The Dumb Gods Speak

by Edward Phillips Oppenheim, 1866-1946

Illustrations by George Howe

Published in USA: 1936
Little, Brown & Co., Boston
Re-published in USA: 1937
P.F. Collier & Son, New York
Published in UK: 1937
Hodder & Stoughton, London

Table of Contents

Foreword
📖
Chapter I ... thru ... Chapter XXXIV

* * * * *

Illustrations

F	„She is helpless," he told them. „She is four hundred and fifty miles away."
I	He took the paper, glanced at it and crumpled in the palm of his hand.
II	Her eyes were terrible in their fixed stare. „You do not mean," she faltered, „That I must die?"
V	Before him Jonson, unruffled, was regarding him with unabated good humor. „It was your wish that I show you, sir," he said gently.
X	„My little one," said Monsieur Déchamel, „A Frenchman gives romance which a Turk never possesses."
XIV	He leaned a little towards her. „Catherine," he began…
XVI	„I have a fancy for the little one here. She must drink a glass of wine with me first."
XXIII	He dropped on his knee, felt her pulse, examined her eyelids, felt her heart all in the best professional manner.
XXVII	All the throbbing drama of a world in suspense was swept away.
XXVIII	Catherine stood there on the threshold for a moment looking at him.
XXX	He leaned towards Catherine. „It is arranged," he said in a low tone. „Mr. Krellof awaits you."
XXXI	„You can have those. If you play us false, I shall say that you stole them."

Foreword

Seven men were seated around a table in a magnificently proportioned but plainly furnished room on the topmost floor of the famous Humberstone Building. That they were men of consequence was evident by their appearance and general

bearing. That they were assembled for a serious purpose was clearly apparent from the general atmosphere of gravity and suspense. They appeared to be mostly between the ages of thirty-five and fifty, except for one who might have been a few years older, and who was dressed in the sombre garb of an ecclesiastic of high rank. They sat in silence save for an occasional uneasy observation. They had all moved their chairs to a slight angle as though to be able to face one side of the room, into the wall of which had been set two large sheets of some sort of metal, the top sheet smooth, the lower one honeycombed with small interstices. Suddenly the man at the end of the oval table raised his finger.

"Humberstone is coming," he announced.

They all turned towards the folding doors, which at that moment swung open. An invalid's couch on rubber-tyred wheels was pushed quietly into the room by a tall, well-built young man of athletic appearance, but with strongly chiselled features and the fine high forehead of a student. Everyone seated in the room rose for a moment. The man upon the couch, who was propped up into an al most sitting posture, raised his hand in salutation. The couch was wheeled to a convenient position, from which its occupant could see every one of the seven men. His hungry eyes, still bright and powerful, deep-set in his worn face, familiar to the world through the ceaseless efforts of decades of photographers, swept around the table. He ad dressed the man directly opposite him, a man of middle-age and dignified presence. He spoke slowly and his voice was thin. Nevertheless it was marvellously distinct.

"I must conserve my words," he said. "Digby Long, you are here to represent the President?"

"That is so, Mark," was the friendly reply. "As Vice President of the United States I am empowered to sign any papers you may present, or to come to any agreement with you which I may consider desirable."

"I must remind myself of the personality of each one of you," the man on the couch went on. "I must satisfy my self that you are all here, for my physicians, who are wait ing outside, have issued their last warning."

No one attempted any sort of conventional protest. There was, indeed, something grotesque in the idea of death venturing to lay its stranglehold upon a man who had defied and conquered so many of the elemental laws of nature. Words would have seemed utterly inadequate. They kept silent.

"You, General, I remember perfectly," he continued, indicating the Vice President's neighbour—a fine man of military appearance. "You are General Percheron, Commander in Chief of the Army."

"That is so, sir," was the quiet acknowledgment. "Glad you have not forgotten me."

"Next to you," Mark Humberstone proceeded, "I recognise Admiral Powers. You have just been appointed Admiral in Command of the entire Fleet."

"That is so, sir."

