taking the letter in his eager hands.

Waldron, watching keenly, saw that the man's fingers trembled visibly. That letter contained some message of greatest import to him, without a doubt. Yet he held it unopened—not daring, it seemed, to break the seal and learn the truth.

"Candidly," Waldron said, now sitting back easily in a chair opposite Pujalet, "I wondered why it could not be entrusted to the post. It would in that case have reached you two days earlier."

"Ah! there are some things one does not exactly care to trust to the post even though registered."

"If a packet is insured it is rarely lost—even in Italy where the post is so uncertain and insecure. The Administration of Posts and Telegraphs does not care to be called upon to pay an indemnity."

Pujalet did not reply. And by his silence Waldron was convinced that he feared the letter might have been tampered with and opened—that the secret it contained might be revealed.

If this were so, then, after all, it was more than probable that he did really know Lola's actual identity!

And again, what had Her Highness meant when she had hinted at blackmail! Why, too, had not Pujalet travelled to Rome himself instead of burying himself in Brussels.

From that moment Waldron viewed Henri Pujalet with suspicion. Why should he, a Frenchman, be passing there as a Servian, and living in obscurity? His manner, from the very first moment when he had seen him with Lola in his arms under those dark palms in far-off Wady Haifa, had been suspicious. For some reason—why, he could not himself tell—Hubert felt a bitter antagonism towards the Frenchman. Surely it was a foolish fancy of Her Royal Highness to allow herself to love that man—a person whose movements were, on the face of them, not those of an honourable man.

Yet, on the other hand, Waldron remembered how devoted the pair had

seemed towards each other. And it was only because of this, because of his intense interest and admiration for Lola, that he had declared himself her friend, and had undertaken that mad rush across Europe on her behalf.

“Please disregard me entirely,” he said to the Frenchman, “if you wish to open your letter,” and taking out his cigarette-case he selected one and slowly lit it, the while covertly watching the man before him as he broke the seal and drew forth a sheet of paper.

Pujalet eagerly devoured what was written there, while Waldron, from the opposite side of the little marble table, watched his countenance keenly.

He saw a sudden expression of blank amazement. Then his sharp, dark eyes narrowed, and surprise gave way to a distinct expression of evil.

Whatever the Princess’s missive contained, it certainly caused him both annoyance and alarm. The man’s astute cleverness, however, was shown by the manner in which he made pretence of disregarding it and treating it with nonchalance.

He smiled as he looked again into the face of his companion, though it was but a strange, sickly smile, like that seen upon a criminal’s face on listening to his sentence. And without a word he signalled to a waiter and called for a cognac.

Waldron refused his invitation to drink, but watched him as he tossed off the *petit verre* at a single gulp.

“I regret if the news I have brought is unwelcome,” Waldron remarked, as he drew slowly at his cigarette and watched the smoke curling upwards. “But m’sieur must forgive me.”

“Oh, no,” he laughed, “the news is not unwelcome in the least. At first I regarded it as such, but on mature reflection I see it is not,” he declared, quite unperturbed.

But Waldron knew from the man’s manner that he was lying. He felt that Henri Pujalet was not the charming, educated man which he had believed him to be on the Nile.

“I hope Mademoiselle has not been—well, indiscreet,” the Englishman remarked with a smile. “Ladies so often are.”

“Ah, yes. Well—she has, truth to tell, been just a little indiscreet. But it is nothing,” he declared, “really nothing whatever.”

“Is there any reply I can convey to her?” asked Waldron. “I am leaving for Paris at four o’clock.”

“So soon—eh? Will you not remain and be my guest at dinner this evening?” urged the other. “Do. You must be tired and want rest.”

“Ah, no. I much regret, M’sieur Pujalet. But I have to be back at my post at the Embassy at once. I travel to Italy direct—just as I came.”

“Of course. You are a diplomat! I clean forgot!” exclaimed the man before him. “Ah! yours must be a most interesting profession! I have several good friends at the foreign Embassies in Paris. But I heard yesterday that trouble seems to be brewing in Europe—another war-cloud, they say.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Waldron, in an instant interested. “I know nothing of it. Who told you?”

Pujalet seemed upon his guard in an instant.

“Oh—er—I—well, somebody here in this café last night was telling us that secret mobilisation orders had been given.”

“Secret mobilisation! Where?”

The Frenchman hesitated and reflected.

“In Austria—I believe,” was his reply. “But, really, I did not take much notice.”

Hubert Waldron held his breath for a few seconds. Was the great secret already out? The political gossip of the cafés was very often correct. “Was the man unknown to you?”

“Quite. While I was seated over yonder with a friend of mine, a banker of

Liège, the man came in, greeted his friend, and joined us. And then they began to chat. Personally, I'm tired of all these war alarms. They come too frequently, being set about by unscrupulous operators on the Bourses."

"Then you don't believe the rumour—eh?"

"I never believe rumours which I hear in such circumstances as those. Not until I have some confirmation," the man declared.

"I have not seen the papers to-day. Is there any mention of the crisis?" Hubert asked.

"None that I have seen," Pujalet replied. "It is merely an alarmist rumour, no doubt."

Waldron lit another cigarette and reflected deeply.

It was distinctly curious and certainly most alarming that the fact which was regarded as such a dead secret in Vienna should have been openly discussed in that café in Brussels on the previous night. On his journey he had carefully watched the principal French and Italian papers, but there was no mention whatever of the affair. Besides, before leaving Rome he had arranged that if anything fresh leaked out regarding the crisis a telegram should meet him on his arrival at the Gare de Lyon.

With that innate cautiousness and shrewd discretion which was inborn in him, and which had placed him above others in the profession of diplomacy, he carefully questioned Henri Pujalet further, asking him the opinion held by the stranger regarding the pending crisis, and other such-like questions.

But the mind of the man seated before him seemed an utter blank regarding what had transpired.

"All I know is that the man told us that Austria is secretly preparing for war, and that in a few days Europe would be aflame. I naturally put him down to be one of those alarmist cranks with whom one so often comes into contact—a man who exaggerates the gossip of the Bourse and repeats it as actual fact with embroidery of his own."

“Your friend was a banker?” Waldron remarked. “Perhaps the man had received some inside knowledge from Vienna for the purpose of operating on the Bourse?”

“He may have done,” replied the other thoughtfully. “But really I don’t know. I didn’t take much notice of his words.”

Waldron said nothing for a few moments.

“And your reply to Mam’zelle?” he asked at last.

“If I bring it to you at the Grand by three o’clock will that be convenient to you?”

“Quite,” was the reply, and then the two men parted, Hubert taking a taxi up to the British Legation in the Rue de Spa, where he had a pleasant luncheon with Hugh Bennett, the Minister, and his wife, returning to the Grand at three o’clock, where in his room he received a sealed letter from the Frenchman’s hand.

It was addressed “To Mademoiselle Lola Duprez” and not to the Princess Luisa of Savoy, as Hubert had half expected.

“I can, alas! do no more than thank you most warmly and deeply both on my own behalf and upon Mam’zelle’s,” said Pujalet in his polite Parisian manner. “By coming here you have rendered a great service to us both—one that I can never in all my life forget.”

But Hubert Waldron, though he placed the letter in his pocket, held the man in distinct antipathy. He could read men’s minds better than most of his fellows. It was his profession as a diplomat.

And in the heart of Henri Pujalet, that man who had come up out of the desert from nowhere, he felt that there was a hidden yet distinct evil.

Upon him on that grey, wintry afternoon as he drove to the station to catch the express back to Paris there fell a feeling that a crisis—a dangerous and dramatic crisis—was imminent.

Ah! had he but known the truth—had he had but sight of what the

Princess had written in that fatal letter he had conveyed to her lover—how differently would he have acted!

But, alas! he travelled back to the Eternal City bearing the bitter reply of the Princess's secret lover—a reply by which her own young life was held in the balance, which crushed her soul, which held her in breathless terror, and, alas! caused her to long for the dark oblivion of death.

Chapter Nineteen.

At the Court Ball.

The second Court ball—one of the most brilliant functions of the Roman season—was at its height when, having arrived direct from Paris, very dirty and weary, Hubert hastened to his rooms, washed, changed into uniform, and drove at once to the Palace.

He was all anxiety to hear what had occurred during his absence.

Pucci had left a note on the previous day saying that he hoped to call and see him immediately upon his return. Apparently he had something to communicate.

Hubert, smart in his diplomatic, gold-laced uniform, his cocked hat tucked under his arm, and wearing his sword with the Royal Victorian Order and two foreign decorations—the Spanish Order of the Toison d'Or, and the Order of the Elephant of Denmark, passed the sentries of the Royal bodyguard, and through the long lines of gorgeously dressed flunkeys in the vestibule, and up the brilliantly lit grand staircase—that same staircase which he had descended after his secret conversation with His Majesty the King.

Above showed the fine fresco of Christ in a cloud of angels by Melozzo da Forli, once in the Church of Santi Apostoli, and then as he greeted the Royal Chamberlain and entered the great ballroom he suddenly found himself in a whirl of gaiety amid the smartest and most exclusive Court circle in Europe.

The scene was one of great brilliance and animation. The huge *salon* with its polished floor, its great crystal electroliers, and its beautiful tapestries and paintings, was a perfect phantasmagoria of light and colour. In the gallery the Royal orchestra was playing a pretty waltz from one of the latest Viennese musical comedies, and the dancers, the women in Court gowns, and the men in uniforms and glittering with decorations were whirling round the splendid chamber.

Upon the raised dais with the purple velvet hanging, on the left sat Her Majesty the Queen, wearing a splendid tiara of diamonds and her world-renowned pearls, while across her corsage showed the parti-coloured sash of the Order of St. Elisabeth. Near by her was the King himself in his blue military tunic and pale grey trousers, wearing the collar of the Order of the Annonciade, of which he was Grand Master, while on his breast glittered the diamond stars of the Order of the Crown of Italy, St. Maurice and Lazarus, and a dozen others. With them were two foreign minor royalties, and several other members of the Royal circle, together with ladies-in-waiting and aides-de-camp and others standing at the rear.

Waldron's eyes were searching for the Princess Luisa. At first he failed to discover her, but a few moments later he saw her take her place beside the Queen and bend to speak with her.

In white, with her hair beautifully dressed, she presented a sweet, charming picture of youthful patrician beauty, of exquisite refinement. From where he stood he could see the black watered ribbon of one of the Imperial German Orders peeping over the edge of her low-cut corsage, and from it was suspended the cross of the Order in brilliants.

She was looking unusually pale and worn. Her eyes seemed to have black rings around them which told of anxiety, perhaps of sleepless nights—different, indeed, to her appearance in those sunny, careless winter days up the Nile.

As the British diplomat made his way through the throng—for the waltz had just concluded—he bowed over the hands of a dozen pretty women, dames of high degree in the Eternal City, wives of Roman princes, of marquises, of great signori, and of diplomats. With many men, politicians, financiers, Court sycophants, and those struggling for distinction—that crowd of place-seekers and unscrupulous officials with which every European Court is surrounded—he nodded acquaintance, until suddenly espying Sir Francis Cathcart, he made his way to him.

"Hallo, Waldron—back?" exclaimed his Chief sharply.

"Yes, only an hour ago," was the other's reply.

"Come out into the conservatory. I want to have a word with you," said

the Ambassador, and the pair strolled together to the end of the room, where, cunningly concealed, lights showed beneath the feathery foliage of the palms of the great winter-garden.

“Well?” asked Sir Francis, when they were alone together; “I’ve heard nothing more concerning that alarming report from Vienna. Have you learnt anything?”

“Nothing,” was Hubert’s reply, “except one fact—that the rumour was also afloat in Brussels.”

“Ah! Some Bourse conspiracy, then!” was the Ambassador’s quick remark, for he was a shrewd and well-seasoned diplomat, who knew all the subtle moves in the game of international politics.

“I cannot quite determine.”

“Then you’ve been in Brussels?”

“Yes. In the interests of the matter which we were discussing.”

“Curious that what is a secret here should be rumoured there!” remarked the British Ambassador. “But a week has now gone, Waldron, therefore we can only hope the storm-cloud has blown over.”

And at that moment the Russian Ambassador, in his brilliant uniform, passed, and Sir Francis joined him, leaving the secretary again alone.

As he returned to the ballroom he met the old yellow-toothed Marchesa Genazzano face to face, and though he endeavoured to avoid her—for she was such a terrible gossip and bore—he was compelled to bend over her hand and stop to chat.

She was full of the latest titbit of scandal concerning a young and pretty French Baronne, well-known in Roman Society, and her good-looking chauffeur. It was being whispered that the lady had gone away on a motor tour with him a fortnight ago and had not returned, while the irate husband was searching frantically for the driver with a revolver.

“They were last seen in Brescia,” the Marchesa said. “Probably they are

on their way back to France. I hear, too, that the Baronne, though always supposed to be of the *haut monde*, was, before her marriage, a variety artiste at Olympia in Paris. And"—she lowered her voice behind her fan—"and there are all sorts of queer stories going about."

Waldron was bored. The scandals of Rome—and, alas! Florence and the Eternal City are the two most scandal-mongering centres in the whole of Europe—were frequent. There seemed to be a fresh one daily, and nobody's reputation was sacred from the venomous tongues of the old women, of whom the Marchesa Genazzano was one.

Her Majesty had done all she could to put a stop to such gossip at Court, but, alas! only six months before, one of her own ladies-in-waiting, a pretty woman moving in the best Society, had kept a secret tryst at an obscure restaurant down near the Tiber and had been shot dead by her lover, a common soldier.

After that unfortunate scandal in her own entourage Her Majesty had been powerless to prevent uncharitable chatter concerning others.

That night the whole of the great Quirinale Palace was ablaze with light. Music and gaiety were everywhere, for through the great suite of rooms the Sala of the Ambassadors, the Sala Regia, and the others, supper was being served with all that pomp and ceremony characteristic of the Italian Court.

Presently Hubert managed to escape the old lady, and offering his arm to a young, dark-haired girl, the daughter of the Minister of the Interior, made his way across the ballroom.

There was another waltz, and this he danced with his pretty little companion, afterwards taking her back to her mother, a rather obese, Hebrew-looking woman with more than a suspicion of dark hair upon her upper lip.

He had bowed and withdrawn when, passing through the crowd, he suddenly heard a low female voice utter his name, and saw at his side the Princess Luisa.

"I must see you," she whispered, as he halted and bowed. "Go to the

small door of the Capella Paolina. I will meet you outside it in five minutes."

And next instant she moved onward towards the raised dais where His Majesty was standing chatting with Sir Francis Cathcart.

In obedience Hubert made his way by a circuitous route, first through the great winter-garden, where many couples were sitting out, and then through that long suite of heavily gilded State apartments comprising fourteen magnificent chambers, each ornamented with wonderful tapestries and paintings, and full of historic associations from the days of Gregory XIII. Generations of courtiers had paced those oaken floors until now, in our twentieth century, those who trod them were the embodiment of selfishness, of avarice, and of vain glorification.

Ah! what a brilliant, glittering, tinselled world of sham and subterfuge, of resplendent plutocracy, and adventurous politics, is each of the European Courts of to-day—that of our own St. James's not excepted. The shameful traffic in titles goes on unchecked everywhere, and many a man who struts about with a piece of gilded ironmongery upon his breast and a handle to his name ought if he obtained his deserved merits, to have more strongly forged ironmongery upon his wrists and eat the bread of a felon's cell. Their Excellencies who are Ministers, too, are many of them hypocrites and adventurers, who swell the purses from the public funds, or, by means of their previous knowledge of legislation, make coups upon the Bourse. Corruption is rife everywhere, the public are gulled by the Press, and the religion of to-day is, alas! the worship of the great god, Gold.

Beyond the blue drawing-room, with its many portraits of Sovereigns and Princes, where only a few of the more elderly people were chattering, Hubert passed down two long corridors, quite deserted save for the sentries, and at length approached a small side door which led to the Paolina Chapel—the private chapel of the Quirinale.

He was quite alone, and stood listening in expectation. From the courtyard below came up the sounds of motor-cars and the tramp of the Palace guard, while in the faint distance he could hear the strains of music.

Suddenly, however, he saw a figure in white approaching, and a moment later Lola was at his side.

“Follow me,” she said hastily. “Follow me at a distance—to Villanova’s room. No one will be there.”

General Villanova was Minister of the Royal Household.

And she went on, he lounging leisurely after her at a distance.

A couple of minutes afterwards he found himself with her in a small room where a coal fire burned brightly—the private office of the Controller of the Household.

“Well,” she echoed eagerly. “You have seen him—eh? When did you return?”

“To-night,” Waldron replied. “He has sent you this,” and from the breast of his uniform coat he drew the letter from her lover, Henri Pujalet.

With eager fingers she carried the note across to the shaded reading-lamp upon the table, and tearing it open, read the message it contained.

Hugh stood watching the expression of her pale, anxious face. It went instantly white as the dress she wore; her pale lips slowly parted, and in her splendid eyes was an expression of such horror that he had never seen in any person’s eyes before.

For a second she seemed transfixed by the words written there.

Next second, with an almost superhuman effort, she summoned all her self-composure. Her slim, nervous fingers crushed the letter, and with a quick movement she crossed to the fire near which Hubert was standing and cast the message into the flames.

Hubert Waldron had acted as Cupid’s messenger, but whatever the Princess’s secret lover had written, it apparently gave her grave concern.

She stood, her left hand pressed to her heaving chest, a strangely pathetic little figure in her Court dress and glittering diamond cross upon

her corsage. Her great, wonderful eyes were fixed upon the moss-green carpet, and he saw that she was trembling as though in fear.

“Your Highness is distressed,” he remarked in a low voice full of sympathy. “Cannot I assist you further?”

“Distressed!” she cried, turning quickly upon him with her eyes flashing suddenly. “Distressed!” she echoed. “Ah, Mr Waldron, you do not know how crushing is this blow that has fallen upon me! I have done—my—very best—what I believed to be for the best, but—ah, *Dio*!—all is lost—lost—ah!—I—I—” And reeling suddenly, she clutched wildly at air and would have fallen forward had he not sprung up to prevent her.

He took her in his strong arms and carried her insensible form to the high couch near the window, whereon he laid her tenderly.

Then he looked around bewildered, not knowing how next to act.

Chapter Twenty.

Reveals Hubert's Secret.

Water was needed, he knew, though he had had but little experience of cases such as this.

Upon the Minister's writing-table stood a silver bowl full of pale pink tulips, and these he threw out quickly and began to sprinkle Her Highness's hard-set countenance.

But to no avail.

For some minutes he tried frantically to restore her. He dared not ring for the servants, as it would no doubt compromise her to be found alone with him in that room. There were alas! sufficient wild stories afloat about her already, and no doubt if she were discovered there with him the fact would, in an hour, reach His Majesty's ears.

In such case what explanation could he give without telling absolute lies? Besides, did not His Majesty repose the utmost confidence in him, and that confidence must assuredly be shaken.

Absolutely helpless he stood gazing upon her prostrate figure and trying in vain to seek a solution of the difficulty.

If she would only regain consciousness in order that he could ring the bell and leave her. But, alas! she was insensible, and no amount of water upon her face would revive her. Of smelling-salts or other restoratives there were none. So he was compelled to remain there inactive and impatient.

What could be the nature of the message she had received from that man who, though a Frenchman, was posing in Brussels as Slavo Petrovitch, a Servian from Belgrade? It must have been a most disquieting one to have so upset her as to cause her to faint. A girl who knew no fear, who was naturally athletic and strong-minded, who drove her car through the night alone and unattended, and who, travelling to the

north incognita, had won a motor-cycle race, was not the sort of person to faint at any news which did not gravely concern herself.

Was it possible, he wondered, that Henri Pujalet had written abandoning her?

That was the impression which forced itself upon him. The Frenchman certainly could not know her real title and position. Pujalet no doubt believed, as he himself had believed, that Lola was a poor dependent. Hence it was quite probable that he had met some other woman and in favour of her had abandoned Lola.

Yet, as he stood there wondering he recollected the love-scene that hot stifling night beneath the palms in the far-off Sudan, how her lover had held her so passionately to his breast and smothered her face with his kisses. And how she, too, had stroked his cheeks tenderly with both her soft hands.

Yes. They, no doubt, loved each other, and perhaps, after all, he was misjudging that man to whom she had given her affection.

Thoughts of Beatriz, too, flashed across his mind. How different was the pale recumbent figure in white to that dashing Andalusian dancer!

He dropped upon one knee at the side of the couch, looked intently upon the white unconscious countenance, and held his breath.

“Lola!” he whispered, but so low that sound hardly passed his fevered lips. “I love you, darling! I love you, though you shall never know, because our love is forbidden. Alas! it could only bring grief, sorrow, and disaster upon both of us. But—ah, my God! I love you—*I love you*!”

And slowly and reverently he took the inert hand which he held in his and raising it to his lips, kissed it with all the mad, ardent passion of his stifled affection.

For some minutes he remained there kneeling by her side, stroking her bare white arm and kissing her soft little hand. Sorely tempted was he to kiss her upon the lips, but by dint of self-restraint he held himself back.

She was unconscious, and to kiss her would be to take an unfair advantage.

But time and again he repeated those fervent whispered words, sometimes so loud that they could actually be heard in the room.

“Lola! I love you! I love you, darling. I love you—though you can never be mine!”

He was bending over her hand in silence, a great lump having arisen in his throat, while in his eyes were unshed tears. The blank hopelessness of his mad passion had been forced upon him. There were two reasons. She loved the young Frenchman, and again she, a Princess of the House of Savoy, could never marry a mere foreign diplomat.

No, he must again crush down all his intense love for her; again remain her sincere and most devoted friend.

Once more he bent till his lips reverently touched her cold hand, but at that moment he heard a movement behind him, and, turning, saw a short, white-haired man in Court uniform, with the crimson and white ribbon of the Order of the Crown of Italy at his throat.

Waldron started quickly.

The man who had entered noiselessly and stood there watching him was none other than the man who, up the Nile, had passed as Lola’s uncle, Jules Gigleux—but whose real name was Luigi Ghelardi, the most renowned Secret Service Chief in Europe.

“Well, signore,” exclaimed the shrewd, cunning old man in Italian with his grey brows knit, “this is certainly a surprise! I did not expect when I entered here in search of His Excellency the General that I should make this very interesting discovery?”

Waldron sprang to his feet much confused and altered in the same language:

“Her Highness has unfortunately fainted.”

“And you were trying to restore her—eh?” he laughed with bitter sarcasm.

There was a look of distinct evil in the man’s small cunning eyes.

“Yes. And I have failed,” Waldron answered.

“Had you not better ring for the servants? I think so.”

And the chief spy of Italy pressed the electric button near at hand.

In response, a tall sentry appeared at once and saluted.

“I want one of the maids of the household instantly. Her Royal Highness has fainted.”

“*Si, signore*,” was the man’s reply, saluting, again turning like clockwork and disappearing.

“I must confess, Signor Waldron,” exclaimed Ghelardi, very severely, “that I am greatly surprised to discover you here, and in such a position as I found you.”

“And I am equally surprised, Signor Ghelardi, to discover your real identity,” was the diplomat’s reply. “For a number of years, as Chief of the German Service, you were the arch-enemy of my country. That is not forgotten, even though you have returned to the land of your birth, and taken service again under your own King.”

“It appears that your attitude is the reverse of friendly, signore,” was the antagonistic reply of the man with the bristly hair, who looked much more French than Italian.

“And it appears to me that very little friendship exists between us on either side—eh?”

“From what I have just witnessed I can plainly discern the truth,” said the Chief of the Secret Service. “The Princess is a giddy, skittish girl whose injudicious actions have, from time to time, caused greatest annoyance and anxiety to Their Majesties. Rome is full of scandals regarding her unconventionality and her disregard for her high position. And here we

have yet another. I discover her insensible with you kneeling at her side declaring your affection?”

“I hope the discovery gives you most supreme satisfaction, Signor Ghelardi,” exclaimed Hubert defiantly.

“It gives me the greatest dissatisfaction. His Majesty entrusts her to my care, and I am responsible.”

“You exercised your duty very well in Egypt, I admit,” Waldron replied with a light laugh. “Now I suppose your intention will be to go to His Majesty and describe what you have seen here this evening.”

“I shall act, signore, just as I think fit.”

“No doubt, in order to curry favour with His Majesty you will give a lurid picture of what you have witnessed,” exclaimed Hubert. “Well, do so—at your own peril.”

As he spoke two maids entered, accompanied by the sentry.

“Her Royal Highness has fainted,” Ghelardi explained, pointing to the prostrate figure upon the couch. “You, sentry, had better go in search of Doctor Mellini. He is probably in his rooms. You know where they are—close to the principal entrance. Tell your captain—he will soon find him.”

“*Si, signore*,” was the man’s answer, as he raised his hand to the salute, turned again and left.

The two maids in their artistic pale grey caps and aprons—the uniform worn by all the female servants of the Palace—dashed across to the young Princess. Then one of them left and ran away for her own smelling-salts.

“I think we had better leave Her Highness. She will be attended to and taken to her rooms,” Ghelardi said.

So the two men went out together, passing along the corridor which led towards the grand staircase.

Hubert was pondering. He saw that the situation was, both for Lola and himself, a very unpleasant one. Ghelardi would, without a doubt, inform the King. Since he had been appointed to Rome he had learnt that the notorious spy was, in addition to being a most remarkable man in his profession, at the same time a place-seeker of the worst type, a soft-spoken sycophant who was for ever closeted with the King.

That His Majesty, with his shrewd intuition and his instinctive reading of men's minds, had realised this, had been shown by the fact that he had called in the British diplomat to make inquiries into the serious loss of the plans of the frontier fortresses.

No. The King did not trust Luigi Ghelardi so implicitly as Ghelardi himself believed.

The pair, on their way along the corridor, passed an open door. The small room, which was that devoted to the Captain of the Royal Guard while on duty.

"Before we part, Signor Ghelardi, I would like to have a word with you," Hubert said suddenly. "We cannot do better than speak together here in private."

"*Benissimo*," was the great spy's reply, acceding most willingly.

Then when they were inside, and Waldron had closed the door, he turned, suddenly asking:

"I presume it is your intention to reveal to the King what you have just witnessed—eh?"

"It is my duty to do so, signore. I have been entrusted with Her Royal Highness's welfare."

"And by doing so you will once more cause His Majesty both pain and annoyance," Waldron remarked.

"And if I were silent should I not be conniving at this impossible situation?"

Hubert Waldron looking at him with keen defiance said:

“Signor Ghelardi, you will, I tell you, say nothing of to-night’s incident to a single soul.”

The elder man laughed openly in the diplomat’s face.

“No, Signor Waldron,” he said, “I quite understand you have no desire that the truth should become common property; but His Majesty will say nothing to others.”

“His Majesty will not know!” Waldron said decisively and very quietly. There was a hard look upon his dark handsome face.

“*Madonna mia*! I may surely make what report I like to my King, to whom I am directly responsible.”

“In this instance, Signor Ghelardi, though you discern in it an excellent opportunity of showing your remarkable powers of inquiry, you will remain strictly silent. No word of it shall pass your lips.”

“Oh, and pray why, my dear signore?” asked the other opening his eyes.

“Because I forbid it.”

“You forbid!” he echoed. “I tell you that I shall act just as I deem proper.”

“Then I, too, shall also act, Signor Ghelardi—and much against your interests, I assure you.”

“You threaten me—eh? You?”

“I do not threaten,” Hubert hastened to assure him. “I shall only act in case you should act against the interests of Her Royal Highness.”

“I do not think you, a foreigner, can interfere very much with my interests,” laughed the other in defiance.

“Think whatever you please. After you have had audience with His Majesty I, too, shall have audience, and when I have left, then the King

will probably tell you what I have revealed to him."

"And what, pray, can you reveal?" asked the Chief of the Secret Service, his grey brows again knit, showing that he was somewhat puzzled by the diplomat's defiant attitude.

"That is my own affair," replied Hubert with a triumphant smile. "Suffice it to say that the hour you make any statement concerning what you have witnessed to-night, then in the same hour you will cease to be Chief of Italy's Secret Service!"

"Do you think to frighten me, then?"

"I have no wish, my dear Signor Ghelardi," was Hubert's very polite reply. "I only desire that no further scandal should be attached to Her Royal Highness's good name." And after a brief pause he looked the official straight in the face and said: "I offer you silence for silence!"

"And I decline your most generous offer."

"Good. Then we shall see!"

"But—"

"I do not wish to discuss this unpleasant matter further," interrupted Waldron. "Go and tell the King—but at your own peril. *Buona sera*." And the diplomat turned away. As he was about to leave the room Ghelardi sprang forward and placed his fingers upon the handle of the door to prevent him.

"I think," he said, "that we are perhaps misunderstanding each other."

"No, we are not," was Hubert's prompt reply, sturdy Briton that he was. "I understand you, Luigi Ghelardi, perfectly. You have no compunction where Her Highness is concerned. You, man of secrets that you are, will, rather than conceal a woman's shortcomings, bring upon her the anger of the King in order to secure your own personal ends."

The bristly haired old official bit his lip. Hubert watched him and smiled inwardly.

“You defy me to execute my duty.”

“Your duty is political espionage, not to spy upon a member of the royal family,” the diplomat replied. “And, further, I tell you that if you breathe a word of this to His Majesty—or if His Majesty gets to hear of it through any third party, I will not spare you, Luigi Ghelardi,” he added, earnestly facing the old man in defiance. “Go then, tell him what you will,” Hubert continued angrily, and again he turned the handle of the door to pass out.

“That is my intention.”

“And in return my intention will be to bring you down from your high position in the King’s esteem. That I shall do, and quickly—never fear,” Waldron said. Then, after a second’s pause, he added: “You are acquainted with a certain Englishman—a Mr Jerningham. He knew you well when you were in the German Service—he has cause to remember you. Indeed he has still a little account to settle with you, has he not—eh?”

Ghelardi started.

“What do you mean?” he asked, though affecting disregard of the remark.

“I mean nothing—so long as you remain silent,” Waldron answered.

Ghelardi was nonplussed. But only for a second, for he was not a man to be easily deterred from any intention.

“So you think that I may heed your empty threats—eh, Signor Waldron? Well, we shall see,” he replied, with a hard, triumphant laugh.

Then releasing his hold upon the door handle he bowed mockingly to the Englishman, inviting him to pass out.

Chapter Twenty One.

A Confidential Report.

Hubert Waldron halted on the threshold, his eyes fixed upon those of the spy.

“Well?” asked Ghelardi, with a sinister smile.

“All I desire to say is that I have the ear of His Majesty as well as yourself. And what I shall tell him will not be to your credit.”

The countenance of the Chief of the Secret Service broadened into a smile of open derision. In his high official position he was all-powerful in Italy—more powerful indeed than the whole Cabinet of Ministers.

“Neither will it be to your credit when I describe to the King what I have witnessed to-night,” he answered.

The Englishman had it upon the tip of his tongue to speak more openly, but on reflection realised that it would be more judicious to keep the information to himself. Jerningham knew that man who had been England’s arch-enemy while in the pay of his masters at Berlin; he had cause to know him—and well, too.

“Signor Ghelardi,” he said finally, “this matter is one of give and take. I offer you terms for your silence. If you refuse, then I shall act as I think fit.”

“Act just as you think fit,” was the Italian’s sneering response.

“Very well,” replied the diplomat, turning and walking up the corridor back to the ballroom.

Half an hour later he met His Majesty face to face.

“Ah, Signor Waldron, you are back again in Rome—eh?” the King exclaimed anxiously. “Well—anything to tell me?” he asked, dropping his

voice.

His Majesty was passing through the Sala Regia alone, and there was nobody in the vicinity to overhear.

“Nothing, sir—only—”

“Only what? Quick,” he said impatiently. “It is rumoured in Brussels that Austria is mobilising for attack!”

“In Brussels!” exclaimed the King as they walked together. “How do you know that?”

“I have to-night returned from there.”

“Curious—very curious,” repeated His Majesty reflectively. “Here, as far as I know, we have heard nothing. Ghelardi’s agents in Vienna report by telegraph several times daily, but they can obtain no definite information, though it is known that troops are massing in the south—for manoeuvres—the old story.”

“I am still inquiring into the affair,” said Waldron. “As soon as I have anything to report I will seek audience of Your Majesty.”

“Yes; at any hour. I have instructed Villanova.”

“I have not spoken about the matter to Ghelardi,” the Englishman said as they left the great *salon* and turned into one of the corridors. Several men and women had halted to bow as His Majesty passed.

“Ghelardi has discovered nothing,” was the King’s hasty response. “He has all sorts of wild theories regarding the theft of the plans, but as far as I can see he has no clue whatever to the thief.”

“Then I shall continue to work without his aid,” Waldron declared, and a moment later he bowed and left His Majesty, who passed through a small door leading to the private apartments.

Next morning, at nine o’clock, Pucci, the brigadier of detective police, called at Hubert’s rooms, and produced a carefully written report, which

the Englishman settled himself to digest.

It certainly was interesting reading.

While the brigadier sat smoking a cigarette, the diplomat ran through the document, which showed that Pucci had been extremely active during the week of his absence.

The private and public lives—with extracts from the dossiers at the Prefecture of Police—of His Excellency the Minister for War, of Lambarini, secretary of the Council of Defence, and of Pironti, the Minister's private secretary, were all laid bare.

Of General Cataldi it was stated that, after long service in the army, he became General, commanding the Third Army Corps in Calabria. While occupying that post an army scandal occurred regarding the supply of stores, great quantities having been paid for and not delivered by the contractors. A court martial was held and four officers attached to the General's headquarters had been sentenced to terms of imprisonment and dismissed the Service. Certain journals had accused the General himself of being cognisant of the misappropriation of funds, but this he had indignantly denied and had demanded of the Minister of War an inquiry into his conduct. This had been held, and a report returned that there were no grounds for the allegation. But even in face of that the journals in question had charged him with making scapegoats of the four imprisoned officers.

It was curious that a year later the General, who had hitherto, like all Italian officers, not been very well off, had suddenly appeared to be in possession of considerable funds. He had been transferred to Turin, where he had bought a large house and, with his wife, had entertained lavishly. Another lady, a certain youthful Countess in Milan, had attracted him, and in consequence, after a few months, his wife preferred to live apart.

Then, by reason of his lavish entertainments, his apparent wealth, and also because he had a number of influential friends in the Chamber of Deputies, he had been called by the King and given his portfolio as Minister of War.

The confidential report added that his present expenditure greatly exceeded his income, and that he was also heavily in debt, owing, in great measure, to the extravagances of the young Countess in question, who had now taken up her abode in Rome.

Against Colonel Lambarini nothing was known. He was happily married, with two charming children. He lived well within his income, and was of a plain and rather economic turn of mind. He ran into debt for nothing, and his wife had a private income of her own.

The King's estimate of Lambarini was therefore perfectly correct.

With Pironti it was different. As His Excellency's secretary he was a man who pandered in every way to all his Chief's whims and foibles. He was a bachelor, and spent his evenings in the gaming clubs and other questionable haunts, and had been known to lose considerable sums at baccarat. He frequented the political cafés and the variety theatres, and it was also well-known in the army that no one could obtain the ear of His Excellency without first obtaining "the good graces of his secretary."

"These good graces you mention, Signor Pucci, mean money, I suppose!" remarked Waldron suddenly in Italian.

"*Si, signore*," replied the dark-faced detective, with a smile.

Continuing, the report stated that Pironti often associated with undesirable persons, and, further, that it was a known fact that he had received from many officers who had sought promotion *douceurs* to a considerable amount. Indeed in the army it was declared that so lax was His Excellency in his duties as Minister that he left Pironti to prepare the lists of both promotions and military decorations, merely taking care that the names of none of his enemies appeared there, and scribbling his signature to the decree for the King's approval.

Hubert Waldon sighed when he had finished that most instructive document.

Then, rising, he placed it in a drawer of his writing-table and locked it safely away.

“So His Excellency and his secretary are not exactly above accepting bribes—eh?” he asked, throwing himself again in his chair.

“According to the result of my inquiries they seem to be both reaping a golden harvest,” Pucci said. “But perhaps not greater than in any other department.”

“The police excepted, I hope,” laughed the diplomat.

But the brigadier grinned. During his years of office he had known more than one person being given timely warning to escape when the Government, forced to prosecute, did not wish to expose a scandal. The Italian peasant may well say that the law for the count is exactly opposite to that for the *contadino*.

Hubert sat for some moments looking straight into the fire.

He saw that General Cataldi, with the assistance of his dishonest secretary, could enforce a secret toll from every officer who obtained promotion. While nearly every member of the Cabinet was doing the same thing, and every Deputy was giving or accepting bribes, often quite openly, it was not likely that anyone would dare to come forward and denounce them.

The motto of the Minister in Italy is to make a fortune while the office lasts. And they certainly do—as is proved by the constant scandals ever being exposed by the Press, while more are suppressed with hush-money.

But if this were so, and if His Excellency and his sycophant were reaping such a rich harvest, then would they dare to run such risks as to connive at the theft of the plans by a foreign agent?

According to Tonini, only His Excellency and the two secretaries entered the room wherein the plans reposed. Therefore, either His Excellency or his secretary must have extracted them.

Nevertheless this report of Pucci’s made it somewhat dubious whether these two corrupt officials, making the many thousands a year themselves, would go to such lengths as to betray their country into the

hands of Austria.

Pucci sat there in silence, wondering what was passing through the diplomat's mind. He was, of course, in ignorance of what had happened, and was puzzled as to the reason why Waldron was so inquisitive.

Hubert knew the General's house well—a splendid villa of princely proportions, with delightful garden and terraces, about five miles out of Rome on the white, dusty road which leads to Civita Vecchia. It was near Malagrotta, in the picturesque hills through which still runs the ancient Via Aurelia, and looked down upon ancient Ostia and the broad mouths of the ancient Tiber.

Was he a traitor? Or was he innocent? That was the great and crucial question which he had to decide.

"And this Countess," he exclaimed, addressing the detective presently. "I noticed that she is not named in your report."

"No, signore. But her name is Cioni—of the Cionis of Firenze, one of the most ancient houses in Italy—the Countess Guilia Cioni."

"A widow?"

"No, signore. She is daughter of the late Count Ferdinando Cioni, head of the house. Their palace is on the Lung 'Arno in Firenze."

"Of what age is she?"

"Thirty."

"You say she was from Milan."

"They have a palace in Milan—in one of those short streets off the Piazza del Duomo."

"And this woman is infatuated with the General, you say? Where does she live?"

"In an apartment in the Corso Vittorio."

“She, no doubt, knows the chief source of his income—eh?”

“Without a doubt.”

Then Waldron thought deeply. A strange theory had crossed his mind.

“Has she a maid?”

“Yes, signore, a young woman from Borghetto named Velia Bettini.”

Waldron scribbled the name upon his shirt-cuff together with the address of the young Countess Cioni.

“Anything known of this maid?”

Pucci, who had done thoroughly the work entrusted to him, reflected for a moment, and then diving his hand into his breast-pocket, drew forth a well-worn note-book, which he searched for a few moments.

“Yes,” he replied. “I made a few inquiries at the Prefecture concerning her. She was previously in the service of the Marchesa di Martini, of Genoa, and was sentenced to six months’ imprisonment for stealing jewellery belonging to her.”

“How long ago?”

“Two years.”

“Anything else?”

“Well—her record is not exactly an unblemished one, signore,” the detective went on. “After her release she went to Paris and was in the service of a young French actress, Mademoiselle Yvonne Barlet, of the Gymnase. While there she passed herself off as a young lady of good family and became friendly with a wealthy young Frenchman, whose name, however I do not know.”

“And what else?”

“She returned to Italy and then entered the service of the Countess

Cioni.”

“But this Countess Cioni—who is she? I do not seem to have heard of her in Rome Society.”

“She is not known—except in a certain circle. One of her intimate friends, however, is Her Royal Highness, the Princess Luisa.”

“The Princess Luisa?” echoed the Englishman. “Yes, signore. But, as you have heard, the Princess makes many strange and unfortunate friendships. She is, I fear, rather foolish.”

“But surely this friendship ought to be put a stop to, Signor Pucci. It is impossible for a Princess of the blood-royal to associate with such a person as this Contessa Cioni.”

The detective shrugged his shoulders and elevated his dark eyebrows.

Then he smiled that quiet meaning smile which all Italians can affect in moments of indecision.

Chapter Twenty Two.

“The Thrush.”

On the night following Pucci’s visit to Hubert Waldron, Her Royal Highness sat before the fire in her handsome bedroom curled up in a soft chair, thinking.

The little leather-framed travelling-clock upon her big dressing-table with its gold and tortoiseshell brushes and toilet accessories showed that midnight was past. She had been to a dinner at the Palazzo Riparbella, where Her Majesty had honoured the Duchess of Riparbella with her presence, and an hour ago they had returned.

She had dismissed her maid-of-honour, and when Renata, her personal maid, had entered to attend her she had sent her to bed. Renata was devoted to her mistress. She was used to the vagaries of Her Highness—who so often wore her dresses in her escapades—so she bowed and retired.

For half an hour, still attired in her handsome, pale blue evening gown, with her dark hair well-dressed, and a beautiful diamond necklet upon her white throat, she had sat staring into the dancing flames, thinking—ever thinking.

At last she stirred herself, rising suddenly to her feet, and then, crossing to her bed, she threw herself upon her knees wildly and bent her head within her white hands.

Her pale lips moved, but no sound came from them.

She was fervent in prayer.

Her countenance, her movements, her attitude showed her to be in a veritable tumult of agony and despair. But she was alone, with none to witness her terrible anxiety, and the blank hopelessness of it all.

She had been wondering ever since she had regained consciousness on

the previous night what had really occurred in the room of the Minister of the Royal Household—whether the British diplomat, her friend, had also been discovered there in her company. She had questioned the maids, but they had been instructed by Ghelardi and refused to satisfy her curiosity.

Therefore she was in ignorance of what had happened after the receipt of that fatal message from Brussels.

How she had passed that day of feverish anxiety she knew not. Every second had to her seemed an hour.

At last, after crossing herself devoutly, she rose from her knees wearily, when her eyes fell upon the clock.

Instantly she began to take off her splendid evening gown. Her diamonds she unclasped and tossed them unheeded into a velvet-lined casket on the big dressing-table, together with her bracelets and the ornament from her corsage.

Then, kicking off her evening slippers, she exchanged her pale blue silk stockings for stout ones of black cashmere, and putting on a pair of serviceable country boots, she afterwards opened her wardrobe and took out a dingy costume of blue serge—one of Renata's.

This she hastily donned, and taking down her hair, deftly arranged it so that when she put on the little black bonnet she produced from a locked box, she was in a quarter of an hour transformed from a princess to a demure, neatly-dressed lady's maid.

From a drawer in her dressing-table she took out a shabby hand-bag—Renata's bag—and, after ascertaining that there was a small sum of money in it, she put it upon her arm, and finally examined herself in the glass.

She was an adept at disguising herself as Renata, and, after patting her hair and altering the angle of her neat bonnet, she switched off the light and left the room.

Boldly she passed along the corridor of the private apartments until she

at length opened a door at the end, whereupon she passed a sentry unchallenged, and away into the servants' quarters.

Across the courtyard, now only dimly lit, she passed, and then out by the servants' entrance to the Via del Quirinale.

Having left the Palace she hurried through a number of dark side-streets until she reached a small garage in a narrow thoroughfare—almost a lane—called the Via della Muratte, beyond the Trevi fountain.

A sleepy, white-haired old man roused himself as she entered, while she gave him a cheery good evening, and then went up to her car, a powerful grey one of open type, and switched on the head-lamps. From a locker in the garage the old man brought her a big, fur-lined motor coat and a close-fitting hat, and these she quickly assumed. Then a few minutes later, seated at the wheel, she passed out of the garage exclaiming gaily:

"I shall be back before it is light, Paolo. *Buona motte*."

Gaining the Corso, silent and dark at that hour, she drove rapidly away, out by the Popolo Gate, and with her cut-out roaring went straight along the Via Flaminia, the ancient way through the mountains to Civita Castellana and the wilds of Umbria.

The night was dark and bitterly cold, for a strong east wind was blowing from the snowcapped mountains causing Lola to draw up and take her big fur mitts from the inside pocket of the car. Then she turned up the wide fur collar of her coat, mounted to the wheel again, and was soon negotiating the winding road—the surface of which at that season was shockingly loose and bad.

After fifteen miles of continual ascent she approached the dead silent old town of Castelnuova, being challenged by the octroi guards who, finding a lady alone, allowed her to proceed without further word. Then through the narrow, ancient street, lit by oil lamps, she went slowly, and out again into a great plain for a further fifteen miles—a lonely drive, indeed, along a difficult and dangerous road. But she was an expert driver and negotiated all the difficult corners with tact and caution.

Through several hamlets she passed, but not a dog was astir, until

presently she descended a sharp hill, and below saw a few meagre lights of the half-hidden town of Borghetto—a little place dominated by a great ruined castle situated on the direct railway line between Firenze and Rome.

Half-way down the hill she slackened speed, her great head-lights glaring, until presently she pulled up at the roadside and, slowly descending, extinguished the lights so that they might not attract attention.

Then, leaving the car, she hurried forward along the road, for she was cramped and cold.

But scarcely had she gone fifty yards when a dark figure came out of the shadows to meet her, uttering her name.

“Is it you, Pietro?” she asked quickly.

“*Si, signorina*,” was the reassuring reply, in a voice which told that its owner was a *contadino*, and not a gentleman.

Next second they were standing together.

“I received your message, Pietro,” she said, “and I have kept the appointment, as you see.”

The man for a few minutes did not reply. In the half-light, for the moon was now struggling through the clouds, the fact was revealed that the peasant was about forty, one of that pleasant-faced, debonair type so frequently met with in Central Italy—a gay, careless fellow who might possibly be a noted person in the little village of Borghetto.

He had taken off his hat at Lola’s approach and stood bare-headed before her.

“You are silent,” she said. “What has happened?”

“Nothing evil has happened, signorina,” was his reply, for he spoke in the distinctive dialect of Umbria, very different indeed to the polite language of Rome. “Only I am surprised—that is all.”

“Surprised! Why?”

“I feared that the signorina would not be in Rome.”

“Why?”

“Because I saw the Signor Enrico to-night, and he told me you had left.”

“Enrico! He has not been here?”

“I saw him at eleven o’clock. He arrived from Firenze by the north express at half-past eight. He had come from far away—from Milano, I think.”

“He has been at the signora’s then?” asked Her Highness quickly.

“Yes—with the Signorina Velia. I was with him an hour ago.”

“Did you tell him I should be here?”

“No; I feared to tell him, signorina.”

“Good. Where is he now?”

“Still at the signora’s.”

“Then he does not know I am here?”

“No, signorina, he goes to Rome to-morrow.” Lola was silent for a few moments. She was reflecting deeply.