The speaker paused for a moment. He looked around at the others. There was no form of greeting in his gesture or speech. He seemed to recognise them, however, without difficulty.

"My fellow worker, Daniel Rathborne," he continued thoughtfully, addressing his immediate neighbour. "Yes, it is right that you should be here. The work is

finished but it must be held together. Phineas Laythrop, you are here as Secretary of State, and you, Martin Clough, are the newly appointed Secretary of War. Finally, there is my old friend, Dr. Felton, Bishop of New York."

"You have named them all, sir," the young man who had wheeled in the couch announced, leaning a little forward.

"I have, alas, no words to spare to bid you greeting or farewell," Humberstone said, taking into his hand the black cylinder from the bracket attached to the side of the couch. "Will you please, the moment I touch this switch, turn towards the television receiver and listen to the loud speaker. Watch! Now, if you please."

There was a murmur from the table. Everyone was leaning forward. The young man had taken his father's wrist, the wrist of a child, into his hand. Upon the screen was suddenly depicted a river, and in the middle of the stream a huge man-of-war making apparently slow progress against a powerful tide.

"The battleship you see," the man on the couch went on, "is the old CITY OF WASHINGTON. She is making her way down the Hudson. You have her visualised?"

There was an affirmative chorus. Mark Humberstone moved an inch or two in his place, white and ghastly in the strong light, his eyes apparently devouring the screen. He leaned slightly to one side and touched the switch attached to the cylinder. For a moment there was a flash of scarlet light which darted around the room like an escaped ray. The Bishop started in his chair. The Vice President rose involuntarily to his feet. There was a faint staccato murmur of amazement.

"Continue to watch, if you please," the still quiet voice from the couch insisted. "By this time I think you discover that the battleship is out of control. Watch. You see her swinging round in the tide? Already she is in process of disintegration... You observe the list?"

Illustration:
„She is helpless," he told them.
„She is four hundred and fifty miles away."

For the last time on earth, Mark Humberstone smiled as he watched their faces.

"She is helpless," he told them. "She is four hundred and fifty miles away. It would have made no difference if she had been four thousand. I touch a switch and every electrical appliance which she possesses is dumb and nerve less. Our friend the Admiral there knows what that means. She is finished."

There was a rumble of voices from around the table. Astonishment had given place to awe. Everyone was star ing at the tragedy depicted upon that shining plate of metal.

"Your whole attention, if you please, my friends," the great scientist begged, and it was noticeable that his voice had become a shade weaker. "What you have seen taking place, the powers which I am handing over can bring about at any time from a battleship, a fort, an observatory. We believed that the discovery of radium itself was the greatest thing that had happened to the world in centuries. Be sides this combination of forces which I present to you, this amplification and concentration of those electric cur rents with which our atmosphere is filled, radium is of no more account than the sands of the desert. I am handing over to

you who sit around that table the gravest responsibility that was ever placed upon the shoulders of mankind. The control of these new powers, in collaboration with a staff who know the secret only in sections, will be yours to deal with on these terms: You will each put your signature to the document which the Vice President has already in his hand, and you will swear by the honour of your country that you will never consent to these powers being put into operation except for the holy purpose of proving to the world, by illustration, that war be tween the nations is no longer a possible enterprise. Only if at any time the United States should be attacked by a foreign enemy will you make use of these secret controls, which I have sometimes thought in a nightmare I must have dragged up out of hell. Each one of you will appoint a successor to himself, next in rank and capacity, who will succeed him in the case of his death. Seven you are now, and seven you are to remain till the time of wars is past. This is understood?"

There was a murmur of assent, but not one of them could look away from the screen. The voice of the man who had passed on to them that awful secret had ceased. They watched like men paralysed. Not one of them realised that the miracle worker of his generation, the man who had helped to make his country almighty, was already facing the one insoluble problem.