“You say that Velia is here—eh? Then Enrico has come to see her, I suppose?” she asked.

“I believe so. They met before at the house of old Madame Mortara’s and again to-night.”

“*Benissimo*, Pietro. Now tell me, what have you found out?”

“Not very much, signorina, I regret to say. They are too wary, these people. I know, however, they are watching your friend the Englishman.

And they mean mischief, too."

"Watching Signor Waldron," she echoed in alarm. "Are you quite certain of that?"

"Absolutely."

"Who are watching?"

"Beppo and 'The Thrush.'"

"That is Beppo Fiola and Gino Merlo—eh?" she remarked. "I thought Gino had been arrested in Sarzana."

"So he was," replied the man, "but he escaped. He is wanted, but the present moment is not an exactly opportune one for his arrest, signorina."

"And they mean evil?"

"Decidedly. The Signor Waldron should be warned."

"How did you discover this, Pietro?" she asked, standing with him in the deep shadow of a disused granary.

"Signorina, a man of my profession has various channels of information," was his polite but rather ambiguous reply, his voice entirely altered, for he now spoke in an educated manner. Hitherto he had spoken in the dialect peculiar to the valley of the Tiber, but his last sentence was that of an educated man.

"Ah! I know, Signor Olivieri," she said; "you are a past-master in the art of disguise to come out here and live as a *contadino*."

"For the purpose of obtaining information every ruse is admissable, signorina. This is not the first occasion in my career by many when I have posed as a peasant."

"Curious that Signor Enrico is so friendly with Velia, is it not?" she asked.

"Exactly my thought," replied Pietro Olivieri, the renowned private

detective of Genoa, for such he was; “there is some devil’s work afoot, but whether it is in connection with the matter we are investigating I cannot yet convince myself. As a field-labourer in madame’s service I have been ever on the alert. Fortunately no one has yet suspected me—for this place is, as you well know, a veritable hot-bed of anarchy and crime; a nest which contains some of the worst and most desperate characters in the whole of Italy. Therefore if I betrayed myself, I fear I should not return to Rome alive.”

“But have you no fear?” she asked anxiously. “Not while I exercise ordinary caution. Here, I am Pietro Bondi, a simple, hard-working *contadino*. I take my wine like a man. I gossip to the women, and I interfere with nobody. At first when I came here my presence aroused suspicion, but that has, fortunately, now died down.”

“You will watch Enrico?”

“Certainly.”

“I wonder what his object is in returning here to Borghetto?”

“In order to meet Velia.”

“He could have met her more easily in Rome.”

“Not if it chanced to be against his interests to be seen in Rome. Remember he is well-known there.”

“So you think he got off the train here instead of going on to the capital?”

“Yes. To see the girl Velia who came here to-night—to meet him and the others.”

“The others?” she repeated inquiringly.

“Yes—‘The Thrush’ and the others.”

“To form a plot against the Englishman?” she gasped.

“Exactly, signorina. The Signor Waldron should be warned at once. Will

you do so—or shall I send him an anonymous letter?”

“I will see him to-morrow; but—but what can I say without exposing the truth. Come, Signor Pietro, you are a good one at inventing stories.”

“Tell him the truth, signorina.”

“No,” she said, “that is impossible. I—I could never do that. I have reasons for concealing it—strong reasons.”

“Then what do you propose doing? If you tell him he is in grave personal danger he will only laugh at you and take no heed of your warning. Englishmen never can understand our people.”

“True, but—but really,” she asked suddenly, “is there any great danger?”

“I tell you, signorina, that some conspiracy is afoot against your friend,” replied the detective who, before entering business on his own account, had been a well-known official at the Prefecture of Police in Genoa. His work lay in the north and he knew very little of Rome, and was therefore unknown. “You requested me to assist you in this curious inquiry, and I am doing so; yet the further I probe, the deeper and more complicated, I confess, becomes the problem.”

“But you do not despair?” she cried anxiously.

“No. I am hoping ere long to see a ray of light through this impenetrable veil of mystery,” he replied. “At present, however, all seems so utterly complicated. There is but one outstanding feature of the affair,” he added, “and that is the attempt which will assuredly be made upon the life of your friend.”

“But why? With what motive?”

“They hold him in fear.”

“For what reason?”

“Ah! that, signorina, I am as yet unable to say,” was his quick reply. “If I knew that then we might soon get upon a path which would undoubtedly

lead us to the truth."

"We must crush the conspiracy at all hazards, Signor Olivieri," she said quickly. "Remember that Signor Waldron is my friend—my dear friend."

"Then go to him and tell him the truth."

"Ah, no, I cannot!" she cried. "That is quite impossible."

"You know him, I do not," the detective said. "Could you not induce him to leave Italy, say for a few weeks? It would be safer. These men, I tell you frankly, are desperate characters. They will hesitate at nothing."

"But why should they attack an Englishman?" she asked.

"Because he knows—or they think he knows—some secret concerning them. That is my theory."

"And they intend to close his lips?"

The detective nodded.

"S-h-h-h," he whispered next second. "See yonder"—and he pointed down the hill to where a light had suddenly shone. "Someone is coming across the vineyard. Perhaps it is Signor Enrico—probably it is, I overheard him say something about catching the night mail to Rome. It is due in twenty minutes."

"*Addio*, then," she said hurriedly. "I will manage to warn Signor Waldron if, as you say, it is absolutely necessary," and, taking the peasant's hand in farewell, she ran back to where her car was waiting, and was soon on the road again speeding back over the thirty odd miles which lay between that nest of bad characters and the Eternal City.

While she was hurrying away, without waiting to switch on her lamps, Pietro Olivieri leisurely descended the hill. But as he passed on through the grove of dark cypresses a human figure crept stealthily out of the shadows and, looking after him, muttered a fierce imprecation.

The pair who had believed themselves unseen, had been watched by a

very sharp pair of eyes!

Chapter Twenty Three.

Her Highness's Warning.

The grey morning mist hung over the Tiber and over the Eternal City, but outside the town it was bright, crisp, and sunny.

Away at Frascati on the pleasant mountain slopes with those lovely views over the Campagna, fifteen miles from Rome, the day was charming, and at noon quite warm and delightful.

Perhaps of all the *contorini* of Rome the Frascati is the most attractive. By road and rail it is easy of access, and perhaps this fact had induced Lola to telephone to Hubert and give him an appointment in the beautiful grounds of the Villa Aldobrandini, where there certainly would be no other person, save perhaps a few odd British tourists who would not recognise either of the pair.

At noon, therefore, both having arrived by train from Rome, they had met at a spot appointed by Her Highness, and were standing together against an old broken piece of statuary under a high hedge of dark ilex. The great old sixteenth-century villa, built by Cardinal Pietro Aldobrandini, nephew of Clement VIII, is now, alas! falling into decay; its fountains are dilapidated; its statuary broken; its terraces, once trod by papal dignitaries, moss-grown; while over the steps of its principal entrance the green lizards flash in the sunshine.

Its grounds, however, are still the delight of the traveller, with their terraces, their fantastic grottos, their fountains and rocks, their great oaks, their funereal cypresses, and their splendid extensive views.

From where the diplomat stood beside the Princess he could see far away across the plain to where the great dome of St. Peter's rose in the blue-grey mists of the panorama, while on the other hand lay the ancient Tusculum, and the range of blue hills dominated by the Corbio—as the Italians call the Rocca Priora—while a little to the right shone the Lake of Albano, lying like a mirror in its basin in the sunshine.

Lola had arrived there first, but as he came swinging along the path a flush of pleasure mounted to her pale cheeks, and she put out her gloved hand, greeting him warmly.

Dressed in dark grey, and wearing a magnificent set of blue fox, she presented a very different appearance to that of the previous night when she had worn the old dress and close-fitting bonnet of Renata's.

Hubert Waldron thought he had never seen her looking so charming, yet he wondered why she had made that appointment so far away from Rome. He was still wondering, too, why that letter of Henry Pujalet's should have had such an effect upon her. With her last strenuous effort, however, she had destroyed it. Why?

"Your man seemed awfully dense this morning," the Princess laughed. "When I telephoned he thought it was the manageress of your fishmonger, and told me that you required nothing to-day! Your English servants are horribly abrupt, I assure you."

"I'm so sorry," he said, hastening to apologise. "I fear abruptness is one of his failings, but he is honest. I've reprimanded him lots of times."

"Ah! I expect he hears a good many female voices on the 'phone," she laughed, teasing him; "and he has orders to what you call it in English, to choke them off—eh?" and she laughed.

Together they walked along the gravelled path to where, beneath a tall cypress, was an old semicircular stone seat, one of those placed there when the great cardinal laid out the grounds of his princely villa. Upon that they seated themselves when suddenly Her Highness, with an anxious look upon her face, turned to her companion and said, still speaking in English.

"I fear that we may be watched, therefore I made this appointment with you here."

"Watched?" he echoed. "Who by? Old Ghelardi, I suppose?"

"No. I have no great fear of him," she answered. "But you have enemies here, in Rome," she went on very seriously. "I have discovered that they

are desperate and intend to do you some grievous harm. Therefore I urge you to make some excuse to leave Rome at once."

"Why, whatever do you mean, Princess?" he asked, staring at her.

"How often have I forbidden you to use that title to me?" she cried petulantly. "To you I am Lola, plain Lola, as always," she said, looking very gravely into his eyes. "We are friends. That is why I am here to warn you."

"But I really don't understand," he protested. "What enemies can I have here? And if I have, what harm can they possibly do me? I'm not afraid, I assure you."

"Ah! I know you are not afraid," she answered. "But from what I have heard, it seems probable that these people, whoever they are, must be in fear of you—they suspect you are cognisant of some secret of theirs."

The word "secret" held him speechless for some seconds. She knew nothing of the theft that had been committed at the Ministry of War. The only "secret" which he had tried to discover was the identity of the thief.

"But how came you to know this?" he asked at last.

"I—well I heard a rumour last night," was her vague reply; "and I thought it my duty, as your friend, to warn you lest you should be entrapped or taken unawares."

"Then you really and honestly believe that these mysterious, unknown persons, whoever they are, mean mischief?" he asked, looking anxiously into her pale, anxious countenance.

How handsome she was! How deeply, too, was he in love with her. He held his breath, remembering how frantically he had kissed her hand; how he had told her of the great burning passion within his heart, though she had lain there with all consciousness blotted out.

"If I had any doubt, Signor Waldron, I should not trouble to raise this alarm," she answered in a tone of slight reproach.

“But how can I leave Rome?” he asked, for he was reflecting that to adopt her suggestion was impossible. His duty to the King, as well as his duty to the British Service, precluded it at present. “Cannot you go on leave again? Or—or cannot you get appointed to another post for six months—or a year?”

He was silent, his eyes fixed upon hers.

“Are you so very anxious then to get rid of me?” he asked gravely.

“To get rid of you?” she echoed blankly. “To get rid of you—my most sincere and devoted friend! How can you suggest such a thing?”

“Well, it almost seems so,” he answered with a smile.

“My dear Signor Waldron, I warn you most seriously that you are in grave personal peril, and that—”

“But you do not tell me how you know this, Lola,” he interrupted. “I am naturally most curious to know.”

“Without doubt,” she responded, her eyes cast down. “But the information is from a source which I have no desire to divulge. I learnt it entirely by accident.”

“It was not contained in that letter I brought you from Brussels?” he asked very slowly, for of that he held a faint suspicion. He looked her straight in the eyes.

“Oh no,” was her reply. “That letter—ah! it was about something—something which affected me very closely. I know that I was very foolish to allow it to upset me so. It was absurd of me to faint as I did. But I could not help it. I suppose I am but a woman, after all.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to describe how old Ghelardi had discovered them together in the room of the Minister of the Household, but he hesitated, fearing to unduly cause her annoyance. He had defied the chief spy of Italy, but was as yet uncertain whether the crafty old fellow had not gone secretly to the King and told him the story—with many embellishments, perhaps.

“Your indisposition was not your own fault, Lola,” he answered in a voice of deepest sympathy. “No doubt Monsieur Pujalet’s letter contained something to cause you the gravest disconcern.”

“Disconcern!” she cried, starting up wildly, her big expressive eyes full of anxiety. “Ah! you do not know—how can you know all the tortures of conscience, of the daily, hourly terror I am now suffering! No! You cannot understand.”

“Because you will explain nothing,” he remarked with dissatisfaction.

“I cannot, I dare not—even to you, my most intimate friend!”

“Well, Lola, I confess that each time we meet you become more and more mysterious.”

“Ah! Because I am compelled. Surrounded by enemies, even my association with you seems to have placed you also in a deadly peril. That is why I am appealing to you to leave Rome.”

“I can’t,” he said. “That is entirely out of the question. But now that you have warned me I will be wary—and will carry my revolver, if you think it necessary.”

“Cannot you leave Italy? It would be far safer.”

“And leave you in this perilous position? No,” was his prompt and decisive answer.

“But I beg—nay, I implore you to do so,” she cried, holding out both her hands to him.

He shook his head slowly.

“It is quite impossible. If danger really exists, then I must face it.”

For some moments she remained silent.

“Have you seen Ghelardi lately?” she asked quite suddenly.

Her question surprised. What, he wondered, could she know?

“I saw him the day before yesterday,” was his vague reply.

“Has it not struck you that he is very ill-disposed towards you?” she exclaimed.

“Certainly. I have always known that—even while we were up the Nile, and he was passing as Jules Gigleux. He objected to our friendliness. Yet he never seemed to discover that you were acquainted with Henri Pujalet. That was curious, was it not?”

She smiled.

“Perhaps because I was extremely careful not to betray it—eh?” But next second she glanced at the little diamond-studded watch upon her wrist, and rising quickly, declared that it was time for her to catch the train back to Rome.

“There is a luncheon to the Grand Duke of Oldenbourg to-day, and I shall be in horrible disgrace if I’m absent,” she explained. “But it will be best for you to travel by the next train. It is injudicious for us to be seen together, Mr Waldron, especially if we are watched—as I believe we are.”

“Ghelardi’s secret agents may lurk anywhere,” he said, as they walked together to the great gateway of the villa.

“No, I do not fear them, I tell you,” she said.

“But just now you told me that he is ill-disposed towards me—a fact of which I am well aware.”

“I tell you it is not Ghelardi that I fear, but certain persons who, for their own mysterious purposes, intend to make an attack upon you when fitting opportunity offers.”

“Trust me to remain wary,” replied Hubert with a smile, and then after they had stood together in the winter sunshine for several moments near the gate he lifted his hat, bowed low over her hand, and then stood watching until she, pulling her splendid furs about her shoulders, had

disappeared into the road which led down to the rural station.

Ah! how he loved her! But he sighed and bit his lip.

To Hubert, the object of Her Highness's warning seemed both mysterious and obscure. Did she, for some hidden purpose of her own wish to get rid of him. If so, why?

The story that an attempt might be made upon him he was inclined to discredit, especially as she had refused to reveal the source of her information.

He lunched at the little *albergo* above the steps leading to the station, and by half-past two found himself back again in Rome where, in his rooms, he found Pucci, the brigadier of police, awaiting him.

"I have a curious fact to report, signore," said the man when they were alone together with the door closed.

"Well," asked Hubert, "what is it?"

"That your movements are being closely watched by two well-known characters—criminals."

Waldron started, staring at the man, for had not Lola warned him that very morning.

"Do you know them?"

"Quite well. One is called 'The Thrush' by his associates, and has served several long terms of imprisonment for theft. Indeed I arrested him three years ago for attacking a policeman in the Piazza Farnese and using a knife. The other is Beppo Fiola, who has been sentenced several times for burglary."

"Professional thieves then?"

"Two of the worst characters we have in Rome, signore."

"I wonder what they want with me—eh?" asked Hubert, lighting a

cigarette, perfectly unperturbed.

“They mean no good, signore,” declared the man very gravely. “Perhaps they intend to commit a burglary here?”

“They are welcome. There’s nothing here of any great value, and if they do come they’ll get a pretty warm reception,” he laughed.

“Ah, signore, it is a very serious matter,” protested the detective. “These two men would, if it suited them, take life without the slightest hesitation. In a case four months ago where a Russian diamond-dealer was robbed of his wallet and his body found in the Tiber stabbed to the heart, the strongest suspicion attached to the two men in question, though we have not yet been able to bring home the crime to them.”

“But I haven’t any diamonds or valuables,” replied the diplomat.

“No, but perhaps you, signore, may be in possession of some secret or other concerning them,” the detective said. “Perhaps even they may be employed by some enemy of yours to watch an opportunity and close your lips.”

Hubert looked at the man in surprise without replying.

“Yes, signore,” Pucci added very gravely, “such a thing is not entirely unknown in Rome, remember. Therefore I would urge you to exercise the greatest caution; to beware of any trap, and always to carry arms. It would be best, I think, to report to the Questore, and arrest both men on suspicion.”

“No, Pucci,” Hubert replied quickly. “No. Watch closely, but make no move. Their arrest might upset all my present plans.”

Chapter Twenty Four.

Room Number 164.

Days, many anxious, fevered days, passed—bright winter days during which Hubert was frantically active in his efforts to discover some clue to the mystery of the stolen plans of the frontier fortresses.

Not a stone did he leave unturned in his quiet, patient endeavours, and aided by the faithful Pucci—to whom he still hesitated to reveal the exact object of his search—he kept constant watch upon the actions of His Excellency the Minister of War.

Suspicions were very strong against the latter. He had discovered one important point, namely, that within a week from the loss of the documents the sum of one hundred and sixty thousand lire was paid into the General's account at the Banca Commerciale, and, further, that it appeared to have come from an unknown source.

Agents employed by Pucci had also watched the two secretaries, Lambarini and Pironti, but against neither was there any suspicious circumstance.

Several times had Waldron had audience with His Majesty, but was compelled to confess that he had nothing to report, while from Vienna came the secret information daily that, though a great army had been mobilised, the "manoeuvres" had not yet commenced.

The very silence was full of menace.

More than once—at Court, at the Embassy, and in the princely drawing-rooms of Rome—Hubert had met Her Highness. He had stood beside her full of love and admiration, at the same time puzzled at the paleness of her countenance and the constant anxiety which seemed ever expressed there. Since that night when he had delivered Pujalet's note to her she had never seemed the same.

Yet she would tell him nothing—absolutely nothing. It was her secret, she

said—a secret which she steadily declined to divulge.

“Why do you not take my advice and leave Rome?” she asked one night when she was dancing with him at a great ball at the Rospigliosi Palace. “You are in constant peril.”

“I have my duties here,” was his answer. “I cannot leave.”

She sighed, and as he held her in his arms he felt that she was trembling.

“Why won’t you heed me?” she implored, looking up at him with those wonderful eyes of hers. “Do.”

“Because I am not my own master,” was his reply. “Because I cannot.”

General Cataldi was there, in his fine uniform resplendent with stars and ribbons, and it chanced that at that moment his eyes fell upon the handsome pair.

He regarded them suspiciously, thoughtfully stroking his white moustache.

“That Englishman, Waldron, seems on very friendly terms with the Princess Luisa,” he remarked to the brilliant, handsomely dressed young woman at his side—the Countess Cioni.

“Yes,” was the answer of the lady in pink in the glittering tiara. “I, too, have noticed it. But Luisa is always making queer friendships.”

“He was whispering to her a moment ago, just before they commenced to dance,” the General remarked. “Has Her Highness ever mentioned him?”

“Oh yes. They met up the Nile, I understand, when Luisa was sent away from Court in disgrace.”

“Ah! then the friendship has been of some duration—eh?” grunted His Excellency, casting another strangely suspicious look at the pair as he turned away.

Late one night, about a week later, Hubert had been to an official dinner

at the Russian Embassy, in the Via Gaeta, and the weather being bright and starlight he threw his cloak over his uniform and, lighting a cigar, started to stroll home.

It was past one o'clock and few people were astir in those narrow, ill-lit Italian streets with their high, dark houses. He had turned from the Via Gaeta into the narrow Via Curtatone on his way towards the Piazza del Cinquecento—which was the shortest cut to his rooms—when, ere he was aware of it, a dark figure lurched suddenly out of a doorway and he was dealt a stunning blow at the back of the head, causing him to reel, stumble, and fall.

His assailants, of whom there were two—who had apparently been lying in wait for him—bent quickly over his prostrate form with keen knives drawn, when Hubert's hand shot out and next second one of the men staggered back with a revolver bullet in his stomach. So swiftly had the Englishman defended himself that the second man, ere he could use his knife, received a bullet in the cheek, whereupon the pair both wounded and in fear because of the alarm caused by the report of the explosions, slipped round the corner and were well out of sight before a policeman from the neighbouring piazza came running up eagerly to discover what was wrong.

The whole affair happened within a few seconds, but never had Hubert Waldron been nearer death than at that moment.

His presence of mind to draw his weapon which he had carried loose in the pocket of his cloak, and at the same time to fall heavily as though stunned and unconscious, had saved his life. Had he simply fallen back against the wall his assailants' knives would, no doubt, have been buried in his heart ere he could have fired.

He had escaped death by an ace.

The policeman, on arrival, found him standing with his back to the wall, recovering from the sudden shock.

"Two men knocked me down," he replied in answer to the police agent. "But I fired at them. Hit both the brutes, I believe," and he laughed.

“*Dio*! Which way did they go?” asked the man.

“Round there, to the left, into the Via Vicenza, I believe. But you’ll never find them. Besides I didn’t see them well enough to be able to recognise them again.”

“The signore is a diplomat, I see. May I not know his name, for the purpose of my report?”

“No,” replied Waldron, for he was not anxious that Ghelardi should learn of the incident, as no doubt he would, if formal report were made that a British diplomat had been attacked in the streets. “It’s nothing,” he said. “They tried to rob me, that’s all.”

And then placing ten francs in the man’s hand he picked up his cocked hat and went his way.

What Lola had told him was the truth. But how could she possibly have known that such a desperate attempt was about to be made?

What motive could there be to seal his lips, save because he was endeavouring to see a solution of the mystery of the missing plans!

Was it possible that those two assassins whom Pucci knew to be two of the most desperate characters in Rome were the hirelings of General Cataldi?

On his way homeward that theory became more than ever impressed upon him. His Excellency was guilty of connivance at the theft, and knowing that he was near arriving at a solution of the mystery, intended that his mouth should be closed.

After he had bathed the injury to his head, he threw himself into his chair and sat for a long time pondering, trying to make up his mind how, in face of the present situation, he should act. Was it possible that Lola, being friendly with the Countess Cioni, had somehow learned of the General’s fears, and had obtained information as to the projected plot? If so, why did not Her Highness, so friendly was she, reveal to him the whole strange truth?

No. There was some curious element of mystery in her attitude towards him. She was concealing something—but what it was he could not in the least discern. He loved her—ay, better than any man had ever loved a woman. He regarded her as his sole ideal, for before her all other feminine beauty faded. He, who had run the whole gamut of gaiety in the exclusive Society of the capitals; he who had trodden the diplomatic stage of Europe ever since a child, had at last met the one woman who was sweet perfection; the one woman before whom he had thrown himself upon his knees and worshipped—on that fatal night when his enemy had, alas! discovered him.

And yet the situation seemed so utterly hopeless. His love was, after all, but a hollow mockery, and could only lead to grief and black despair, while his utter failure to trace the hand which had stolen the plans was, he knew, causing His Majesty to lose all faith in him. He had been in Brussels upon a mysterious errand instead of carrying out His Majesty's desire.

Italy was at that moment menaced on every side. Complications had arisen with Turkey during the past week or two, while her relations with France were not of the best regarding certain Customs tariffs which France had suddenly risen in order to further strangle Italian trade.

Yes, indeed, the time was now absolutely ripe for Austria to strike her long-premeditated blow. And if she did, then Italy, in her state of unpreparedness, and her serious quarrel with Turkey regarding Tripoli, must, alas! succumb.

Next morning, when Peters brought Hubert the *Tribuna* in bed as usual, he saw an announcement that His Excellency General Cataldi, Minister of War, was leaving that evening for Lyons, to visit his brother, who was lying dangerously ill there.

Why that sudden journey? he thought. The news had no doubt been communicated to the Press by His Excellency himself.

During the day he reflected upon the matter many times, until at six o'clock that evening, dressed in an old tweed suit, and presenting the appearance of a ten-day-ten-guinea tourist, he entered a second-class

compartment of the Paris *rapide*—having first watched the General into the sleeping-car.

That evening he dined upon a roll and a piece of uncooked ham which he bought at the station, and that night he spent crossing the wild, dreary Maremme marshes in sleepless discomfort, for the Italian railway administrative are not over-generous towards the second-class traveller.

By Pisa, with a glimpse of its white Leaning Tower, Carrara with its dazzling white marble quarries, Genoa, Turin, and the glorious scenery of the Mont Cenis, they at last gained France, until at last, late on the following day, they arrived at the long, inartistic station of Culoz, and there, watching intently, he saw the General in his fur-lined overcoat and felt hat descend, and change into the train for Lyons, an action which he himself followed.

On gaining Lyons, however, His Excellency, who was alone and quite unconscious that he was being followed, entered the big buffet of the terminus, and having waited there an hour, purchased a ticket for Tours.

The story of the invalid brother was at once exploded! He had left Italy with some other object in view.

Travelling by a slow train across the mountains, they did not arrive in the pretty capital of Touraine until early next morning, and then the General, entering the omnibus of the Hôtel de l'Univers, drove down the wide Boulevard Heurteloup, while Hubert went to a rival house, the Metropol, in the Place du Palais-de-Justice.

An hour later, however, he called at the Univers, and by means of a judicious tip to the under-concierge—the concierge being absent—discovered that the Italian gentleman who had arrived had given the name of Conio—Emilio Conio, of Milan, he had written in the register.

The Englishman now saw that the object of the Minister's journey was, no doubt, to keep some secret appointment. Therefore he decided to risk detection and transfer his quarters to the Univers, which he promptly did.

Through all the day he watched the General very closely. During the morning, overcome by his journey, His Excellency slept, and not until four

o’clock did he come down to idle in the lounge. Then after half an hour he crossed the Place and entered one of the cafés there for a *vermouth*.

His attitude was as though he expected someone who had not arrived.

Hubert smiled within himself when he reflected how he had followed this man who had bribed assassins to take his life, and how utterly unconscious he now was of being watched.

“The Italian gentleman is expecting a certain Herr Steinberg, of Berlin, to-night,” the assistant concierge whispered to Hubert when he entered the hotel just before dinner. “He is to arrive at ten o’clock to-night.”

And then, as his hands closed over the louis which the Englishman produced, he added:

“I will let you know, by a note to your room, m’sieur.”

Hubert, fearing to meet His Excellency in the salle à manger, went out and dined at the Curassier, a noted restaurant in the Rue Nationale, and did not return before half-past ten.

In his room he found a scribbled line as arranged.

Then, descending by the lift, he sought the assistant concierge, and from him discovered that the pair were in consultation in room Number 164.

“Yes, I believe there is a door between that and the next room, m’sieur,” the man replied.

“Good. Then get me the key for an hour or so, and I will make it all right with you.”

The profession of concierge is synonymous of bribery. No concierge in Europe lives upon his stipend. Hence within ten minutes Hubert was crouched against the door of the adjoining room, listening to the conversation of the Italian Minister of War and the stranger from Berlin—a conversation which certainly proved highly instructive.

Chapter Twenty Five.

Government Secrets.

Like most doors separating rooms in Continental hotels those of the Univers at Tours were no exception. They were thin, and Hubert, kneeling with his ear to the crack, could distinctly hear the conversation between the Cabinet Minister who was passing under the unassuming name of Emilio Conio.

Apparently His Excellency had only a very limited knowledge of German, and the pair were therefore speaking in very indifferent French. The Italian can seldom speak French well.

Very soon Waldron ascertained that the secret meeting had been arranged in order to discuss a forthcoming army contract for one hundred and eighty thousand pairs of boots, lucrative, no doubt. Contracts in these days are always lucrative. There is commission somewhere.

“We have had many tenders,” His Excellency said. “Firms in England, France, and Italy have sent in quotations and samples, in addition to four German firms, including your own.”

“But they are all strangers, Your Excellency, no doubt,” replied the gentleman from Berlin very suavely. “We are not strangers, and the terms we offer must, I think, commend themselves to you. Our last deal turned out satisfactory for both sides, did it not?”

“Except that my secretary became suddenly most avaricious.”

“By some indiscretion on Your Excellency’s part, no doubt. Secretaries are only hirelings.”

“Probably I was foolish,” the General laughed. “But as I wrote you, I think that if I pass an order of this magnitude your firm ought to—well, they ought to increase its generosity.”

“Ah! Excellency, things are cut so terribly fine. You do not know. In order

to compete with those Northampton and Leicester firms we have to be content with the very slightest margin of profit, and after our secret commission to you there is really nothing left. We have to live and pay our people. Besides you tie us down so rigidly to dates of delivery."

"Unfortunately I am compelled. I cannot show any favour to you, or our association would at once be detected."

And so, for half an hour, the two men haggled and bargained, until the General who, from the conversation, had, it seemed, got six thousand pounds out of a recent contract from army food, grew impatient and said:

"Well, it seems that we cannot do business. I am really sorry. But I have Menier, of Marseilles, coming to see me here at noon to-morrow. He will be a little more generous than yourself. I happen to know the large commissions which you recently paid in Turkey to secure the contract. So why strangle me—eh?"

"Exactly, m'sieur. But to supply army boots to Turkey and to Italy are quite different matters. To Turkey one can send any rubbish that will hang together—soles of millboard, if necessary—for with a little baksheesh anything will be passed. But in Rome you have your commission, remember, and those officers of yours cannot be bribed."

"Perhaps it is as well," laughed the General. "What I fear is that if I sign your contract my secretary will at once suspect commission, and make a demand upon me—as he did before—the worm!"

"Well, permit me to remark that the sum is a really respectable one, and if we pay it on receipt of the contract into an English bank to the account of the Countess Cioni, as before, it cannot be traced to you."

"Ah yes. But my secretary is a very shrewd person. I would have to give him something—however small."

Again the two men haggled, while Waldron knelt, holding his breath and listening to the corrupt bargain whereby the Italian Army were to be supplied with inferior German boots in order that His Excellency, the Minister of War, should profit. But in most European countries the same thing is done and winked at.

“If you are to have the contract, Herr Steinberg,” the General said decisively at last, “you must give me an extra half per cent. I will not sign it without.”

“Upon the whole amount?”

“Yes, on the whole amount.”

“But the total contract amounts to nearly a million francs.”

“Exactly. I gave you the tinned-food contract. It is large, therefore I require a larger sum for my signature.”

There was silence for a few moments.

To Waldron it seemed by the rustle of paper that the German contractor must be scribbling a rapid sum to see exactly what the commission amounted to.

“I shall, of course, want the usual sum, twenty-five thousand francs down and the balance placed to the credit of the Countess in London seven days after the signed contract is delivered to you in Berlin,” His Excellency said.

“Well,” exclaimed the German in dismay at last. “That leaves us so very little that I really cannot decide it off-hand. I must telegraph at once to my partner, and will give you a decision to-morrow.”

“No, Herr Steinberg,” was the General’s answer. “I must know now—at once—yes or no. Personally it would give me greater popularity if I dealt in France, rather than in Germany. Besides, if I deal with Menier, my secretary knows nothing. So there is the position. You may leave or accept my terms—whichever you like. It is quite immaterial to me.”

Again they argued and haggled, the German pleading for time to communicate with his partner in Berlin, the General quite obdurate. The latter had much experience of contractors.

At last Herr Steinberg, shrewd business man that he was, seeing that the General’s mind was made up, said: “Very well. I accept your terms.”

“Good,” answered the General. “I shall sign the contract as soon as I return to Rome—the day after to-morrow—and send it to you in Berlin by special messenger.”

“Agreed. Perhaps you will write me a letter?”

“At once,” was the reply. Then after another brief silence, during which time both had scribbled some agreement, the German said:

“I think that will suffice.”

“And this?” asked the General.

They read each other’s letters, expressed satisfaction, and then Waldron heard a slight click, the opening and shutting of a wallet.

Some notes were counted out—to the sum of one thousand pounds. They rustled, and the listener knew that they were English notes so that they could not be traced so easily as those which the unscrupulous German contractor might withdraw from his own bank in Berlin.

His Excellency counted them, declared the sum to be correct, and then, after a further brief conversation the German left, His Excellency remaining so as not to be seen in his company.

The deal was concluded. Though interesting to Hubert, it however carried him no farther in his inquiry. It proved of course that General Cataldi, Minister of War, was corrupt and unscrupulous, yet were not the majority of the men who formed the Cabinet equally ready to accept bribes?

He stood in that artistically furnished bedroom full of chagrin. He had practically had his journey there for nothing, and had lost valuable time by his absence from Rome.

Therefore he slipped out along the corridor, and two hours later was on his way to Culoz, to catch the *train-de-luxe* from Paris to Rome.

During that night as the express roared through the mountains he lay in his narrow sleeping-berth watching the green-shaded lamp above, and full of conflicting thoughts.

The attempt upon his life showed plainly that the thief was aware of the strenuous efforts he was making to fathom the mystery. But who was the thief! Was it this unscrupulous, much-decorated General who took secret commission of contractors, the man who allowed the army to be fed on discarded tin food, and go shod in cheap German boots which wore in holes on the first march, in order to enrich himself?

Long and deeply he thought, and still the conviction clung to him that the person mainly responsible for the sale of the plans to Austria was His Excellency himself.

Thoughts of Her Highness rose within him. He sighed. Yes, he loved her with all his body and soul. Yet that barrier of birth could never be bridged. After all, they could be only good friends, therefore he had never dared to declare his love. She was a Princess of the blood-royal and might marry a reigning Sovereign, but he was a mere diplomat, a secretary of Embassy, a man whom the Court regarded as the necessary adjunct of a practically defunct institution, for, however much one may cling in these days to the old usages and customs, yet the glaring fact must be faced that kings themselves are the ambassadors, and royal visits from one Court to another tend to cement more international friendships than ten years of that narrow little squabbling and intriguing world which exists in every capital under the name of the *corps diplomatique*.

The public have been long enough gulled by the false tinsel and glamour of the diplomatic world, and in these ultra-modern days they see the inutility of it all. Often an obscure Vice-Consul in an obscure port is of greater use to the nation than the whole of the red-taped, ceremonious Embassy, with its splendid house, its dinners and dances, its flunkeys and furbelows, and its flabby, do-nothing policy directed from Downing Street.

Hubert Waldron, born and bred in the diplomatic atmosphere and nurtured upon the squabbles and petty jealousies of international politics, could not close his eyes to the fact that the public of Europe were being gulled daily by the Press, and that at an hour when all would seem quietest and most peaceful, the great and terrible European war would suddenly break out.

Though at the Embassies you will be told that the peace of Europe is quite assured nowadays, and though your penny papers with their “advertised actual sales” will print reassuring leaders for the sake of the particular party who supports them, yet there is not a diplomat in all Europe who does not, in his own heart, fear a violent and bloody explosion and that brought about by the Dual Monarchy.

Though this view may appear pessimistic, it is nevertheless a hard fact that the Powers of the Triple Alliance have not signed any agreements relating to the Mediterranean, and more than one European throne is to-day tottering to its fall, nay, more than one nation may, at any moment, be erased from the map.

But the whole object of diplomacy is to reassure, not to alarm. The days when the greatest international tension exists are those when the outlook seems the most serene and unruffled.

In our present century war breaks out; it is not declared. And war in Europe may break out at any moment, even though much is said of the solidity of the Triple Alliance.

On arrival at the great echoing station at Rome, Hubert descended, tired and fagged, and took a taxi home.

It was then nine o’clock in the morning, and Peters, surprised to see him, handed him a letter which had been left on the previous night. On opening it he found it was from Ghelardi, dated from the Bureau of Secret Police, and asking when he could see him.

At this request he was somewhat surprised in view of what had already passed between them, nevertheless he spoke to the functionary on the telephone at his private house and at eleven o’clock entered his private room at the Ministry.

Their greeting was the reverse of cordial. Indeed Hubert had at first hesitated to meet him at all, yet he thought that the object of the interview might concern the unfortunate incident in the Palace; hence he went, determined to still show a bold front.

“I regret, Signor Waldron, to have disturbed you,” the crafty old man said

when his visitor was seated. “But it has been reported to me that the other night you were attacked by two individuals, and that you narrowly escaped with your life—that you shot and wounded both your assailants.”

The policeman had, notwithstanding the bribe, evidently made a report in order to show his watchfulness to his superior. Hubert frowned in annoyance.

“Oh, it was nothing at all,” he declared, laughing. “I had quite forgotten all about it. They were merely footpads, I suppose. No further notice need be taken of them.”

“Ah! but they are very dangerous characters, and well-known in Rome,” he said. Then, looking straight at him the old man with the bristly hair said in a curious, half-suspicious voice: “You appear, Signor Waldron, to have some rather bitter enemies in Rome—eh?”

“I was not aware of it,” answered the diplomat. “If I have it does not trouble me in the least. I am perfectly able to defend myself.”

“They are secret enemies, it seems,” Ghelardi said slowly, looking at his visitor meaningly.

Hubert did not reply for a few moments. At last he said:

“And they include yourself, Signor Commendatore.”

The cunning old fellow smiled.

“Ah, you are referring, I suppose, to that incident of the other night. Well, I think we may surely let that pass. We all of us have our hours of irresponsibility,” and he slowly twisted the diamond ring around his little finger, laughing lightly.

“Thank you. I have no desire for your covert sneers, Signor Commendatore,” he said angrily, rising. “As I have told you—you are my secret enemy, and I shall treat you as such.”

“It is rather a pity that you do so.”

“A pity—why?”

“For the sake of Her Royal Highness.”

“Her name need not enter into our discussion,” Hubert said hotly, his hand upon the door ready to leave. “I do not see your object in troubling me to come here, merely to tell me of the attack made upon me by two criminals which the police should already have under lock and key. It is not much to the credit of the department that the streets of Rome are unsafe at night.”

“Ah! my dear signore, you are a little too impatient, I fear,” replied the chief of spies, quite undisturbed. “I was about to prove to you my friendliness.”

“I desire none of your friendship,” declared the Englishman hotly. “And I tell you that I will not have you mention the name of the Princess Luisa in connection with my own.”

“Friendships formed by Her Royal Highness are frequently unfortunate.”

“Are they!” exclaimed Waldron, his eyes aflame. “If you were younger, Signor Commendatore, I would knock you down for your gratuitous insult. As it is, I shall not forget it. *Buon giorno*!”

And he left the room, slamming the door after him.

Chapter Twenty Six.

Gathering Clouds.

Dust had once more been thrown into the eyes of Europe.

Weeks had gone by, spring came, and the Roman season was on the wane. The month of May—the Primavera—with all its blossoms and ceremonies had opened.

As far as the world knew not a cloud obscured the political horizon. In the chancelleries of Europe there were no sinister whispers, in the Embassies they danced and dined, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand had made a placid speech from the Throne, and Count Berchtold had declared the foreign policy of Austria-Hungary unchanged, and further, that the changes in the Near East had created new interests common to the Dual Monarchy and to Italy, and that their policy was leading them together along the path of co-operation, and also that their attitude towards each other tended to preserve the peace of Europe and to assure freedom and equilibrium in the Adriatic.

It is always so. The calm is followed by the storm. At Vienna they were secretly completing their plans for a sudden coup against their neighbours, yet the true facts were known only in our own Intelligence Department in Whitehall, and the information had in turn been sent in a cipher dispatch to the Embassy in Rome.

It was this dispatch which the Ambassador, receiving it one evening from the hand of the King's messenger, who had brought it in hot haste direct from Downing Street, passed over to Hubert to decipher.

The information was highly alarming, to say the least.

The British secret agent—a responsible Austrian official in the Ministry of War—reported that the great army massed in the Tyrol for manoeuvres was being kept there. A secret order had been issued to the Eighth, Tenth, and Thirteenth Army Corps to concentrate from the Adriatic across to the Danube, and at the same time the Ministry of Marine had issued

orders to the navy recalling the Adriatic fleet which had been manoeuvring between Cattaro and Ragusa up to Trieste.

The wireless stations at Sebenico and Pola had been taken over by the navy, and operators placed there sent expressly from the Ministry of Marine in Vienna.

All tended to a secret attack—to war—a war in Europe with dreadnoughts, high explosives, aeroplanes, seaplanes, submarines, and wireless conditions never before imagined either in the wildest dreams of novelists or the ever-active brains of place-seeking party politicians.

Preparations were slowly but surely being made in Vienna, and the blow would surely soon be struck.

For an hour Waldron remained in consultation with his Chief. Then, regardless of Downing Street regulations, and only hoping to prevent the conflagration, he went back to his rooms on the ground floor of the Embassy, scribbled a hasty copy of the secret information, and with it walked direct to the Quirinale.

Events would, he saw, very soon be moving fast.

About six o'clock he entered the private room of the Minister of the Royal Household, that cosy, well-remembered apartment in which Ghelardi had discovered him on his knees beside Her Royal Highness. The Minister himself was not in, but his secretary went immediately along to the private apartments and asked His Majesty for audience on Waldron's behalf.

The request was immediately granted, and he was at once shown up the long corridor, past the sentries guarding the door leading to the royal apartments, and on into the King's private cabinet, where His Majesty, plainly dressed in dark blue serge—for he discarded uniform whenever he could—stood eagerly awaiting him.

"Well, Waldron?" he exclaimed, stretching out his hand warmly, "I've been expecting you for days. Anything to report—eh?"

For answer his visitor drew out the rough memorandum from his pocket,

and after brief explanation regarding its source, proceeded to read it.

His Majesty's handsome, clear-cut face fell. He grew pale, but remained silent till the end.

Then with his hands behind his back, he strode slowly across the soft carpet to the heavily curtained window and back again.

Twice he paced the room in silence.

"Strange, Waldron!" he said, pausing and standing before the diplomat. "Very strange that you get this information, yet Ghelardi is in ignorance of what is happening?"

"He may not deem it wise to report to Your Majesty," Hubert suggested.

"Wise!" he echoed. "In the interests of the country's safety it is his first duty! He reports to me sufficient regarding trivial matters—the irresponsible vagaries of my niece, Lola, and things of that sort. Yet he knows nothing of what is in progress across the frontier," the King cried in anger. "Again, he has discovered nothing regarding the theft of those plans. If we could but find out the truth we might easily face our friends in Vienna, and prevent this attack. Diplomacy could avert the explosion even now, if we only knew the identity of the spy."

"I have made every inquiry, Your Majesty, but I have, alas! failed."

"I can only suppose that the conspiracy must have been formed in our own camp," was the King's hard remark, and his visitor knew what was passing in His Majesty's mind. Though Sovereign, he was not blind to the corruptness of his Ministry. Yet, as monarch, his hands were, alas! tied, or he would have long ago cleaned out the Augean stable.

For an hour he remained with the King, discussing the seriousness of the international situation.

"Ah, Waldron," sighed His Majesty, as he stood before the fire, erect, almost statuesque, his face pale and hard-set, "my people little know how much responsibility rests upon me, or how heavy is the burden of my duties towards my nation. During these past weeks I have slept but little,

and many a night have I passed in here alone, trying to devise some scheme whereby to defeat this secret plot against us. I have learnt how untiring have been your efforts to unravel the mystery of the theft, and I also know that a dastardly attempt has been made upon your life. I know how well and faithfully you have served me, even though I am not your own King. I can only thank you most deeply. Your father was my father's friend, and you are my friend."

"And I trust, even though I have failed to accomplish successfully the mission entrusted to me, that Your Majesty will still allow me to be your most faithful and devoted servant," he replied.

"I know you have done your very best, Waldron, and I highly appreciate it," was the Sovereign's earnest reply. "Ah!" he sighed, "if we could only discover the truth concerning those plans. Then, by prompt action, we might save the situation. But alas! it is still a mystery."

"Has Your Majesty formed any theory?" Hubert asked, after a few moments' hesitation.

"Only one—that Cataldi may have sought profit to himself."

Hubert Waldron nodded, but no word escaped him.

"But how can we prove it—how can we prove it?" the King said.

The Englishman shrugged his shoulders. He recollected that sum which had come to the Minister from a mysterious source a few days after the theft. But of that he made no mention to the King. It was, after all, no proof. Only a suspicion.

Therefore, after yet another half an hour, he made his adieu, bowed as he backed out of the room, and then walked home full of gravest reflections.

That same evening he had promised to see off at the station by the Milan express two English ladies who had been guests of Lady Cathcart at the Embassy, and this he did, driving in the car with them, for the Ambassador himself had to be present at an official dinner given by the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

He had bidden the two ladies farewell and the train had moved out of the station upon its long, northward journey when, just as he was about to enter the Ambassador's car, standing in the piazza, he caught sight of a familiar face—that of Henri Pujalet.

"Hallo?" he cried. "Why—you in Rome?"

"Yes. I arrived only this afternoon," responded Her Highness's lover, halting and putting out his hand. He was well-dressed, though there seemed to have been some slight attempt to disguise his features. "Mademoiselle does not know I am here," he added, "so if you see her, please do not mention this meeting. I shall not see her until the day after to-morrow—when we have an appointment to meet."

"Very well," laughed Waldron, though, truth to tell, he was consumed by jealousy. Then in reply to a question he told Waldron that he was staying at the Hôtel de Russie, out by the Porta del Popolo, to which place Hubert gave him a lift, afterwards bidding him good evening and driving back to the Embassy.

What further indiscretion, he wondered, was Lola about to commit.

His heart was bursting with unspoken love. Night after night he lay and thought of her in wonder. Though she was in ignorance of it, she was his all-in-all. Since he had been in Rome he had danced attendance upon many women, as it was his duty as diplomat to do; he had laughed and flirted, and danced and gossiped, and kissed many a woman's hand, but in his heart he held them all in supreme indifference. His eyes and heart were only gladdened when Her Royal Highness, the scandalously skittish and unconventional, chanced to be present. This was fortunately often the case, and frequently he found himself in cosy corners or in conservatories with her as she whispered merrily behind her fan.

This Frenchman, Pujalet, still knew her by the name she had used in her incognita in Egypt—Lola Duprez. Where, he wondered, would they hold their secret meeting?

He bit his lip in mad jealousy as there arose before his eyes a vision of that far-off oasis of dark palms, the steely sky with the bright stars shining, and of two figures clasped breast to breast.

Peters, as he entered his room, placed the evening paper before him.

Taking it up mechanically he saw a heading: “Boots for the Army,” and read as follows:

“It has just transpired, telegraphs our Berlin correspondent, that the tender for the supply of all boots to the Italian Army for the next three years has been secured by the well-known firm of Steinberg and Klein, of Friedenau, near Berlin. It will be remembered that last year they also secured the contract for supplying tinned meats and leather accoutrements for the expedition to Tripoli. The contract was signed by His Excellency General Cataldi some weeks ago, but has not been made public until to-day. The prices quoted by the English and French firms were lower, but His Excellency, after various tests, decided that the quality of the goods offered by the German firm was distinctly better.”