* * * * *

The date of the opening of this story is April the fourteenth, 1947, some years after the granting of independence to the Philippine Islands by the United States, and subsequent to the attempted seizure of these islands by Japan, a proceeding which was followed by the greatest naval débâcle in the world's history, when the Japanese Fleet, at its full strength, was totally destroyed in the Pacific Ocean by a single battleship of the United States Navy, equipped with the full range of the Humberstone discoveries.

The characters in this story are entirely imaginary and have no relation to any living person.

Chapter I

At 10:43 on a morning when the deep blue sea of the Mediterranean was flecked with whitecaps and the clear outline of the Estérels suggested a mistral, Mr. Jonson stepped from his compartment in the Train Bleu and, with a suitcase in either hand, alighted upon the platform at Nice. Refusing with dogged politeness the clamorous offers of a crowd of blue-shirted porters, he carried his own bag gage, gave up his ticket at the barriers and summoned a small carriage.

"Le Café des Oiseaux Noirs, Number Seventeen, Avenue Laperle," he told the cocher. "It is in the direction of the old town."

The cocher glanced a trifle curiously at his passenger, whipped up his steed and drove off. The latter leaned back amongst the frowsy cushions, produced a cigarette from a neat black metal case and commenced to smoke it with enjoyment. Nice was, he reflected, looking around him, a handsome, populous

place, worthy to have become the head quarters of the great institution with whose operations he hoped presently to be connected. The cocher turned round and addressed him.

"Monsieur understands without a doubt that the Avenue Laperle is outside the radius?"

His client grinned.

"Monsieur understands nothing of the sort," he replied. "Monsieur intends to pay the sum indicated upon the dial, with a suitable pourboire, and any dispute upon arrival will be referred to the nearest gendarme."

The cocher flicked the air with his whip and turned surlily around. There was something about the brusque air of the small, rosy-cheeked man who had taken possession of his voiture which made it doubtful whether argument would be worth the trouble.

"We shall see," was all he muttered. "Oh, yes, we shall see."

Without undue haste on the part of anyone concerned, with many wheezes from the horse, creakings of the ancient vehicle, hoarse encouragements and flicks in the air with his whip from the unsavoury looking cocher, the end of the journey arrived at last. It was without a doubt an unprepossessing neighbourhood. There was little to be discerned of the beauty of one of the Riviera's principal watering places. The building before which they had stopped was solidly built but was a somewhat sinister-looking tenement house, the ground floor of which was occupied by an apparently low-class café. The pavement was squalid. A sluggish canal, a turgid depository of filth, loomed unpleasantly near on the other side of the way. The cocher pointed to the dial.

"For the voyage itself, monsieur," he announced, "one demands three francs and forty centimes. To return one must ascend the hill. It is an awkward neighbourhood. Monsieur will remember that in granting the pourboire."

Mr. Jonson counted out five francs with great care.

"In the matter of pourboires," he said, "I am a generous fellow. Take that and drive your crazy vehicle off to hell. May I never see it again! It smells. It pleases me not. Be off!"

Mr. Jonson grasped his bags and stepped out. The cocher, suddenly dumb, accepted his money and, with a carefully thought-out mixture of argument and abuse absolutely unuttered, drove off.

"A type," he muttered to himself. "I wonder!"

The man was perhaps wise. It was one of the worst quarters of Nice and the flap of his passenger's hip pocket drawn somewhat tightly over his rotund limbs pronounced the fact that he was not a man who took risks. The cocher drove off, but it took him the rest of the day to forget his fare.

* * * * *

Mr. Jonson seated himself in a discreet corner at a three-legged table of unsavoury appearance, with a bag on either side of him, and summoned a waiter. The latter, dressed in a shabby pullover and a worn pair of trousers with shoes which gapingly displayed the absence of socks, came wearily up. He showed no surprise at the sight of a client obviously of better circumstances than the few

others scattered about the place and, though his eyes dwelt for a moment upon the bags, curiosity seemed a dead impulse in him.

"Monsieur désire?" he muttered.