Waldron, with bitter words upon his lips, cast the journal from him viciously.

A letter he opened was from Beatriz, dated from Moscow. She was having a brilliant success at the Opera there, she said. When could they meet?

He tore it into small fragments and cast it into the wastepaper-basket. All thought of the handsome dancer who had used him merely as a stepping-stone to fame had now passed from him. He only remembered her with a feeling of poignant bitterness.

Upon the mantelshelf a large, imposing card of invitation caught his eye. Peters sorted them out, and day by day placed them in that conspicuous spot so that he might be reminded of his engagements.

The presence of the Honourable Hubert Waldron, M.V.O., was requested that night by His Excellency General Cataldi at an official reception at the Ministry of War.

He smiled. Cataldi, the unscrupulous, corrupt member of the Cabinet, who was feathering his nest so comfortably, had, perhaps, hired those two assassins to take his life. And he was invited to his reception. The situation was not without its grim humour.

Yes, he would go. He would watch further this man who was providing the brave, patriotic sons of Italy with uneatable beef and unwearable boots, in order that the Countess Cioni should be provided with funds.

He rung up Pucci on the telephone, telling him where he was going.

“You have entrée to the Ministry, Pucci, have you not?”

He heard the detective reply in the affirmative.

“I may want you. So go there.”

“I cannot go as guest, signore,” came the reply. “I will arrange, if you wish, to be on duty as a servant.”

“Good. And be as near His Excellency’s private room as possible. I will meet you there at midnight and give you instructions. The reception is at eleven—after the banquet at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His Majesty will, no doubt, be there, and other members of the Royal Family.”

“*Benissimo, signore*, I shall be in the corridor at midnight, acting as waiter.”

Then Hubert rang off, and passing into his bedroom, got into uniform with the aid of the queer, under-sized, hunch-backed little man who, for so many years, had been his faithful servant, and whose father before him had been valet to Hubert’s father.

At eleven o’clock Waldron stood before the long cheval glass arranging his tight uniform collar. Then he placed his decorations exactly at the right angle, settled the hang of his pearl-handled diplomatic sword, and took his white gloves from Peters’ hand.

His face was dark and clouded. On the one hand he had no desire to meet the corrupt Minister who was bringing disaster and defeat upon his country, while on the other he knew that his Chief expected him to turn up there and be on show, as is the duty of those attached to the Embassies.

His Majesty, too, would be there. What, in face of those words of his concerning His Excellency, could he think? Truly, the head upon which

lies a crown must, indeed, be very weary. How little does the general public know of that narrow, glittering, fevered world which, in every capital, surrounds a throne—that world where place-seekers intrigue, where money brings power, where morality is so often scoffed at as antiquated and out-of-date, and where the true, honest love of man and woman is forbidden because of rank and blood.

How little do the readers of our daily Press ever dream of the many bitter romances of love that are to-day being enacted beneath the shadows of the thrones of Europe, for the social columns tell nothing save what those mentioned desire that the world shall know, while the scandals which find their way into print are only the sordid ones. How little, indeed, do the public dream of the hearts which lie broken near the thrones of Europe, of the mad passion, of the steel fetters of royalty, or of the true, honest affection of those beyond the pale. It is only when there is a morganatic marriage, or when a Prince or Princess of the blood-royal renounces their royal rights that that public pause for a second to reflect. And then, alas! they too often put it down to mental derangement.

But the public are in ignorance of the world behind the walls of the royal palace, the pomp, the splendour, the officialdom, and, alas! the constant intrigue.

Only those in the immediate entourage of the Sovereign and the diplomat know the truth. And, after all, it is that little fevered world of its own which rules the greater world outside. And so the Powers of Europe struggle on, one against the other, for wealth and supremacy.

At eleven o’clock Hubert Waldron’s taxi drove into the great courtyard of the Ministry of War, that huge, handsome building at the other end of the Via Venti Settembre to where the British Embassy was situated.

As he descended, the sentries, noticing his uniform, saluted, and returning their salute, he entered the great vestibule, threw his cloak to one of the gorgeously dressed flunkeys, and with his cocked hat tucked beneath his arm made his way up the great red-carpeted staircase to the first floor where the reception was being held.

As he went up he could hear the tuneful strains of dance music being

played above by one of the military bands, bright military uniforms were everywhere, the place, usually so dark and sombre, had been adorned by flowers and palms, and was now brilliantly lit by festoons of coloured electric lamps.

Italy, *par excellence* the country of the British tourist, has its charm even in its officialdom.

At the top of the staircase stood the Minister himself, His Excellency General Cataldi, resplendent in his brilliant, gold-laced uniform, glittering with decorations, saluting as he received his guests.

Hubert smiled bitterly within himself. He recollected that last occasion when, after travelling many miles, he had seen him driving to the Univers at Tours, and remembered the subsequent conversation when he had accepted the bribe to place brown-paper boots upon the feet of the Italian Army.

He saw that His Excellency wished to behave with great cordiality as he passed. But he merely drew himself up, saluted, and passed on along the corridor.

A second later he found himself face to face with the detective, Pucci, who, in plain evening-clothes as a waiter, came up and bowed, and then, with darkly knit brows, motioned that he desired most anxiously to speak with him.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Reveals an Intrigue.

Hubert Waldron, a smart figure in his diplomatic uniform, strolled along the corridor, followed at a respectable distance by the neatly-dressed waiter until, at a convenient point, the diplomat halted at the junction of two corridors, as though in doubt. Pucci was at his side in an instant.

“I learnt only half an hour ago, signore, that there is a plot against you!” he said. “Signor Ghelardi is your enemy. You were attacked by the two assassins whom he bribed, but the conspiracy failed. Be careful. Exercise the greatest caution, signore—I beg of you.”

“This is not news to me, Pucci,” replied the diplomat, pretending to button his white glove. “I am keeping observation upon His Excellency the Minister, so be near me to-night, and keep a sharp look-out. It is in the personal interests of His Majesty. Is he here?”

“*Si, signore*. He arrived a quarter of an hour ago. I saluted him and he recognised me—even in this garb. His Majesty never forgets the faces of those whose duty it is to be his personal guardians.”

“All right, Pucci. Be near in case I require you—I trust you.”

“*Bene, signore*. I shall be there if you want me, never fear,” was the reply; of the faithful police agent.

And then the British diplomat strolled up the corridor, leaving the waiter to bustle along in the opposite direction.

Pucci was full of resource. He had been attracted to Hubert Waldron because he had seen that he was a fine, strong character, a man of high ideals, of dogged courage, and of British bull-dog perseverance. Waldron, of the stock that had made the Empire what it is, commanded respect. He was a man of action and of honour. Though clever, far-seeing, and with a keen scent for mystery, yet he was honest, upright, and once he made a friend that friend was his for always. His only fault

was that he was too generous towards his friends, or to those who were in want. He would give his last half-sovereign to anyone who told him a tale of poverty.

In this connection he had often been imposed upon. He knew it, but always declared that, after all, he might have done one really charitable action, though others who had told their stories were impostors.

Like most men possessed of keen wits, he had been very badly imposed upon at times. Yet often and often, by his sympathetic feelings, he had spent the greater part of his pay in the relief of real cases of distress.

The Waldrons had ever been charitable, for they were always English gentlemen in the truest sense of the word.

In the great Council Chamber with the huge crystal chandeliers, where the walls were hung with the ancient tapestries brought from the Palazzo Communale at Siena—the chamber in which the sittings of the Council of Defence were held, and where the lost plans had been discussed—the King stood, the brilliant, imposing centre of His Excellency's guests.

The assembly was a somewhat mixed one, though mainly military, and uniforms of every description were there, while every second man wore decorations of one kind or another. The ladies were mostly wives of high officers of State, of prefects and of military men. Yet there was also the usual sprinkling of wives and daughters of deputies and senators. Monte Citorio is always much in evidence in every public function in Italy.

Twice each year was the great imposing Ministry of War—or at least the public portion of it—thronged with officials from every corner of the kingdom, for His Excellency, General Cataldi, sent invitations broadcast, as he found it a cheap way of returning the hospitality daily offered to him—especially as the entertainment was paid for out of the public purse.

Waldron, on entering the Council Chamber, made his bow before His Majesty, and then, after nodding acquaintance with many persons he knew, crossed to where the Princess Luisa was standing in conversation with a stout old General, the commandant on the Alpine frontier. He bowed over her hand, and then all three began to chatter, while a few moments later the secretary, Lambarini, approached and found the little

group.

Presently Lola, who was wearing a beautiful gown of pale carnation pink, and who looked inexpressibly sweet as she smiled, bent and whispered to Hubert:

“We had better not be seen together to-night, I think. Let us meet to-morrow at noon, out at Frascati, as before. I must see you. It is most important.”

“Good,” he replied. “That is an appointment,” and bending over her hand he passed across the great apartment, and was soon laughing merrily with Suderman, secretary of the Swedish Embassy.

He was rather annoyed that Lola—whom he had come there expressly to meet—should have ordered him to remain apart from her. What, he wondered, did she fear?

When in her presence, the world was, to him, full of bright gladness, but when they were apart, he only moped in silence and despair.

Did she know the truth, he wondered. Had she, by her woman’s keen, natural intuition, discovered that he loved her—that he was hers, body and soul?

Though he laughed lightly with the tall, fair-haired Swede at his side, his thoughtful eyes were still upon her, full of supreme admiration. And once she glanced furtively at him, as though in fear, it seemed, and then he saw her accompany the fat old General out into the ante-chamber adjoining.

For half an hour, or more, he remained talking with men and women he knew—the same old weary chatter of which the diplomat serving his country abroad grows so unutterably tired.

Who, of all that gay throng save His Majesty himself, dreamed of the sharp-edged sword of war suspended above them? Who knew of the black peril which threatened the fair land of Italy, or of the carefully prepared plot which her enemies in Vienna had prepared against her.

As Waldron stood chatting with a stout woman in black—the wife of one of the great Hebrew financiers of Genoa, he saw His Excellency enter and take his stand near the King, smiling serenely and bowing graciously to those about him—he, the man who was feeding the army upon tinned meat that had been rejected by the German authorities, and who signed contracts in return for bundles of bank-notes. Ah! what a world is ours!

But alas! is there not corruption in every Ministry of every European Power. What contractor to-day can hope to do a legitimate business without placing apart a sum for palm-oil? Disguise it as you will, business morality is in these days of grab and get-rich-quick, at a very low ebb, for too often, alas! honesty spells bankruptcy.

A pretty young Countess was talking with Hubert as he stood watching His Excellency. Was the General, he wondered, the man who had hired the two ruffians, Merlo and Fiola, to make that murderous attack upon him? Or was it Ghelardi, as the detective, Pucci, had that night declared.

Was it possible that the Chief of Secret Police had now found out the strenuous efforts he was making towards the elucidation of the problem of the stolen plans, and in consequence his jealousy had been aroused.

Of which theory to accept he was utterly undecided.

He was listening to the pretty woman's inane chatter, hardly aware of what she said. His mind was far too full of the grave peril of the international situation.

Suddenly his eyes wandered around to find Lambarini. He was there a few moments before, but he seemed to have left and passed into one or other of the ante-rooms. A point had arisen in his mind regarding the plans earlier that evening, and upon it he wished to ask him a question.

The Council Chamber was now hot and stifling, and the mingled odours of the chiffons of the women nauseated him. He would have preferred to be in the quiet comfort of his own rooms, now that Lola had sent him away. Yet was not his duty to be seen at that official reception?

Dawson, the British military attaché, conspicuous in his Guards' uniform, came up to him, saying in a low voice:

“Hallo, Hubert, you look a bit bored, my dear boy. So am I. Couldn’t we clear out, do you think? I’m going to play bridge down at the club. Come?”

“Not to-night, old chap,” Hubert answered. “I shall stay another quarter of an hour, and then toddle home.”

“Sure you won’t—eh?”

“No, not to-night. I’m tired.”

“Right-ho! Good night,” answered the attaché cheerily, and was next moment lost in the crowd. Waldron pushed his way through the throng into the ante-chamber, vainly searching for Lambarini. Pironti, the unscrupulous secretary of the Minister was there, surrounded by women —wives of officers and others who hoped to secure the man’s good graces to procure better appointments for their husbands. In the army it was openly declared that Pironti was necessary in order to secure His Excellency’s ear, and many a man had been passed over his superior’s heads and given lucrative jobs because Pironti’s palm had been crossed by a few bank-notes.

Presently, tired to death of the incessant laughter and chatter, Hubert left by a door which he knew led to a long corridor, which ended with a flight of stairs to the first floor.

On the nights of Ministerial receptions the sentries had orders to allow guests to pass without hindrance and unchallenged throughout the building, therefore, as Hubert ascended the stairs the soldier stood at attention.

Above, was another wide corridor leading right round the first floor to where was situated General Cataldi’s private cabinet in the centre of the huge, handsome pile overlooking the broad Via Venti Settembre.

To that part of the building few of the guests penetrated, save perhaps some officials who took their wives to see the fine suite of rooms occupied by His Excellency the Minister.

Hubert was still in search of Lambarini, and was wondering if he had

gone in that direction.

At some distance down the corridor from the door of His Excellency's private cabinet two sentries, their duties relaxed that night, stood at ease chatting, but as Hubert passed they drew themselves to attention, while around a corner from another corridor which ran at right angles a waiter with a silver salver in his hand hurried by.

The man's face struck Waldron as peculiarly familiar, yet he saw it only for a second, as the man seemed in a great hurry.

It was not Pucci, for he had not seen him since he had first entered the building.

Hubert halted and looked after the receding figure, much puzzled. His clothes did not fit him, for the tails of his dress-coat were too long, and the trousers also were too big. Apparently, he seemed of middle-age, with a short moustache turning slightly grey, yet in his eyes, in that brief second when their glance had met, there was an expression that was familiar.

"Who can he be?" murmured Hubert to himself. "I know him. But for the life of me I can't recollect where we've met before."

The man who travels comes frequently across familiar waiters in all sorts of out-of-the-way places. Therefore, after reflection, he came to the conclusion that it must be a man who had served him somewhere or other in the past.

And he went forward to His Excellency's rooms—that room wherein, on the last occasion, he had discussed the stolen plans with Cataldi and the two secretaries.

No one was nigh. The sentry still stood gossiping at the other end of the corridor. He would enter and have yet another look at that big safe which had been so mysteriously opened, though no one appeared to have entered there.

He turned the handle of the big door of polished mahogany. It yielded noiselessly, and pushing it open, he stood upon the thick, Oriental carpet

in the too familiar room.

He halted upon the threshold, scarce believing his own eyes.

Before the Minister’s safe—the same one from which the plans had been stolen—stood a woman—Lola!

The safe door stood open, and as he looked he watched her abstract an envelope, which she folded hurriedly with nervous hands and thrust into the breast of her gown, at the same time producing a similar envelope which she put in the place of the one she had stolen.

So noiselessly had he entered that she was all unconscious of his presence.

His heart gave a great bound and he held his breath. His senses were frozen by the amazing and horrifying discovery.

With staring eyes he watched her breathlessly, as with hurried hands she closed the heavy safe door, turned the small key twice and then slipped it into her long white glove, at the same time crushing the stolen envelope deeper down into the breast of her low-cut dress.

For a second she remained motionless. Then she tried the safe door in order to reassure herself that it was securely locked, and turned to leave.

But as she did so a low cry escaped her hard, white lips.

She found herself face to face with Hubert Waldron.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

The Eyewitness.

“Princess!”

“You!” she gasped, staring at him, her face white as death, and clutching at the back of a chair for support.

“Yes. I see now why you were so anxious that I should not remain in your company this evening,” he said in bitter reproach.

“Then—*then you know*!” she cried. “You—*you saw me*!”

“Yes. I have been watching you, and I can only say that I am surprised to find you tampering with His Excellency’s safe!” he said in a low, hard tone, while, as ill-luck would have it, old Ghelardi, in uniform, with a glittering star upon his coat, entered the room just at that moment and overheard part of the diplomat’s words.

“Ah!” said the crafty Chief of Secret Police, affecting not to have overheard anything. “Ah! these assignations—eh?”

She raised her hand towards him in a quick gesture, but from her glove, there fell the small key.

Ghelardi stooped and picked it up.

“Hallo!” he exclaimed, “what does this mean, Your Highness? A safe key!”

The unhappy girl, white as death, nodded in the affirmative.

The white-haired official stepped across, drew the brass cover aside from the keyhole, and tried the key. It yielded.

“And may I ask Your Royal Highness why I find you here, in His Excellency’s room, with a key to his private safe wherein, I believe, many secrets of our defences are kept?” he asked of her.

“I refuse to answer you, Signor Commendatore,” was her bold reply, as she drew herself up and faced him. “You have no right to question me. I shall answer only to His Majesty for what I have done.”

This bold declaration took Hubert aback.

“Very well,” replied the old man, pocketing the key and smiling that strange, cunning smile of his. “Your Highness shall be compelled to answer to him—and without very much delay.”

And he turned on his heel and without a word left the room.

“Ah! Mr Waldron,” she cried, wringing her hands, “what must you think of me? I know I have acted very foolishly—that I am mad—that I—”

“Hush, Princess!” he said, his heart full of sympathy for her in her wild distress. “You have acted wrongly, it is true—very, very wrongly. Yet I am still your friend. I will see you safely out of this impasse—if you will only allow me. What is that document you have abstracted from the safe?”

She made no response, but placing her hand within her breast she very slowly drew it out and handed it to him.

Without opening the envelope he placed it in his pocket. Then taking her hand, he looked long and earnestly into her face and said:

“You had better return to the Palace at once, Lola. You are not well. Leave me to settle matters with Ghelardi.”

“But he will tell the King!” she gasped, wringing her hands in despair. “What can I say—how shall I explain?”

“Leave all to me,” he urged. “But before you go, tell me one thing. Why is Henri Pujalet in Rome?”

“No, no!” she shrieked, “do not mention his name. I—ah! no—do not torture me, I beg of you!” she went on wildly. “Hate me—denounce me as a spy, if you will—revile my memory if you wish—but do not taunt me with the name of that man.”

“I will see you to your carriage. Come,” he urged simply.

She struggled to calm herself, placing her gloved hand upon her beating heart, while the Englishman laid his hand tenderly upon her shoulder in deepest sympathy.

At first he had been horrified at discovering the bitter, amazing truth. But horror had now been succeeded by poignant regret and a determination to suppress, if possible, what must be, if divulged by Ghelardi, as no doubt it would—a most terrible national scandal.

While they were standing together, a Colonel of Artillery and two ladies entered, the former showing them the private cabinet of the head of the War Department. The women recognised the Princess by the decoration she wore at the edge of her bodice, and bowed low and awkwardly before her as she passed out, followed by Hubert.

With hurried steps he conducted her to the main entrance, and at once sent a servant for one of the royal automobiles, saying that Her Royal Highness was not well.

Together they waited in an ante-room almost without speaking. She seemed too nervous and overwrought.

“I trust you, Mr Waldron,” she said suddenly, looking up into his face. “Yet—ah! what can you think of me! How you must scorn and despise me! But—but I hope you will not misjudge me—that—you will make allowances for me—a girl—a very foolish girl?”

“Do not let us discuss that now,” he hastened to reply in a low, hard voice, for he never knew until that moment how mad was his affection for her.

And just then one of the royal flunkeys entered, bowing, to announce that the car was awaiting Her Royal Highness.

Their hands clasped in silence, and she walked out through a line of obsequious servants and down the flight of steps to the royal car.

As she went out a waiter stood behind the line of soldiers drawn up in the

great vestibule, watching intently. Unobserved he had followed the pair when they had emerged from His Excellency's private cabinet, and his shrewd eyes had noticed something amiss.

He was the same man who had passed Hubert earlier in the evening and whose face had so puzzled him.

The Englishman, after the royal car had driven away, turned and made his way back in search of Ghelardi.

The discovery held him utterly confounded. What secret was contained in that envelope she had stolen? Why had she a key to the Minister's safe?

As he walked back, his mind tortured by a thousand strange thoughts and curious theories, the mysterious waiter followed him at a respectable distance, watching.

Hubert was wondering what had become of Pucci whom he ordered to be near him, and whom he had not seen the whole evening.

He gained the door of His Excellency's room just as the Chief of Secret Police returned along the corridor.

"I have been endeavouring to discover His Excellency, but, unfortunately, I cannot find him anywhere," the old man said. "We will open the safe and see what has been taken. It is utterly astounding to me that the Princess Luisa should be revealed as a spy."

"I do not think we should condemn her yet," urged Waldron. "There may be some explanation."

"Explanation! What explanation can there be of a woman who takes advantage of a reception, when the sentries are relaxed, to creep up here, open the safe with a false key, and abstract documents."

"I cannot see the motive," declared Waldron.

"Ah! but I do. I and my agents have been watching for weeks," he replied, and crossing to the safe he placed the key in the lock and again opened it.

Many formidable bundles of documents were disclosed, lying within, together with the thin envelope with which Lola had replaced the one she had taken.

Waldon took it up and turned it over with curiosity. Then, deliberately tearing it open, he pulled out its contents.

It was, he found to his dismay, only a blank piece of tracing paper!

“Ah! that is what she has placed here, after taking out a similar envelope, I suppose,” snapped the keen-eyed old man, grasping the situation in a moment. “I have suspected this all along—ever since those fortress plans so mysteriously disappeared. And now she has taken another document. I was foolish to allow her to leave with you.”

“The document—or whatever it is—is in my safe keeping.”

“You have it!” he cried quickly. “Please hand it to me.”

“I shall do no such thing, Commendatore,” was Hubert’s defiant reply.

“It is a secret of State, and you, as a foreigner, have no right to its possession!”

“It has been given to me for safety, and I shall hand it over to His Majesty, and to him alone.”

“Signor Waldron, I demand it,” the old man said angrily, raising his voice as he flung the safe door to with a clang and re-locked it. “I demand it—in the name of His Majesty!”

“And I refuse.”

“You defy me then?”

“Yes, I defy you, signore,” he replied firmly, his dark eyes fixed upon those of the crafty official.

“You are Her Highness’s lover. When the King is made aware of that fact he will show you little graciousness, I assure you,” said Ghelardi with a

dry laugh.

“But you will remain silent upon that point, just as you will remain silent regarding what we have discovered to-night,” the Englishman said slowly. “No scandal must attach to the Princess’s name, remember.”

“Of course you wish to shield her—for your own ends. She is the spy for whom we have been searching all these weeks. It is she who placed in the hands of the our enemies the truth concerning the new fortifications along the northern frontier.”

“I refuse to discuss that point,” replied Hubert very coldly, but firmly. “One thing alone I demand of you, and that is silence—silence most absolute and profound.”

“It is my duty to inform the King of the whole circumstances.”

“True, it may be your duty, but it is one that you will not perform, Signor Ghelardi. Think of the terrible scandal throughout Europe if the Press got wind of it! And they must do—if you report officially, and it comes to the ears of His Excellency the Minister. The latter hates the Princess, because she accidentally snubbed the Countess Cioni at the ball at the Palazzo Ginori last week.”

“That is no affair of mine. Women’s jealousies do not concern me in the least. I am charged with the safety of the State against foreign espionage.”

“Well—in this case you’ve discovered the truth accidentally,” responded the diplomat, “and having done so, if you respect your Sovereign and his family, you will say nothing. Further, we may, if we remain silent, be able to obtain more information from Her Highness as to the identity of the person into whose hands the plans fell.”

“She abstracted them, without a doubt, for she had this duplicate key of the safe,” the old man declared.

“You will say nothing, I command you.”

“You! How can you impose silence upon me, pray?” he demanded

fiercely. “You are a foreigner, and you are holding a State secret.”

“I shall hold it at present for safe keeping.”

“Then I shall go straight to the King and lay the whole matter before him.”

“You threatened to do a similar action before,” said the other very quietly. “I repeat my warning—that silence is best.”

“Then I tell you frankly that I refuse to heed your warning. It is my duty to my Sovereign to tell him the truth.”

“Very well—go to him and tell him—at your own peril.”

“Peril!” he echoed. “What peril?”

“The peril at which I have already hinted, Signor Ghelardi,” he answered in a low, hard voice. “Do you wish me to be more explicit? Well—there is in a village called Wroxham, in Norfolk, a mystery—the murder of a man named Arthur Benyon, a British naval officer—which has never yet been cleared up. One man can clear it up—an eyewitness who is, fortunately, still alive and who knows you. And if it is cleared up, then you, Luigi Ghelardi—who at the time occupied the office of Chief of the German Secret Service, and was directing the operation of the horde of spies who are still infesting East Anglia, will be confronted with certain very awkward questions.”

The old man’s face went livid. He started at Waldron’s words, and his bony fingers clenched themselves into the palms.

“Shall I say more?” asked the Englishman, after a brief pause, his eyes fixed upon the crafty chief of spies. “Shall I explain how Arthur Benyon, an agent of the British Intelligence Department, was attacked one summer night after sailing on the Norfolk Broads, being shot in cold blood, and his body flung into the river—how the revolver was thrown in after him, and how, half an hour later, a man, dusty and breathless, gained a car that had been waiting for him and drove through the night up to London. And the fugitive was yourself—Luigi Ghelardi!”

He paused.

“And shall I describe the hue and cry raised by the police: how at the inquest a man named James, employed on a wherry, made a queer statement that was not believed, and how you left London next day and returned to Germany? Shall I also describe to you what the eyewitness saw—and—”

“No!” cried the man hoarsely. “Enough! enough!”

“Then give me that safe key and remain silent. If not, I shall also do my duty and explain to the King those circumstances to which I have just referred.”

Ghelardi reluctantly drew the key from his pocket, and having handed it to the Englishman, passed to the door in silence, staring in horror at the man who had so unexpectedly levelled such a terrible accusation against him.

He knew that Hubert Waldron held all the honours in that game. In his eyes showed a wild, murderous look.

Yes, he would treat the man before him as he had treated the Englishman, Benyon—seal his lips as he had sealed his own—if only he dared!

But Hubert Waldron, his hand upon the hilt of his uniform-sword, only bowed as the other slowly passed out. He knew now the reason why those two men, Merlo and Fiola, had been bribed to encompass his end.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Reveals the Bondage.

On his return home Hubert sat at his table, and very carefully broke open the stolen envelope.

To his surprise, he found that it merely contained several pieces of tracing linen upon which were many lines, angles, and numbers, all of which were quite unintelligible.

There were four small sheets, each about twelve inches square and as far as he could make out, they related to certain plans—or else they were plans in themselves. The scale seemed very small; therefore, after a long examination, he came to the conclusion that they must form the key to other plans, and had been reduced purposely, so that they could not be used without considerable preparation.

If they formed a key, this, no doubt, would be done in order that no improper use might be made of them.

The four pieces of tracing linen were practically covered with cabalistic signs and numbers, short lines, long lines, and all sorts of carefully ruled angles at various degrees. Yet there was nothing whatever upon them to show what they were.

There, during the night, beneath his shaded reading-lamp he strove to puzzle out their import.

Upon one he discovered that the various calculations appeared to be heights in metres and centimetres, and certainly in another were measurements concerning reinforced concrete.

Suddenly a startling thought flashed across his mind. The plans of the new fortresses on the Austrian frontier had been stolen, but as far as he could gather no use had been made of them. True, the army of Austria-Hungary had been mobilised and was held in secret, hourly ready for attack. Yet no formal representations had been made from the Vienna

Foreign Office to Rome, and all inquiries had failed to establish that the reason of the secret mobilisation was actually due to the alleged act of war on the part of Italy.

Was it possible, therefore, that the plans stolen were worthless and conveyed nothing without that neatly executed key which lay spread on the blotting-pad before him? Would Her Highness, when she met him next day, reveal to him the truth?

For the present he had imposed silence upon his enemy, the crafty old Ghelardi. But how long would that last—how long before Italy, and indeed the whole of Europe, rang with the terrible scandal of a Royal House!

That night he locked away the envelope with its precious contents safely in his steel dispatch-box and still in his clothes, cast himself upon the bed to sleep. But it was already nearly five in the morning, and he failed even to close his eyes.

The discovery of Lola's treachery had utterly bewildered and unnerved him. Surely she could not want money—and the temptation of money alone makes the traitor. He loved her still. Yes, after that first revulsion of feeling at the moment when he had caught her in the very act it had become more than ever impressed upon him that by her sweetness and beauty she held him in her toils—that he loved her with a mad, profound passion, a deep and tender love, such as he had never before experienced, not even in the case of that brilliant-eyed Andalusian who had been so near dragging him down to his ruin.

Ay, he loved her, even though the bitter truth how stood revealed in all its naked hideousness. Yet, alas! he could not tell her of his love. No. He dare not! Between them there existed a wide barrier of birth that was of necessity unsurmountable. She, a princess of the blood-royal, could never be permitted to marry a mere diplomat, any more than she could marry the man to whom she had given her heart, Henri Pujalet.

Thoughts of the latter brought reflections that he was in Rome. That fact was very curious, to say the least.

Had not the Frenchman urged him to keep his presence a secret from Lola? Why? He had, he said, arranged to meet her.

Feelings of the most intense jealousy and hatred arose within Hubert's heart, for did he not remember that passionate love-scene he had witnessed beneath the palms in far-off Wady Haifa.

At nine o'clock the telephone bell rang, and he replied to it.

It was Renata, Lola's maid, who explained that Her Highness would be unable to go out to Frascati, but would call upon him at noon—an appointment which he eagerly confirmed.

Just before eleven Waldron called upon General Cataldi and was shown at once into the Minister's private room.

Without much preliminary he said in Italian:

"I am anxious to know whether another document of very great importance has disappeared from Your Excellency's safe?"

The General looked at him keenly, in wonder at his meaning.

"I confess I scarcely follow you," he replied.

"Well, I have suspicion that, during the reception last night another valuable confidential document was abstracted—an envelope containing several sheets of tracing linen."

His Excellency, quickly taking the safe key attached to his watch-chain, rose eagerly and opened the big steel door.

"Yes," he gasped, turning pale, "it's gone! What do you know about it, signore?"

"No," laughed the Englishman; "this is not quite so serious, for though it was actually stolen last night I already have it safe in my possession."

"You!"

"Yes. I recovered it. But first please tell me to what the tracing refers."

"Why, to the plans of our new fortresses along the Austrian frontier," was

his prompt reply. “I doubt if they would be understood without that key. Pironti declares they would be valueless.”

“Then the same person who stole the key would have stolen the original plans—eh?”

“Without a doubt. Who was the thief? You know, signore! I can tell it from your face.”

“True, I do know, but at present Your Excellency must excuse me if I remain silent. I hope in His Majesty’s interest—indeed in the interest of the Italian nation to be able to avoid a scandal.”

“But surely you can tell me in confidence. Signor Waldron,” the General protested. “The plans disappeared and I know from my own personal observations that His Majesty held me in suspicion, as responsible for their safe keeping.”

“No suspicion can further attach to you, General Cataldi,” the Englishman assured him, “nor to your secretary. But I have called to ascertain exactly the nature of the key plans.”

“I am much relieved if suspicion has been lifted from my shoulders, signore,” was the General’s reply. “I know that both you and our friend, the Commendatore Ghelardi suspected that someone in the Ministry had connived at this act of espionage.”

“The theft has been committed by a person outside the Ministry.”

“Who—do tell me who, signore,” he cried eagerly.

“Not at present. I can say nothing. I am only here to obtain further information, so that I may make a complete report to His Majesty and explain of what assistance Your Excellency has been to me.”

The General—the man who had accepted bribes from every quarter—hesitated for a few seconds. This man whom he had hitherto regarded as his enemy was, he thought, evidently his friend, after all!

“The tracings of the key were purposely upon a smaller scale, so that

they would have to be enlarged by photography, or re-drawn, to be of any use," he said. "Three days ago they were examined by the Committee of National Defence in view of the theft of the plans themselves; my secretary placed them in the safe prior to being returned to the Department of Fortifications."

"Then I take it that the missing plans are quite useless to any outsider without the measurements and calculations upon the key?"

"That is so."

"You have never stated this before," remarked Waldron in surprise.

"No question has been put to me."

"But the plans were stolen and the consequences extremely grave."

"And Ghelardi has been in search of the thief. He is no friend of mine," said the General with an expressive smile.

"Hence you have not mentioned the key—eh?" His Excellency smiled again in the affirmative. "Then, if the key is safe, the plans are, after all, useless?"

"Exactly, Signor Waldron. Indeed I question whether a foreign Power could make out what new construction were intended—and certainly they could not—without the tracings you refer to—discover the strength of the armaments of the forts."

"Then that is all I require to know at present," Hubert said, and a few moments later, as Pironti entered, he took his leave.

At noon he was standing in his room when the crooked-backed Peters ushered in Her Royal Highness. She was dressed smartly, but neatly, in deep black, with a large hat which suited her admirably, though her face was white as paper.

"I was unable to go out to Frascati," she explained, as she put out her gloved hand to him. "So I thought it better to risk being seen and to call on you, Mr Waldron."

The door was closed and they stood alone.

His eyes were fixed upon her, and for some seconds he did not reply.

“Lola,” he said at last, “I—I really hardly know what to say. The whole affair of last night is too terrible for words.”

“I know, Mr Waldron. Ah! I—I feel that I cannot face you, for what excuse can I make? I have no excuse—none whatever.”

“But why in Heaven’s name have you betrayed your country—why have you placed yourself so utterly and entirely in the hands of your enemies?” he cried in blank dismay.

“Because—ah! because I have been compelled.”

“Compelled to hand Italy’s secrets over to the hands of her enemies?” he asked in bitter reproach.

“Yes. But, at the time, I was in ignorance of what I was doing—of the fateful consequences—until, alas! too late.”

“And then?”

“Then, when I realised what! Had done—when I knew that I had made such a terrible mistake, and, further, that you were in search of the thief, I became horrified. Ah! you do not know what I have suffered—how horrible, how awful it has all been; in what constant dread I have lived all these long months, forced as I was to betray my country which I love.”

“Forced—what do you mean?” he asked with a very grave look.

“I was forced, because I was utterly helpless,” she gasped, her gloved hand upon the back of a chair to steady herself. “Last night I failed, because—because of you, Mr Waldron, and that failure means to me but one thing—death—*death by my own hand*!”

He stared at her, starting at her strange words. “Why, what do you mean, Lola?” he asked quickly. “Are you really in your right senses that you should say this?”

“I tell you quite openly and frankly, that I have come this morning to see you, because of my promise of last night—but it is to see you for the last time. Now, when I leave you I shall go back, and before to-day is out, I shall have bidden farewell to you—and to all!”

“No, no. You are not yourself to-day,” he said. “You—a Royal Princess—contemplating suicide! It’s absurd! Think of the terrible scandal—of your family, of the Royal House.”

“The scandal would be greater, if I dared to live and face exposure.”

“But why face exposure?”

“There is no other way. Last night, just as I was within an ace of releasing myself from the terrible bondage, you entered and discovered the disgraceful truth. Ghelardi, too, knows it. He will tell His Majesty—for he hates both you and I, as you well know.”

“Your Highness may rest absolutely assured that he will say no word to the King—he dare not.”

“Dare not? Why? Ghelardi will dare anything.”

“He will not dare to utter a syllable regarding the events of last night,” said Waldron. “Therefore this affair remains between you and me.”

And he looked her straight in the face, much pained at that tragic interview.

“Be frank with me, Lola—do!” he urged after a moment’s pause. “Tell me the real truth, and I may yet be able to save the situation.”

“No,” she cried, wringing her hands frantically. “You cannot. I have come to bid you good-bye—you, my good friend. Ah! I have been too foolish; I have disregarded all good counsels, and have gone down—down to my death! Yet only; because I have loved. Had I not had the misfortune to have been born a princess I should have loved and been happy. But, alas! happiness is impossible for me, unfortunate as I am—only death—death!”

And she stood, her white nervous lips moving in silence, her fine eyes fixed straight before her as though looking into the Unknown, horrified, transfixed.

Chapter Thirty.

Mijoux Flobecq.

“Lola,” he cried at last, unable to stand the sight of her tears and despair, and equally unable to restrain—himself longer. “Lola! Let me help you—let me know the real facts, however ugly they may be—and I will get you out of this difficulty! I implore you to do this, because—ah! you force me to confess to you, though I have believed myself strong enough to preserve my secret—*because I love you*!”

She started quickly and drew back, staring at him in surprise through her tear-dimmed eyes.

“You!” she gasped.

“Yes,” he answered in a quick, low whisper, grasping her small hand in his. “I know that I have no right to speak to you thus, but I cannot hold my secret longer. My love for you is forbidden, and besides I know, alas! too well, that your affection is centred upon another—Henri Pujalet—the man who loves you.”

Mention of her lover’s name seemed to electrify her. She snatched away her hand, turned her head and ejaculated:

“No, no. Do not mention that man’s name, I beg of you?”

This caused Hubert considerable surprise. Was it actually possible that they had quarrelled? He recollected that Pujalet had told him that he had come to Rome to meet her.

“I regret, Lola, if I have annoyed you,” he said quickly in deep apology, “but the fact remains that I love only you—you, my love!”

“You have forgotten your Spanish dancer—eh?” she asked in a strange tone of reproach.

“I took your advice,” was his simple reply; “and in doing so I gradually

grew to love you, Princess, yet knowing that my affection could only bring me, a lonely man, grief, pain and despair."

She was silent. Her little, white-gloved hand was again in his, and he had raised it reverently to his lips.

Ah! that was to him a moment of extreme ecstasy, for her hand lay inert and he saw that though her head was turned to conceal her emotion, her chest heaved and fell convulsively. She was sobbing.

He placed his arm tenderly about her small waist, and slowly she turned her tear-stained face to his. Their gaze met, but no second glance was needed to show that the passionate affection was reciprocated, though it remained unspoken, unacknowledged.

For some moments he held her in his strong, manly embrace, and though no word passed between them their two hearts beat in unison.

Alas! it was but a false paradise. Yet are not our lives made up of such? And we, all of us, are prepared to sacrifice years of weariness and of grief for five brief minutes of sweet illusion.

He did not speak. He knew not what to say. The serious nature of that theft on the previous night he realised, alas! too well. Had that intricate key plan passed from her hand, then the whole truth would have been out, and Europe must have been suddenly aflame.

As it was, his duty remained towards her, to strive to stifle the scandal and prevent the story either reaching the King's ears or becoming public property.

Cataldi knew that the key had been stolen, and would probably inform His Majesty, in which case Hubert would be hastily summoned to audience and closely questioned.

In such circumstances what could he explain? Ay, what?

For fully five minutes the pair stood there motionless, save that with his hand he had softly stroked her cheek. Then, unable to repress the passion that arose within his bursting heart, he bent until his lips touched

hers in a fierce, passionate caress.

She turned her great, expressive eyes upon his, those eyes that were so deep and fathomless, and sighed heavily as he kissed her. Her beautiful head was thrown back, displaying her slim white throat, around which was a thin platinum chain from which was suspended a tiny platinum locket encrusted with diamonds, a gift of the Tzarina. She was inexpressibly sweet and refined, her soft beauty seeming the more perfect as she stood there inert in the man's strong arms.

Again his lips met hers. Then to his boundless joy he felt that, at the same instant she kissed him in return.

Yet next second, as though annoyed that she should have flung discretion to the winds, she gently disengaged herself from his embrace, saying in a low, pained voice:

"No, Hubert—I—I mean Mr Waldron—this is madness. I—we can never be anything but friends, alas! though I—"

She broke off short, and hot tears again filled her splendid eyes.

Then, covering her face suddenly with her hands, she burst into a fit of sobbing.

Hubert crossed and turned the key in the door in case Peters might enter.

Then, returning to her, he strove to comfort her. He implored her, with all the pleading he could summon, to reveal to him the whole story of the plans and the reason she had abstracted them.

But she gravely shook her head, and still preserved a resolute silence.

The man stood bewildered. He saw himself in a terrible quandary. Within a few hours the King might get to know, or Cataldi might inadvertently mention the mysterious theft of the key plan.

The Press—and more especially the scurrilous section of it on the Continent—has an ingenious way of ferreting out details regarding scandals which is gravely disconcerting to those who are trying to

suppress them.

Of his love Hubert Waldron made no further mention. Her mild reproof held him tongue-tied. He knew, alas! too well, the bitter truth of her simple remark. They could never be more than friends, for she must marry a Prince of the blood-royal. The pride of the Royal House of Savoy would never admit or sanction a morganatic marriage.

For fully another quarter of an hour she remained there. He saw, however, upon her face traces of tears, and when she grew calmer he opened the door of his room, into which she passed, and there bathed her eyes with eau-de-Cologne.

When she again emerged she was her old self, though still very pale and nervous, and just before one o'clock she drew on her long gloves and, taking up her blue, morocco hand-bag which bore the royal cipher in gold, bade him a low, half-whispered "*Addio*."

"Not farewell," he said, bending and kissing her hand. "Keep a stout heart, Lola. Do nothing rash. Act with great caution and discretion, and I, on my part, will do all I can to preserve silence." She shook her head despairingly.

"That does not remove the terrible stigma upon me," she said. "It does not remove my guilt!" And with those words upon her white lips she passed through the door which Hubert unlocked for her and down the stairs to the busy street; he following in silence.

In order not to attract notice she would not allow him to call a *vettura*, but preferred to walk. Therefore, slipping out of the door with another whispered adieu, she was instantly lost to his sight.

When he returned upstairs the telephone bell was ringing, and he responded.

He heard the detective, Pucci, speaking.

"You missed me, signore—eh?" he said cheerily, though the voice sounded far away. "I am at Orvieto—at the Hôtel Belle Arti—eighty miles from Rome. I could not communicate with you before leaving. Can you

come here? It is most important. I cannot leave."

"Neither can I," Waldron replied. "Why have you gone to the country?"

"I am keeping observation upon a friend of yours, signore."

"A friend of mine! Who?"

"The gentleman whom you spoke with at the station in Rome last night—a foreigner."

Waldron started. Could he mean Henn Pujalet?

"A Frenchman?"

"*Si, signore*. His behaviour was curious, therefore I came here with him. I have made a discovery. Will you come here? If you leave by the two-eighteen from Rome—the Milan express—you can be here soon after five. I would return to Rome but I have no one here whom I can trust to follow if he leaves," Pucci explained.

Waldron felt that in the circumstances to leave Rome was impossible—and yet on further reflection he saw that if the King summoned him to audience would it not be best to be absent from the capital and thus gain time for action? The brigadier, Pucci, was not a man ever to follow false scents. He must have discovered something gravely mysterious. Was it possible that he had found out that the elegant Frenchman was the lover of Princess Luisa!

He had only a few seconds to make up his mind. "Very well, Pucci. If you think it necessary I will leave by the train you mention. Meet me at the station."

"*Benissimo, signore*," answered the voice faintly dying away, as it does upon some trunk-telephone lines.

Waldron tried to question him further, when the querulous voice of the female clerk at the Exchange declared that the time was up, and promptly cut him off without further ceremony. Telephone operators are no respecters of persons, whether one Is in Paris, Pekin, Petersburg, or

Paddington.

Swallowing a sandwich at the station buffet, and travelling without luggage, Hubert Waldron entered a first-class compartment of the express, which that afternoon was well-filled by foreigners leaving Rome for the north—the reason being that the Roman season, now over, Society was making for Paris and London, as fast as it could. There is always a headlong rush at the end of the season, be it in Egypt, on the Riviera, from Algeria or from any French or German watering-place. It is always helter-skelter to the capitals, regardless of comfort or of expense, and the Compagnie des Wagons-lits reaps a rich harvest always.

The journey from Rome up the wooded valley of the winding Tiber, through a country rich in ruins of the ancient Etruscans, lay through the real heart of Italy, delightfully picturesque, yet for Hubert in his state of mind it held no attraction. He sat in the compartment together with two elderly Englishwomen of the quiet, *pension* type, and a young and rather foppish German student, impatient to meet the detective, and hear from him the result of his observations.

Orte, high up amid its most delightful surroundings, was passed at last, and then, after several stoppages—though the train was termed an express—Orvieto, situate upon the top of its steep rock was reached, a Gibraltar on land, an invulnerable fortress in the days of the Etruscan League, and in mediaeval times a great stronghold of the Guelphs, and often affording refuge to the Popes.

The station lay below the town, which latter was reached by a funicular railway through a long, dark tunnel beneath the fortress. And upon the platform, as the train ran in, Hubert discerned a rather insignificant-looking man in shabby black and somewhat down at heel—a man at whom no one would cast a second glance. It was the brigadier, Pucci.

Hubert descended and crossed towards him, but to his surprise the detective turned away and did not appear to recognise him.

Indeed Pucci hurried off quickly as though business had called him elsewhere, and ere the diplomat could approach he was already out of the station.

In a secluded corner, away from the view of other arriving passengers, the detective halted, saying with relief:

“*Madonna mia, signore*! That was a narrow escape of being detected.”

“Why?” inquired Hubert in surprise.

“Why, did you not see who arrived by the train with you?”

“No,” replied the Englishman. “I was not watching.”

“Her Royal Highness the Princess Luisa alighted from your train.”

“Her Highness?” he gasped utterly dumbfounded.

“Yes; but I hope she has not seen you,” Pucci remarked dubiously.

“Then Pujalet is here—still at the hotel,” said Hubert, for he at once realised the object of Lola’s visit there.

“*Si, signore*. Presently I will tell you what I have by the merest chance discovered,” Pucci replied. “But we must be extremely wary—or the Princess may see us. She is evidently on her way to the hotel to meet your friend the Frenchman. We will let her go, and follow quickly afterwards. Last night a complot was afoot—some desperate plot—But my suspicions were aroused, and by some action of yours—I know not what—it was frustrated.”

“But what do you know, Pucci?” Hubert Waldron demanded breathlessly. “Tell me quickly.”

“I will tell you presently—after we have ascertained the motive of this journey of Her Highness,” replied the detective quietly. “Ah! I am glad you have come here, Signor Waldron. There is something in progress which is an entire mystery to me—something which I believe that you alone will be able to explain.”

“But you have said there was a plot which was frustrated last night. Of what was its nature?” The detective did not reply. His head was turned towards the roadway, which his quick eyes were watching intently.

“Her Highness has gone up to the hotel,” he said. “Let us hasten and watch. I will explain all later. Come—we have not time to lose. This fellow, Flobecq, is a very slippery customer.”

“Flobecq!” echoed Hubert Waldron, starting in amazement.

“Yes. His name is Flobecq, yet I suppose that is not the name by which you know him—eh?”

“Flobecq!” gasped Hubert Waldron. “You are dreaming. Surely that is not his name.”

“Yes, signore, I tell you it is. His name is Mijoux Flobecq!”

Chapter Thirty One.

The Bond Revealed.

“The whole affair last night was a complete fiasco, thanks to you!”

“I know it, alas!”