Illustration:
He took the paper, glanced at it and crumpled in the palm of his hand

For answer Mr. Jonson tore off a marginal strip of paper from the journal which, wrapped round its stick, lay on a neighbouring table. With a stump of lead pencil which he produced from his pocket he traced a number—1009—and passed it to the man. The latter glanced at it, took the paper, and crumpled it in the palm of his hand.

"Monsieur désire?" he repeated.

"Un café simple," Mr. Jonson replied.

The waiter departed. On his way he stopped before one of the receptacles for ashes which stood in the place. The crumpled and torn fragments of the scrap of paper which had been handed to him were added to its contents. After wards the man lumbered on and disappeared round an angle of the café. Mr. Jonson disposed himself to wait. As a matter of fact he waited for a very short time. Within five minutes a woman approached his table bearing a tray. She set the contents before him—a metal coffee pot, a single cup, and saucer.

"It is what Monsieur desires?"

He looked at her curiously. She was a stout woman but her black stuff dress was neat and in good repair. Her enormous bosoms were forced back in their place by the tightness of her bodice. She had magnificent black hair smoothly brushed and a faint moustache upon her upper lip. Her eyes were hard and bright. She might have been any age between twenty-five and forty-five.

"Monsieur chooses a strange place to drink his coffee," she remarked.

Monsieur smiled.

"My name is Jonson," he said. "I have come to see the jackdaws."

The woman looked around.

"Do not drink that muck," she enjoined. "There is better awaits you."

"I come now?" he asked.

Once more she glanced lazily around to the right and to the left. She stepped out onto the pavement through the opened door. All the time she seemed to be looking nowhere. All the time Mr. Jonson felt that there was nothing she did not see.

"Now as well as any time," she replied carelessly. "Monsieur must carry his own bags."

"That is what Monsieur would much prefer," was the smiling assent.

Out through the back quarters into a villainous-looking courtyard, along a dark passage from which branched several mysterious alleyways, out into another street, a broader street with a row of lime trees on the other side, a street that might not perhaps have been so bad except that the wind was bending back the branches of the trees and raising clouds of stinking dust. The woman pointed to a door in the building from which they had emerged, a few yards up the street.

“Monsieur will find what he wants,” she said, “if he mounts three flights of stairs and knocks at the door of the room Number Seven.”

“And if I do not find it,” he muttered, “I suppose I shall find trouble.”

“One takes one’s risks,” she answered, “when one comes to see the jackdaws. If you please it is well. If you are not acceptable—Well,” she added with a wicked smile, “it is a neighbourhood where things happen.”

* * * * *

Mr. Jonson took up his bags, parted with one temporarily to open the outside door, picked it up again and passed into a small hall devoid of furniture, yet also devoid of the sickening evidences of filthy neglect of the Café which he had just left. He mounted to the first floor and found indications there that the building had once been the habitation of people of consequence. The doors had a solid appearance and the metal numbers attached to each were of brass. The second floor was better still. There was light here, for the windows had been cleaned, and from one of them he caught glimpses of the town below and a distant peep of the sea. Here were three more rooms: Four, Five and Six. Once more he mounted, and this time things showed still further improvement. There was a large oaken door with a very visible Number Seven facing him. On the right there was a window and a balcony. The walls were clean and had apparently recently been washed. There was an electric push-bell immediately in front of him. Mr. Jon son held his finger steadily upon it. Even before he had had time to remove it, the door was opened. A young woman, plainly dressed, but of neat and distinguished appearance, looked out at him. For the second time that morning Mr. Jonson told himself that these people knew their business. In those few seconds he felt that this girl had scrutinised his every feature and had arrived at an impression concerning himself and his clothes. It almost seemed as though she had seen through the worn exterior and realised the contents of the bags.

“This, perhaps,” Mr. Jonson suggested, removing his hat with great politeness, “is the Bureau of which I am in search?”

“Monsieur by his question has made that apparent,” she replied.

Mr. Jonson and his two bags disappeared behind the door. They were swallowed up in Room Number Seven of the far-reaching annex of the Café des Oiseaux Noirs.