“And all through your infernal friendship with Waldron?”

“I cannot help it. I did my very best, Henri.”

“Your best!” sneered the Frenchman. “You actually allowed him to take the tracings from you when you already had them in your possession! Faugh! It is all too childish.”

“Childish!” Lola echoed in anger. “Ah, yes, I know. What affection have you now for me—you who declared that you were mine—that—”

“Love is out of the question,” the man replied brutally. “With me it is a matter of business. We must all live. You—a Royal Princess—are in no want. I, agent of the Foreign Office at Vienna, am in constant want of money. You gave me plans that were useless. I merely asked you to contrive to obtain for me the missing tracings.”

“In return for my letters to you!” she cried, in bitter reproach.

But the man merely laughed as he replied:

“Have I not told you, my dear Lola, it is with me purely a matter of finance, not of sentiment.” They were together in a small, plainly furnished sitting-room on the first floor of the mediaeval Palazzo Bisenzi, now occupied by the Hôtel Belle Arti, in ignorance that every word spoken could be overheard by the Englishman and his companion.

The two latter were listening intently at the door of an adjoining room—for in Italian hotels the communicating doors are always an invitation to the eavesdropper. The old place had frescoed walls and ceilings, and in

some rooms the floors were of marble.

“And because I have failed, you will carry out your disgraceful threat—eh? You told me so on the telephone this morning,” she asked in a low, nervous voice.

“You have failed purposely—because you did not intend that I should gain knowledge of that military secret. I know how strenuously active that English friend of yours has been in endeavouring to elucidate the mystery of the theft—and now, thanks to you, he has succeeded,” replied Mijoux Flobecq, *alias* Henri Pujalet, the well-known spy of Austria—the man to whom, though young, the authorities in Vienna had practically entrusted the direction of her wide network of spies across the face of Europe. So cleverly had he concealed his identity that even Ghelardi—the great Ghelardi, whose boast it was that he knew every secret agent of importance in Europe—had been utterly unaware that Henri Pujalet and Mijoux Flobecq were one and the same!

Hubert had long ago heard him spoken of as a man whose phenomenal successes in espionage had been most remarkable for their cleverness, ingenuity, and daring. The foreign policy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire had practically been based upon his reports—as that of Italy was based upon those of Luigi Ghelardi—and in every chancellerie in Europe the name of Flobecq was synonymous of all that was crafty, cunning, and unscrupulous.

The official head of Austria’s Secret Service was a stout and rather slow-speaking, plethoric man of middle-age, who had graduated under Azeff in Russia, and who was well-known to Ghelardi. But Mijoux Flobecq was a man of meteoric fame, a man who had recently come to be regarded in almost legendary light as one of the most remarkable of the unseen and unknown characters in European espionage.

There are several others, Bylandt of Berlin, Captain Hetherington of London, Gomez of Petersburg, and the mysterious and elusive Monsieur X. of the Quai D’Orsay. Diplomats know them by name, and are too well aware of their successes. But not one of them has ever been identified in the flesh.

Lola uttered a loud protest against the allegation that she had purposely played into the Englishman's hands, and then turned and reproached him bitterly for his heartless and brutal treatment.

"I have failed through no want of tact," she cried. "Was it not clearly to my own advantage to preserve my honour—now, alas! that you stand revealed in your true light—that I should act as you directed and become a thief?"

"You used the safe key I gave you with great success on the first occasion—"

"Because I was in ignorance of the terrible gravity of my action," she interrupted. "You told me that the plans were of no real consequence, but if you could obtain them it would put you in the good graces of your firm in Paris. You told me that your firm were Government contractors who were seeking to learn certain details in order that they might tender to our Ministry for the construction of the forts. I never dreamed the truth. I had no idea that you were Mijoux Flobecq, the spy of Austria! Not until three days after I had handed you the plans were my suspicions aroused by some remark which His Majesty dropped while speaking with General Cataldi after one of the State banquets. Then, making a few inquiries in secret, aided by my friend, Pietro Olivieri, I was horrified to discover the ghastly truth," she said. "I found that you—the man who had declared your profound love for me—had practised a most wicked deception. You had induced me to hand over one of the most important of our State secrets to our enemies in Vienna!"

"It was useless without the key," he remarked, quite unaffected by the bitterness of her reproach.

"I committed a theft for which others were suspected, because of my love for you," she went on in a low, hard tone. "You, as Henri Pujalet, had very cleverly led me to believe you had no idea that I was any other than Lola Duprez, niece of old Jules Gigleux of Paris. Yet you knew my real identity all the time! You had laid your plans cleverly, and made me believe that you spoke the truth when you swore undying devotion to me. For nearly nine months you made pretence to love me, and wrote me many letters, to which I naturally responded. Our stolen interviews took place in many

cities, but you had always one fixed idea—the coup which you would one day make with my assistance. At last, on that occasion when at midnight I met you on the road to Tivoli, you put before me a proposition. To save you from bankruptcy, and in order that your position might be assured with your firm in Paris, you begged me to obtain the plans of those frontier fortresses—to steal them! You had, it seemed, intimate inside knowledge of all the arrangements at our Ministry of War. You actually described the very portfolio in which they were kept, and knew the very hour at which they would be placed in the Minister's safe, to which you even gave me a duplicate key."

The man only laughed aloud at her chagrin.

"I now know how you had met General Cataldi at Biarritz, and had, by a clever ruse, taken a wax impression of his safe key, and how, indeed, for months you had been contemplating the theft, feeling certain that my love for you would be strong enough to induce me to fall your helpless victim. Well, I fell. Yes, I believed in you, Henri—believed that you really loved me. I sacrificed all for your sake. But it never crossed my mind that your love was only a hollow pretence, that you were fooling me with your soft-spoken speeches, and that you were the enemy of my country or a professional spy."

"You could have had me arrested," he laughed. "Why didn't you?"

"Ah, when I realised what I had done I begged you to return the plans I had stolen. Mr Waldron conveyed my imploring message to you in Brussels and what was your reply? That I must remain silent—that the key plan was wanted—and that if I did not consent to help you to obtain it you would hand over my letters to you for publication in the *Matin*!"

"That is exactly what I intend now to do," was his cold reply. "Our bargain was that I would return your letters on condition that you obtained the tracings of the key."

"I failed to do that," she cried frantically. "I was detected."

"By Waldron. Because you intended that you should be caught in the act, and thus prevented from carrying out your part of the contract."

“But surely you will give me back my letters!” she implored eagerly. “You will not hound me—a helpless girl—to death by my own hand! I could not bear the exposure, for the honour of my House.”

“You should have thought of all that before,” he laughed mockingly. “The bargain was fair enough, and you accepted readily.”

“Because I could not bear exposure. Think what the publication of those letters will mean to me. In them I have admitted committing a theft. I—a Royal Princess—have betrayed my own country?”

“You are not the first woman who has sacrificed her life for her love,” he answered, quite regardless of her emotion.

“But have you no pity for me, no remorse?” she cried in frantic despair.

“I repeat that, to me, this is not a matter of sentiment. All I required was the cipher key plan—which you actually had in your possession and gave up to Waldron. I was in the Ministry that night in the garb of a waiter. I watched him follow you into the Minister’s private cabinet, and I saw Ghelardi go in later. He came out, and presently you came out with Waldron. I followed you both down to the vestibule, but from your faces I knew that you had been discovered.”

“Yes, Mijoux Flobecq,” she cried in sudden defiance, “the game is up, and the honour of Italy is saved. The timely entry of Mr Waldron into that room has averted a European war!”

“And brought exposure and disaster upon yourself,” answered the man in harsh tones. “Within a week from to-day Europe will read in the Paris Press a most interesting correspondence which will reflect anything but honour upon the Royal House of Savoy.”

“Then you really intend to crush me, and send me to my death—eh?”

“I intend to act exactly as I have said,” was the fellow’s firm response. “When my mind is made up I never alter it.”

“So this is how you repay me for all my sacrifice for you—eh?” she asked with poignant bitterness, and a catch in her voice which was distinctly

audible by the two men listening.

“The brute,” whispered Waldron loudly to his companion. “He shall answer to me for this!”

“But I appeal to you,” she implored; “I—”

“It is useless. I gave you an excellent opportunity of recovering your letters, but you have not taken it. The bargain, I repeat, was a fair and straightforward one. You wanted your letters—I wanted the key plan. But —” and he hesitated as though a sudden suggestion had crossed his mind. “Just wait a few moments. I have forgotten something in my room. I will not be a minute or two—and then we can resume this highly interesting conversation.”

And the two men listening breathlessly heard the door open and shut, and then the silence was broken only by Lola’s low, despairing sobs within.

Chapter Thirty Two.

Through the Night.

A quarter of an hour passed, but the spy of Austria did not return.

Both Waldron and the detective stood in wonder near the door conversing in low whispers.

Nearly half an hour went by, and they could only hear Her Highness pacing the room in her mad despair. Yet Flobecq had not returned.

“Is it possible that he could have overheard my threat of vengeance!” exclaimed the Englishman to his companion. “Has he suspected that the conversation has been heard and left the hotel?”

“*Madonna mia*! He may have done, signore,” Pucci replied. “He is a most alert person.”

“Go out and make inquiry. I will remain here. He knows me.”

“He knows me also,” laughed the Italian. “I kept observation upon him once in Livorno, where he was conducting some negotiations regarding the purchase of plans of two of our battleships being built in Orlando’s yard. That is why I have recognised him. He scented danger on that occasion and fled.”

“Just as he has now done, I fear,” said Hubert. “Go quickly and make inquiries.”

Ten minutes later the brigadier re-entered and said excitedly:

“He’s gone! He had a motor-car awaiting him round in the Via del Duomo. It was a strange car, a long, grey, open one, they say. It had been waiting an hour. The chauffeur was a Frenchman. They left by the Porta Maggiore, and have evidently taken the direction of Bolsena. He took his hand-bag with him, and left a fifty-lire note for his hotel bill.”

“Then he must have overheard me!” gasped Waldron dismayed. “By Jove! he’s got away, and with the Princess’s letters in his possession. What bad luck!”

By this time, of course, Pucci was aware of the whole circumstances.

Hubert Waldron was a man of action. Without a second’s hesitation he rapped at the door of the next room, and confronting Lola, who almost fainted at his sudden and unexpected appearance, explained how he had followed her, and listened to the tragic story as revealed by her conversation with the notorious Mijoux Flobecq.

“Then you know, Mr Waldron! *You know all*!” she gasped, her face pale as death.

“Everything,” he answered hastily. They were alone together, for Pucci had gone out to hire a car. “But I have no time to lose. The spy has escaped us, and we must follow instantly if we are to be successful in preventing this exposure. Return at once to Rome, and behave just as though nothing whatever had happened. Trust in me, Lola,” he said, and looking straight into her eyes he took her small hand gently in his, and raised it in reverence to his lips.

“Yes,” she whispered in a low, intense voice. “You are my only friend, Mr Waldron. I will put my entire trust in you.”

“Then *addio*—for the present,” he said hastily. “I have not a second to spare. I will do all I can to save you from exposure and scandal, Lola. So remain calm, and leave all to me.”

“I do—I do,” she answered frantically. “Ah! what should I do at this moment without your kind aid?”

“No, no,” he protested, again bowing and kissing her hand in his courtly manner.

He dared not kiss her upon the lips, though he was sorely tempted.

“Au revoir,” he said. “Return to Rome as soon as ever you can, I beg of you. Fear nothing from either Ghelardi or this spy who has vanished.”

And he hurried out, down the wide stone stairs of the great prison-like old palace, a fortress in the days of the Cinquecento, but now turned into an *albergo*.

Pucci stood below. A car would be round in ten minutes—the best and most powerful he could obtain. But of hire cars in the remote town of Orvieto not much could be expected, therefore when half an hour later they found themselves speeding in the twilight through the hills and dales of the white, dusty road towards the Lake of Bolsena they were not surprised to find that the engine had a nasty knock, and its firing distinctly bad.

The chauffeur, a dark, beetle-browed young man of the debonair *giovanotto* type, had, however, entered fully into the spirit of the chase, and was travelling with all speed, following the tracks of Flobecq's car, which could be distinctly discerned in the thick white dust.

In the little town of Bolsena, beside the lake, they ascertained that a grey car had come swiftly through, and had turned to the right at the water's edge, taking the road which at the end of the lake branched in two directions, one leading westwards to the sea at Orbetello, forty-five miles or so as the crow flics, or about ninety by road, while the other led direct north, the highway to Siena and Firenze.

It had now grown too dark to see the tracks in the dust, therefore taking their head-lamps they made careful examination of the road, but, alas! upon both they saw motor tracks which seemed in that uncertain light to be exactly similar.

Truly Mijoux Flobecq was an elusive person.

In that, one of the wildest and most unfrequented parts of Italy, where even to-day the motorist is lucky if he is not stoned, and where the peasantry are uncouth and hardly civilised, a night journey was not at all inviting.

After a brief consultation they both agreed that the most probable intention of the fugitive—if his suspicions had been aroused, as was most likely—would be to go north, join the railway on the main line to Florence, and probably get out of the country immediately, carrying with him the

Princess’s letters.

The coup had failed, and Lola knowing him to be a spy, might reveal the truth. Flobecq was wary enough to foresee such an awkward eventuality. Hence his headlong flight, which had, no doubt, been cunningly arranged, as were all his rapid journeys.

Hubert was just about to mount into the car and continue northward along the straight, well-made road which ran first to Acquapendente and then to Radicofani—a village of bad repute on the top of a conical hill, where every car was stoned as it passed, the King’s included—when his quick ears caught a sound.

A motor cyclist was coming rapidly along the road leading westward.

As he approached Pucci hailed him, and he pulled up.

“Have you met a big, open, grey car half an hour or so ago?” the detective inquired of the young man, who seemed surprised at being thus stopped.

“Yes. It passed me just as I came out of Pitigliano village. At least I suppose it must have been the car you mention. The lights were out, and it was travelling very swiftly.”

“Going towards Orbetello—eh?”

“Yes. That is the only place it can reach. The road runs quite straight down the valley, and there are no branches until you get to the sea at Albegna.”

“He’s gone to Orbetello, no doubt,” Hubert exclaimed. “He will catch the express for Turin from there. We must make all haste possible.”

Then, thanking the motor cyclist for his information, the car was backed and turned, and soon they were tearing through the gathering darkness down a long, winding valley which echoed to the roar of their engine and the constant hoot of their horn.

Steep and dangerous was the road in many places, with a loose surface

and a number of sharp turns. The drive was a wild one, but if Flobecq was to be intercepted before he caught the night express for the frontier they would have to drive madly.

The beetle-browed chauffeur of Orvieto drove as he had never driven before, though Italians are noteworthy as dare-devil drivers. They passed through Pitigliano—where the cyclist had met the fugitive—and on again into the wild, dark mountains to Manciano, a remote place in the midst of high, barren precipices. Then, after a steep descent, they at last, after nearly two and a half hours, met a drover who confirmed the cyclist, and said that a motor without lights had gone past long ago, after nearly running him down.

The chase was, indeed, exciting.

The Englishman and his companion sat in the car full of eager anxiety. Once Flobecq gained the train at its stopping-place, Orbetello—that quaint old town on the Mediterranean shore—then he would escape, as without a warrant he could not be detained.

So they urged on the chauffeur, who now drove with all the nerve and daring he possessed. The night became thick and black with those dark, low clouds which in spring in Italy are so frequent, and herald a thunderstorm.

The storm came at last, just about eleven. The lightning flashed and the thunder rolled, echoing and reverberating along the valley where the road ran beside the rushing torrent on its way to the sea.

Then, after four hours of the most exciting drive that either man had experienced, they came to the junction of the Albegna River, and then out upon a broad road across a plain, straight toward the open sea.

After a further eighteen miles or so, a red light showed suddenly—the light of a level railway crossing. They had at last gained the main line which runs by the Maremme from Rome to Pisa—the main line to Genoa and Turin.

Passing the crossing, the gates closed behind them with a clang almost immediately, and then, the road ran parallel with the railway for many

miles towards ancient Orbetello with its ponderous walls and the sea.

Hubert bent, and striking a match with difficulty, looked at his watch. It wanted eighteen minutes to midnight.

He and his companion had on the way calculated that if they lost no time they could reach Orbetello, which was one of the stopping-places of the night express from Rome for Paris, just before the train was due to arrive.

Twice after leaving the mountains they had news of the car they were chasing, once from a shepherd and again from two mounted carabinieri. If they could reach Orbetello they might prevent Flobecq from leaving.

“We must not yet demand his arrest,” the Englishman said to the man at his side. “If we did then it would result in just the thing we are endeavouring to avoid—exposure!”

“No, signore. We must catch him up and keep in touch with him until you decide what action to take in Her Highness’s interests.”

The chauffeur, urged on by Hubert, drove with reckless speed, with the railway line always on their left, and now and then passing red and green, signals, and the small, lonely houses of the watchmen of the line.

Already in the far distance could be seen the lights of the little town out at the end of a promontory at the foot of the high, dark Monte Argentario, rising straight from the sea, a corner of Italy which no one ever visits, though it is on the direct sea road to Rome.

“At last!” cried Waldron excitedly, pointing out the lights.

“Yes, signore, that is Orbetello!” declared Pucci. “But see,” he added quickly. “See that single light on the left yonder! Is it not moving—coming towards us?”

Hubert strained his eyes in the direction which the detective pointed.

“By gad! yes. Why—why it’s a train. And it is coming towards us!” he gasped.

At that moment they passed a signal which fell, showing the line to be clear.

Both men sat silent, watching the rather dim but fast-approaching light.

Yes, assuredly it was a train which had stopped at Orbetello and was now on its way towards the north!

On it came swiftly, with a red glare showing from the furnace, until suddenly, with a bursting roar, it thundered past.

Hubert saw the two long sleeping-cars with their blinds closely drawn.

“It’s the express!” he cried, dismayed. “The Paris express! The spy has caught it—and escaped!”

Pucci said nothing. He sat silent, turning to watch the red tail-lamps as the express bore on its way and out of sight.

And until the car reached the railway station at Orbetello, theft dark and deserted, with lights turned down, no further word was uttered by either man.

Of a sleepy porter Hubert, as he dashed out of the car, made quick inquiry.

“*Si, signore*,” replied the man. “An open car drove up a few moments before the express came in, and a signore got out and bought a ticket for Turin, and left by the train. The car went away at once, away in the direction of Montalto and Rome.”

Hubert described the man Flobecq, and according to the porter the description fitted exactly.

After that the two men returned to the car and held consultation.

“The train is due in Turin about eleven to-morrow morning. We cannot reach there before three in the afternoon.”

“If the individual is making for France he will proceed at eleven-thirty, and

be across the frontier before we can reach Turin," Pucci remarked thoughtfully.

"Exactly. Our only plan is to have him met at Turin and followed, and a report sent to us at Turin as soon as he arrives at his destination. He may go on to Milan, and thence to Trieste and Vienna—who knows? We must therefore telephone to the Questore in Turin to send down a sharp detective to pick him up and travel with him. You, Pucci, must use your authority as brigadier of detective police and make the request to the Questore."

At once the detective called the porter and sent him for the stationmaster who, as soon as he ascertained the detective's position, opened the office and upon the telephone called up the central police bureau at Turin.

For fully half an hour there was no reply.

At last a voice responded, whereupon the detective at the instrument explained that he was Brigadier Pucci of the *brigade mobile* of Rome, that he was following a dangerous person named Flobecq, *alias* Pujalet, who was in the Paris express due at Turin at eleven next morning.

Then he made an urgent request that he should be met, and followed abroad if he attempted to leave Italy. Again there was a silence for ten minutes, while the request was placed before the detective superintendent on duty.

At last came the request for the description of the fugitive, and this Pucci gave slowly, with professional exactness, so that it could be taken down.

"He is a very clever and elusive person, and no doubt suspects he may be followed," Pucci added. "Therefore the greatest caution is necessary not to let him discover that observation is being kept. I am at Orbetello, and am coming on to Turin by the next train to report personally to the Questore."

The voice in return assured the detective that the fugitive would be met and watched by one of the shrewdest officers available.

“*Benissimo*! I shall arrive about three. Please tell the Questore that the matter is a strictly confidential one—a private inquiry instituted by the direction of His Majesty the King.”

“Your message shall be sent to the Questore to his home at once,” the voice replied, and their communication was interrupted.

Would they be successful in cutting off the spy’s retreat?

Suspecting that he would be followed, he might leave the train at Pisa and go on to Florence, and thence to Milan. Or again, at Genoa he might decide to continue along to Ventimiglia and thus across the frontier into France at that point.

Hubert pointed out these loopholes of escape, whereupon Pucci returned to the telephone and was presently speaking to the Commissary of Police at the station of Ventimiglia, giving him a description of the fugitive, and asking that he might be followed. And afterwards he spoke to the police officer at Pisa station, warning him in similar manner.

Thus all that they could do from that dark, lonely, obscure little town they did, yet Hubert’s thoughts were chiefly with Lola. He was wondering if she had yet returned to Rome.

The startling truth which he had learnt while listening to the conversation in Orvieto that evening had staggered him.

The spy, Flobecq, still held the trump card—those foolish declarations of affection and admissions of her guilt.

Truly the situation was most serious, for the honour of the Royal House of Savoy was at stake!

Chapter Thirty Three.

Spreading the Net.

At half-past three next day Hubert Waldron entered the private room of the Questore, or Chief of Police at Turin, where they found a rather elegant, brown-bearded man seated at his writing-table. He instantly recognised Pucci, and quick explanations ensued.

“The man you want duly arrived here,” said the official, “and was picked up by Cimino—whom I believe you know.”

“Certainly. He was with me in Genoa some years ago,” said Pucci.

“Well, all I know is, that the man Flobecq left by the Paris express just before noon, and Cimino is with him. I had a telephone message from you to the effect that His Majesty was making an inquiry. What is it about?” he asked, gazing from the detective to the Englishman.

“At present it is confidential,” replied Pucci, rather lamely. And then he introduced Waldron as a foreign diplomat, and explained that the matter concerned diplomacy, and that the King desired the affair to be kept entirely secret.

The curiosity of the bearded official was at once curbed. Cigarettes were lit by all three, and the Questore suggested that Pucci and his companion should go to the Hôtel Europe and await word from Cimino.

“I will give orders that at any hour when a wire may arrive a copy shall be sent over to you,” he promised.

“Excellent,” exclaimed Hubert, thanking the Chief of Police, and ten minutes later the pair left the Prefecture and drove to the hotel to await developments.

Hubert telegraphed to Lola, giving her brief word of what he had done, and signing himself “Your Friend.” He feared lest somebody might open the dispatch, because for aught he knew she might have left Rome to

attend the Queen upon some public function or other, as she was so often forced to do. She scarcely knew from one day to another where she might be, for King Umberto's Queen was a capricious lady, and somewhat erratic in attending the public ceremonies which were so frequent, and entailed such long and tedious journeys from end to end of the kingdom, one day in Bari, the next in Pisa, and the next in Como. Often Their Majesties, in the fulfilment of their public duties, travelled the whole twenty-four hours in order to arrive at a memorial, to lay a foundation-stone, launch a battleship, or inspect a corps of veterans—and those twenty-four hours of train journey in summer were often the reverse of pleasant. Truly the King worked as hard as any daily toiler within his kingdom.

The Europe, overlooking the big, wide piazza in Turin, proved a quiet place, and Hubert was glad of a stretch on the bed—in his clothes—after the wild motor journey of the previous night.

About twenty-four hours later came the eagerly awaited message from the Italian detective, reporting that Flobecq had installed himself in a small obscure establishment called the Hôtel Weber in the Rue d'Amsterdam, close to the Lazare Station in Paris, and that he was apparently in treaty with a person named Bernard Stein, a journalist of evil reputation.

"He is negotiating the sale of the Princess's letters!" Hubert gasped when he read the copy of the detective's telegram.

Therefore, within an hour, accompanied by Pucci, he was in the express, climbing that steep railroad which leads up to Bardonnechia, and the long tunnel of the Mont Cenis.

The train was not an international one, therefore they were compelled to change at Modane, the frontier, where they took the P.L.M. *rapide* for Paris.

After another night journey across France, the two men alighted from a taxi at the Hôtel Weber, a small, uninviting-looking place with a dingy café beneath. It was then eight o'clock in the morning, and the valet de chambre, a clean-shaven man in shirt-sleeves and green baize apron,

showed them two barely furnished rooms with the beeswaxed floors uncarpeted. They held consultation, being joined at once by the detective, Cimino, a short, stout man with small black eyes, and rather shabby clothes.

A few words sufficed to explain the situation.

He had followed Flobecq, unobserved, and had ascertained that on the previous day he had met in the Café de la Paix, a man named Stein, whom he afterwards found was an unattached journalist who wrote for certain of the most unprincipled of the Paris journals.

The two men spent several hours together, and were apparently bargaining. No agreement, he believed, had been arrived at, and they had arranged to meet again that day.

Hubert listened in silence to the man's story, then, taking a taxi, he drove first to the British Embassy, and thence to an apartment near the Arc de Triomphe, where he was closeted for half an hour with Colonel Guy Maitland, the British military attaché.

Thence, just after half-past ten, he drove to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the Quai d'Orsay, and there interviewed one of the permanent staff.

When he emerged he was accompanied back to the Hôtel Weber by a thin, insignificant-looking little man, wearing a bowler hat and grey gloves. The net was gradually being drawn around the famous spy, who had not yet left his room, and was still unconscious of how completely he was now surrounded. Truth to tell, the thin man in black was Berton, a detective inspector of the political department of the Sûreté, attached to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Thus the four men waited impatiently in the hotel, Berton of the Sûreté having telephoned from the little bureau of the proprietor for two plain-clothes agents from the nearest *poste* of police.

At last Flobecq, on descending the stairs, was met by a waiter who told him that a gentleman was awaiting him in the little private *salon* on the first floor.

In surprise, he turned into the room indicated, and there came face to face with Hubert Waldron. His cheeks went pale, and he started at the unexpected encounter.

“Ah, m’sieur!” he exclaimed, with a strenuous attempt to conceal his surprise. “It is you—eh?”

“Yes, M’sieur Flobecq,” replied Hubert, at once closing the door. “I have great pleasure in meeting you again. You see your identity is well-known to me, and I require a few minutes’ private conversation with you.”

And as he uttered these words he placed himself between the spy and the door.

“Well, and what, pray, do you want with me?” asked Flobecq in French, his dark brows quickly knit with a hard, evil expression.

“I want you to hand over to me those letters you have of the Princess Luisa of Savoy,” Waldron said boldly.

The man laughed. He was well-dressed—a good-looking, easy-going figure of that type which always made an impression upon women, but which men instinctively hated.

“I have followed you here from Italy. And at Her Highness’s request I ask you for those letters. I know that you are in treaty with the journalist, Stein, regarding them. He is a dealer in scandals, and if he purchases them will, no doubt, have a ready market for them,” Hubert added.

“Your audacity is really amazing, M’sieur Waldron.”

“It may be. But I have, fortunately, gained knowledge of your heartless deception. I know the whole of the bitter circumstances; of your pretended affection for the Princess, and how you have compelled her to act as your cat’s-paw and become a thief. Further,” and he hesitated for a few seconds, “further, I am also well aware of your position as secret agent of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at Vienna—a fact of which they are also aware, here in Paris—at the Quai d’Orsay!”

“My dear m’sieur,” laughed the other, folding his arms deliberately and

facing the Englishman. “If you think you can bluff me, you are quite welcome to the illusion. The Princess is my friend—as you well know—you admitted it when we met at Brussels.”

“She was your friend. But to-day, you having been revealed as a spy of Italy’s enemy, she is no longer your friend. I am still her friend. And that is the reason of my presence here to-day. You were very clever in your escape from Orvieto, when you left her there in expectation. But there are others equally as evasive, I may assure you.” Waldron stood with his hands stuck deep in the pockets of his blue serge suit in an attitude of triumph. He could play the game of bluff equally with anyone, when occasion demanded.

“I shall act exactly as I think proper,” was the spy’s indignant reply.

“You will think proper to hand me over those letters—letters of an innocent girl who has been misled by as clever and cunning a plot as has ever been conceived in the whole history of espionage. I admit that you, Mijoux Flobecq, are an artist. But in this case, you have been betrayed by the patriotism of your unfortunate victim.”

“Ah! She has told you then!” he remarked with a smile of contempt.

“No, I watched and found out for myself,” was Hubert’s reply. “The key plan of which you had so ingeniously contrived to obtain possession, is safe in my hands, and—”

“Because she handed it over to you!” he cried. “Because she grew afraid at the last second. All women do! It seems that her love for me waned,” he added in a strange voice.

“That may be. But can a woman ever really love a man who is suddenly revealed to her as an enemy?” queried the diplomat. “No. You were amazingly clever, M’sieur Flobecq, but your estimate of human nature was entirely wrong. As soon as she knew that you were a spy of Italy’s hereditary enemy, Austria, her love turned to hatred. That was but natural.”

“And she betrayed me?”

“No, she did not. There, you are quite mistaken,” was Hubert’s quick response. “It will surprise you to know that I was in the Hôtel Belle Arti and overheard every word that passed between you. It was there, for the first time, that I realised the truth. And—” He looked straight into the eyes of the spy. ”... and I tell you openly and frankly that I am her friend!”

“Then it was your threat I overheard while speaking to her! Well, and what can you do, pray? She has misled me.”

“Do!” echoed Waldron, still standing with his back to the door of the little, shabbily furnished reading-room. “Do! I merely ask you for those letters.”

“Which you will never get. I have them here safe in my pocket,” and he drew out a bulky envelope which he exhibited in triumph. “At noon to-day I shall sell them to my friend, Stein, who can easily place them in the proper quarter. It will be my revenge, my dear m’sieur,” he laughed.

“And a pretty revenge—eh?—upon a defenceless girl whom you have deceived—whom you have met in all sorts of odd, out-of-the-way places. I saw you together as far away as Wady Haifa, in the Sudan. And I watched you all the time you were together in Egypt.”

“I think that to discuss this affair further is quite useless,” Flobecq said with an annoyed look. “You can rest assured that neither your bluff, nor any other influence that you could bring to bear upon me, would ever induce me to give up the letters to you.”

“That is your decision—eh? Reflect—because your defiance may cost you more than you imagine.”

“Bah! What do I care for you, a mere British diplomat! What do you know of Secret Service ways, or methods?” he laughed.

“I know this,” was Hubert’s reply, “that if you refuse to give back to me the correspondence of your unfortunate victim you will find yourself in a very awkward predicament here in Paris.”

“Bah! You are only bluffing, I repeat! What, do you think I have any fear of you? You diplomats are merely air bubbles of self-importance. You are so easily pricked.” And he turned from Waldron with an expression of

supreme contempt.

“Seven months ago there was an incident at Toulon Arsenal—regarding the Admiralty wireless station there—and you escaped,” Hubert remarked in a low, meaning voice.

“Well?”

“Well, that incident is not yet forgotten,” the Englishman said with a curious smile.

“I don’t follow you.”

“Well, in this hotel there are three agents of police now waiting to place you under arrest as a spy of Austria,” he said very quietly; “therefore I think, M’sieur Flobecq, you really must admit that, in this particular game, I just now hold most of the honours—eh?”

The spy’s face darkened. He saw himself checkmated for the first time by a better and more ingenious man.

“You will hand me over those letters at once,” Waldron went on, “or I shall call into this room the inspector of the Sûreté who is anxious to arrest you on charges of espionage. And they have been wanting you now for fully seven months, remember. But they are not yet tired. Oh, dear no! The Sûreté is never tired of waiting. If it is ten years, the penalty for espionage in France is the same!” Hubert added, with a grin of triumph.

In an instant Mijoux Flobecq flew into a passion, declaring that the Englishman should never regain possession of the incriminating correspondence for which he had so heartlessly practised blackmail upon Her Royal Highness.

“I defy you!” he cried with a sneer. “I have arranged the price with my friend, Stein. And he shall have the letters for publication—to reveal to Europe how, even in Royal circles, traitors exist?”

“Traitors!” cried Hubert, advancing towards him threateningly. “Repeat that word, and, by gad! I’ll strangle you—you blackguard! The Princess Luisa is no traitor. You have held her in an evil bondage—you, the agent

of your taskmasters in Vienna—you, who with your devilish cunning, hoped to betray Italy into Austria's hands."

Hubert Waldron was intensely angry, now that he had cast that outrageous reflection upon Lola's honour.

"Now, once and for all, I demand those letters?" he added, facing Flobecq very determinedly.

"And I, on my part, refuse to give them to you."

"Then you are prepared to accept the consequences—eh?"

"Quite."

"You refuse to release an unfortunate girl from the consequences of a foolish infatuation?"

"She has betrayed me. Therefore I feel myself entirely at liberty to act just as I deem fit."

"Act as you wish, M'sieur Flobecq, but I warn you that it is at your own peril. I am prepared to endeavour to give you your liberty in exchange for those letters."

"I have my liberty. I do not wish to bargain for it with you!" laughed the other in open defiance.

"For the last time, I ask you to hand me over that packet."

"And I refuse."

"Give the letters to me, I say?" cried Hubert, and, exasperated by the fellow's demeanour, he sprang suddenly upon him.

He was strong and athletic, and the insults which the spy had cast upon Lola had caused him to lose his temper. His hands were at Flobecq's throat.

A second later, however, the spy drew a revolver, and only just in the nick

of time did the Englishman manage to turn the barrel aside ere it went off.

Then ensued a fierce and desperate struggle for the weapon—indeed a fight for life.

Hubert held Flobecq's right wrist in a grip of iron, at the same time endeavouring to obtain possession of the envelope containing the letters. In this latter, however, he was unsuccessful.

Again the weapon went off in the mêlée, the bullet embedding itself in the ceiling, while the two men, locked in each other's deadly embrace, fell against a table, smashing a large porcelain vase to fragments.

The reports aroused the alarm of the agents of police who, a few seconds later, rushed into the room where they found the two men struggling desperately. But just as they entered, accompanied by the proprietor of the hotel in a state of the utmost alarm, Flobecq discharged his weapon a third time. The bullet struck a huge mirror, shattering it into a thousand pieces.

With the aid of the police agents, Flobecq was, with difficulty, secured, whereupon Hubert—with the one thought uppermost in his mind, that of Lola's honour—placed his hand swiftly into the inner pocket of his adversary's coat and abstracted the envelope containing the fateful letters.

"That man is a thief!" yelled the spy, white to the lips with fury. "Arrest him! Arrest him, I say. He has stolen my property."

Next second, as Hubert drew back and before anyone was aware of it, the man under arrest snatched a heavy police revolver from the hand of one of the men holding him, and fired point-blank at the Englishman.

Again, in the spy's passion of hatred, his shot went wide of the mark, and Hubert stood unharmed, the letters already safe in his pocket.

In a moment all three men, finding their prisoner armed, drew back. Then in an instant he had freed himself.

His back was set against the wall, and flourishing the heavy weapon he

held them all at bay.

“You shan’t take me!” he shrieked in defiance. “Touch me again, any of you, and I’ll shoot you dead!” he shouted in desperation.

And by the distorted expression of his livid face they all knew he meant it.

Berton, the inspector of the Sûreté, made a sudden dash forward, in order to again secure the man so long wanted for espionage, but in less time than it takes to describe the dramatic scene he received a bullet in the shoulder.

Again Flobecq, still holding them all at bay and defying them to arrest him, fired at Waldron, once more missing him, and then firing two further shots at random, one taking effect upon the hand of the elder of the two French agents.

Then the third man, finding his two companions wounded, and himself at the mercy of the frenzied spy, raised his own revolver, took careful aim and fired in self-defence.

The shot took instant effect.

Mijoux Flobecq, the handsome adventurer, shot through the heart, fell forward, face downwards, dead.

Chapter Thirty Four.

The Truth is Told.

At the Quirinale the last State Ball of the season was in full swing.

The Palace was ablaze with light. In the great courtyard, where the sentries paced, there were constant arrivals and departures. All aristocratic and official Rome was there. Smart uniforms were everywhere, and in the great ballroom with its wonderful chandeliers the scene was perhaps the most brilliant of any to be witnessed in the whole of Europe.

In a small *salon* in the private apartments far removed from the music and glitter of the Court—a delightful and artistic room with white-enamelled walls, and furniture and carpet of old rose—stood Hubert Waldron, who had only arrived back in the Eternal City an hour before. He had hastily changed into uniform, and stood there with Her Royal Highness, Princess Luisa, whose slim figure was a tragic one, notwithstanding her handsome Court gown of white satin, and the black watered ribbon of her decoration in her corsage.

He had just related, as briefly as he could, the exciting chase from Orvieto, a thousand miles, to Paris, and the dramatic meeting in the frowsy little hotel in the Rue d'Amsterdam.

"And here, Lola, are your letters," he said calmly, drawing from his tunic the envelope which he had sealed in Paris without prying into its contents, save to reassure himself that they were letters in the handwriting of the woman he loved so devotedly.

"My letters!" she gasped, casting her ivory fan aside and eagerly taking them in her gloved and trembling hands. "Then—then you have recovered them!" she cried in sudden glee. "You—you have saved me, Mr Waldron, for to-night I—I confess to you, my friend—I had the fixed intention to end it all. I could not bear to live and face the terrible exposure, for I knew not from day to day if one of the scurrilous papers in Paris might print my letters—the confession of a woman who, though a

Princess of a Royal House, was also a spy, because she was fooled—tricked into love!”

“Lola,” he said, still speaking earnestly and very calmly, “you need have no further fear of that man. He came near bringing you to ruin—nay to death. But the peril is now at an end.”

“At an end—how?” she asked.

“I begged of you to leave all to me—that I would settle the account with him. I have brought you back your letters,” he said, very gravely. “You need have no further fear, because the scoundrel who made such dastardly pretence of loving you, Lola, is dead!”

“Dead!” she gasped with startled, wide-open eyes.

“Yes; shot dead by the Paris police who had wanted him for espionage. He fired at them, and they retaliated in self-defence.”

“Then my enemy is dead!” she exclaimed in a whisper, standing motionless, her big, expressive eyes fixed straight before her.

“Yes. The peril which threatened you, Lola, and the very existence of the Italian nation, is at an end.”

“And you, Mr Waldron,” she cried in a voice broken by emotion, turning to him suddenly with hand outstretched, “you have risked your own life and have averted a war in Europe, of which I, in my unfortunate ignorance, was so nearly the cause.”

“Because your actions and your movements have been—well, just a little too unconventional,” he laughed, bowing gallantly over her outstretched hand and kissing it fervently.

She knew the truth. She knew how devotedly the Englishman loved her. And she, in return, reciprocated his affection. Had she not, in that moment of her ecstasy, responded to his well-remembered kisses?

He was holding her hand, gazing long and deeply into those fathomless eyes of hers. He was about to speak—again to confess to her his great

all-consuming passion, when a hand was placed upon the door knob and they sprang apart, as of a sudden His Majesty the King, a brilliant figure in his uniform and glittering decorations, entered.

“Ah, Waldron?” he cried in his usual cheery way, “I received your message, and came here to find you. They told me that you were here, with Lola. Well? You have a report to make, I suppose. What is it? Lola,” he said, addressing Her Highness, “I fear I must ask you to leave us. I have some business to talk over with Mr Waldron.”

“I ask Your Majesty’s pardon,” the diplomat said; “but I would beg that Her Royal Highness be allowed to remain. My report closely concerns her.”

“Concerns her! How?”

“If Your Majesty will have patience with me I will explain,” Hubert replied, and then, as briefly and tersely as possible, he related to the King the series of startling and exciting events recorded in the preceding chapters—how Lola, at the instigation of the Austrian spy, Flobecq, in guise of lover, was induced to go in secret to the private safe of the Minister of War and thence abstract the plans of the new frontier defences. He explained, too, how these being found useless without the key—though in secret Austria mobilised her army in readiness for a descent upon her neighbour at the moment that key was forthcoming—Flobecq, the cunning scoundrel in the employ of the Vienna Foreign Office, had blackmailed the unfortunate Princess by threatening to publish her letters if she did not dare further—and steal the key plan.

“And you, it seems, entered His Excellency’s cabinet just in the very nick of time,” the King said, both surprised yet gratified. “Yes, Waldron, I am seldom mistaken in my man,” he went on, “and when I called you and asked you to assist me, as your respected father assisted my own father, I felt that I could trust you. My confidence has not been misplaced. By your staunch friendship to me—not loyalty, because you are loyal only to your own Sovereign, my good brother—you have saved my beloved nation, saved an international complication which must have cost Europe a terrible war. And more—you have saved my madcap little niece’s honour. And why?” he demanded suddenly.

Hubert did not answer for several moments.

“Well, I will be frank, Your Majesty,” he responded. “Because ever since we met in Egypt and I believed her to be Lola Duprez, niece of the cantankerous old Gigleux, we have been most excellent friends. I have only done my duty towards her as a friend, and towards you as Sovereign of Italy, at whose Court I am humbly attached as servant of my own King.”

“Waldron!” exclaimed His Majesty, “to-night I sleep securely for the first time for several months. The war-cloud has been dispersed—and by you. You have my heartfelt thanks—the thanks of a man who has the misfortune perhaps of being born a King.” And he gripped the diplomat’s hand warmly in his own, and looked into his face as only one man can look at another who returns thanks from the very depths of his heart. “We can only reflect, Waldron,” added the King in a low, earnest voice, “upon how many lives might have been sacrificed, of what ruin and desolation must have resulted and of the terrible horrors of modern warfare that have been averted by your devotion to Lola, to myself, and to my own beloved Italy!”

But Hubert Waldron was thinking only of Lola. His Majesty’s eulogy was lost upon him.

He bowed low, and declared himself as the devoted servant of Italy and her Sovereign, as his father had been before him.

Again the King grasped his hand, and then and there declared that he bestowed upon him the coveted Grand Cross of the Order of Saints, Maurice and Lazarus, an order which very few of the Italian Cabinet Ministers possessed, and one of the principal distinctions of Italy.

Afterwards His Majesty bade him a cheery *addio*, and, turning, left the room.

For some moments Hubert stood facing Lola, without speaking.

What could he say?

“Lola,” he exclaimed at last, “there is one point which still remains to be

cleared up. Tell me. How did you manage to enter the General's room while the corporal, Tonini, was there on sentry duty?"

"Tonini knew me well. He is engaged to marry my maid, Renata. I entered the room on pretence of paying a visit to General Cataldi, and finding that His Excellency was not there, I waited in the room a few minutes, during which time I opened the safe. Then I called him in and made him promise solemnly to tell no one that I had paid the General a visit, explaining that I had come to crave the promotion of one of my friends—a captain of cavalry—and was not desirous of the fact becoming public property. He understood the scandal at which I hinted, and therefore loyally preserved silence—even when he knew that the plans had been stolen. Imagine my horror when I realised the full gravity of my action. I had handed over the plans to Austria! At once—ignorant of the inquiry you were making—I called a man I knew, Pietro Olivieri, an ex-police officer, and begged him to assist me to recover the plans. But, alas! he failed. And then Flobecq, holding out the threat to publish my letters, forced me to make an attempt to gain the tracings which formed the key." And she drew her hand wearily across her brow as though to clear her brain of those terrible memories.

A few moments later Hubert stretched forth his hand in farewell.

He loved her with all his heart and all his soul, but, alas! he knew too well the wide barrier of birth that lay between them.

He saw, too, in Lola's face a sweet, passionate love look, that one expression which a woman can never feign. By that alone he knew his affection was reciprocated.

The cup of bitterness was at his lips. But with supreme self-control he dashed it from him.

To speak would only bring upon her grief and sorrow. Yes. Silence was best, after all, even though it cost him all that he held most dear in the world—best for her sake, and for his.

He took her white-gloved hand in his, and bowing over it till his lips touched its back, wished her a courtly *addio*.

“But how can I ever thank you sufficiently for saving me, Hubert?” she cried, addressing him by his Christian name, hot tears welling in her great dark eyes.

“I desire no thanks, Lola,” was his low, earnest reply. “If sometimes you remember me as your friend—as your most true, and most devoted friend—then that is an all-sufficient recompense for me.”

His voice trembled with emotion and she saw a strange expression at the corners of his mouth.

“But I will see you soon—to-morrow—eh? Where?” she said eagerly.

“No,” he answered briefly. “I am leaving Rome.”

“Leaving Rome!” she echoed in dismay.

“Yes. I am applying for transfer to another post. There are reasons why I cannot remain here any longer. I could not bear it. You know why.” And he looked her straight in the face, still holding her hand strongly in his.

She averted her gaze and sighed deeply.

He saw the hot tears upon her cheeks, therefore slowly he drew her towards him in his strong arms, and impressing one last fervent kiss upon her cold white brow, released her, and with bowed head left the room with a whispered:

“*Addio—addio*, my own beloved!”

The door closed, and for a moment she stood motionless as a statue.

Then in sudden frenzy, with wild despair in her eyes, she threw herself upon her face on the rose-coloured silk couch, and there burst into a fit of violent sobbing—sobbing as though her young heart would break.

The sun of her life had, at that moment, been suddenly extinguished.

Several years have now brought their changes.

A new King rules in Italy. He has a new entourage and a new Cabinet, but the Princess Luisa stills lives at the Palace, sweet, handsome, yet ever pale and thoughtful.

Her acts of charity and her blameless life have rendered her highly popular in the Eternal City, and when she drives out in one of the royal automobiles the men raise their hats and the populace cry after her, "*Viva Luisa! Viva Luisa di Savoia*!"

The giddy world of Rome has often wondered why Her Royal Highness, so bright and vivacious, has never married, though her name has frequently been coupled by gossips with that of one or other of the eligible Royal Princes of Europe, notably the Crown Prince of Saxony.

The truth, however, has never leaked out, for his late Majesty, King Umberto, who alone knew his niece's secret, never betrayed it, even to his Queen.

Sir Hubert Waldron, K.C.M.G., is now British Ambassador at St. Petersburg, yet still a bachelor. In diplomatic circles it has long been a matter of surprise that he has never taken to himself a wife, for many wealthy women are known to have set their caps at him.

However, the world is in ignorance that the plain disc of gold which he wears upon his watch-chain, though it has not the appearance of a locket, nevertheless is one, and opens with a cunningly concealed spring. Within, on one side, is an exquisite little ivory miniature of the Princess Luisa, while on the other two simple words are engraved upon the gold case—"For Ever."

Her Royal Highness wears an exact replica—except that it contains a portrait of Hubert Waldron—concealed beneath her corsage, the one talisman which never leaves her either by night or by day.

Though Europe divides them, and the barrier of birth can never be bridged, the little golden lockets form the hidden link which still connects their lives.

When either gaze upon the other's pictured face, as oftens happens, memories from out the misty past arise. Those engraved words are as a

message passing between them—a promise that will never be broken, the pledge of a passionate and unsuspected royal romance—

“FOR EVER.”

The End.

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