* * * * *

Mr. Jonson was beginning to be very much interested indeed in this novel byway leading out to the great road of adventure along which he had steadily made his way since his arrival at manhood. Up to the moment of his being ushered into that barely furnished but somehow impressive-looking apartment and finding himself alone with a young woman, whose distinction he was well able to appreciate, he had found the opening-up of this episode of his career a little disappointing. Everyone knew that Nice was a city of mysterious cafés and bands of criminals with secret haunts, and that there were parts of the city into which it was unsafe to venture without police protection. There was an element of staleness in the whole affair which was suddenly dissipated by the appearance upon the scene of his present companion. He leaned slightly back in the easy chair which

he had been invited to occupy, and he looked across at the young woman with steady, appraising eyes.

"I begin to find it more difficult than I expected, Mademoiselle," he confided, "to enlist myself as a member in your famous society. It is for that purpose I an here."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I wonder what you know about us really?" she enquired.

"Very little," he acknowledged. "I have heard you called the Foreign Legion of Espionage."

She nodded her head gravely.

"The idea is not a bad one."

"But whereas," Mr. Jonson continued, "to join the Foreign Legion the formalities are of a usual type and no penalty seems to be attached to rejection, with you things are different. One has heard of men—and women, too—who set out blithely to become one of your number and who have never been heard of again."

"Quite true," she admitted tolerantly. "But you must remember this, Mr. Jonson. These people to whom you allude have been emissaries of the police or emissaries of the foreign powers against whom we have been working. They have come with the idea of double-crossing some special operation in which we have been engaged. We have reckoned them up and studied their past and when we have discovered that their real object in joining us was to frustrate our plans, we have dealt with them as our principals thought fit. Neither Mr. Humberstone nor Mr. Cheng are lenient men to deal with in such circumstances."

"Now, how do I stand?" he asked her. "I have sent you references from two places which we will not mention in Asia, from Paris and from Moscow. I have done work in the underworld; but now official positions, where there is really scope for enterprise, scope for a man who is not afraid to risk his life, are few. I have come to you as an honest man. I wish to work for you and not against you."

"Then," she said, changing her position a little as though to avoid the sunlight which was flooding into the room, "it is a pity that you tried to deceive us about your nationality."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes," he acknowledged, "that was perhaps a mistake. Yet if I had told you the whole truth I doubt if I would have received this invitation to visit you."

"Of that I am not so sure," she said. "It is strange that a man who wields the power Mr. Humberstone wields, who was the instigator and who is now the inspiration of an amazing International Bureau of Espionage, should be such a passionate lover of the truth. I have known him to risk the whole success of a great coup rather than have his principal agent tell a direct lie."

"It is illogical, that," Mr. Jonson declared.

"Very likely," she assented, "but it does not alter the fact that you have come to us with a lie upon your lips. Others before you have found their way to the Café des Oiseaux Noirs, have even in one or two cases reached this chamber, but that has been the end—they have never found their way back into the world."

"Supposing I make a clean breast of it," Mr. Jonson suggested amiably.

The girl smiled at him. It became more and more apparent that in her quiet way she was remarkably attractive. She tapped a cigarette upon the table and lit it.

“Is not that just a trifle ingenuous?” she asked. “When we found out that a part of your story was not true it goes without saying that we set ourselves to discover the actual truth.”

Mr. Jonson seemed to grow a little smaller in his chair. He wondered whether those blue eyes, which he admired so much beneath their silky eyebrows, were really blue or whether there was not a glitter of steel in them. Had he been led into a death trap, he wondered. From where he sat he could see the trees waving in some gardens opposite and hear the clang of the electric cars. He read the sign on the smoky orange-coloured building on the other side of the square—the Gendarmerie. He smiled thoughtfully. He began to feel that he was safe. The girl read his thoughts.

“I should not be overconfident if I were you,” she said. “You would be the first man who has ever reached this room under false pretences and left it unharmed.”

Nevertheless Mr. Jonson continued to smile. For a few seconds the girl was busy. There was a confusion of telephones. She handled the situation skillfully, with swift fingers and a voice that changed curiously as she spoke through the various instruments. Finally she leaned back in her chair.

“You will know what is going to happen to you directly,” she announced.

Mr. Jonson nodded gravely.

“Would you have any objection to telling me something about your principals?” he enquired.

She looked across at him speculatively.

“Do you mean that you do not know?”

Mr. Jonson coughed slightly.

“I have heard various stories,” he confided. “I have been told, for instance, that the man who runs this establishment is a young American scientist—Mr. Mark Humberstone, son of the great inventor.”

“Well?”

“Then, on the other hand,” Mr. Jonson continued, “I have been told that there is someone of greater importance who keeps always in the background and who is seldom seen outside his suite of rooms here.”

“And this mysterious person’s name?” she asked.

“You yourself alluded to him just now as Mr. Cheng—” There was a brief silence. The girl tapped with her fingers upon the desk.

“At least,” she said, “you need not concern yourself for the present with idle rumours. There is such a person as Mr. Cheng, of course, but you are not likely to see much of him. Mr. Mark Humberstone is our acting principal.”

The door was opened and closed. A young man smiled pleasantly at the girl as he advanced into the room. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and he carried himself with the easy swing of an athlete. His hair was slightly disarranged, his costume the blue shirt of a matelot and a pair of grey flannel trousers. The coat which he had been carrying he tossed lightly into a chair.

“Good morning, Mademoiselle,” he greeted her. “Forgive my ruffled-up appearance. I have been having half an hour in the gymnasium.”

She nodded and pointed to where Mr. Jonson had risen to his feet. The young man swung round and scrutinised the visitor.

“So this is Mr. Jonson, is it?” he remarked.

The latter beamed acquiescence. He was standing in front of his chair with a bag on either side of him. Mark Humberstone looked him up and down curiously. There was something in his puzzled scrutiny which almost suggested recognition.

"So you want a job here, Mr. Jonson?"

"That is why I came."

"And you were so sure of getting it," Mark Humberstone went on with a glance towards the bags, "that you brought your luggage with you."

"I came straight here from the railway station, sir," the other explained. "As to my luggage, when I am travelling I never let it out of my sight."

"Let us see what you have inside."

Mr. Jonson obediently opened the suitcases. The young man examined their contents in blank surprise, and, stooping down, drew out a pair of scarlet silk tights which he held up wonderingly.

"What in God's name is this?" he demanded.

"Both these bags," Mr. Jonson explained, "contain my professional outfit. I have an engagement this week at the Jetée Casino. I imagine there are others in your Bureau, sir, who follow some sort of profession as a cloak to their more serious activities. It has always been my custom."

He laid out the contents upon the floor. Whilst he was still stooping, Mark Humberstone, with a swift movement, withdrew a very finished article in the way of modern guns from the man's hip pocket. Mr. Jonson stood suddenly upright.

"I do not suppose," he remarked with a smile, "that that is any surprise to you. It is a very good gun."

"I know the make," Mark acknowledged, opening the breech and satisfying himself that it was unloaded. "It shall be returned to you before you go."

"So long as I am not expected to work without it," Mr. Jonson murmured.

Catherine Oronoff looked across at the visitor curiously. "Are you Professor Ventura?" she asked.

"That is my stage name," he replied. "I am better known as The Man Who Stops the World."

"One of your tricks?"

He bowed.

"As soon as I have presented myself at the Casino," he invited, "and reported myself to the management, I shall ask for a handful of tickets and you must do me the honour of witnessing my performance. You may call it a trick if you will. It has puzzled many people."

Humberstone sank into an easy chair a few yards away. His long nervous fingers were still playing with the revolver which he held in his hand. He looked up suddenly with a frown.

"I am surprised, sir," he said, addressing Mr. Jonson, "that any man with intelligence enough to discover that there was such an organisation as the International Bureau of Espionage, and with the sense to want to work for it, should be foolish enough to start by attempting to deceive us."

"I regret already that I made the attempt," the culprit admitted humbly.

"What post did you hope to fill here?"

"My business for the last two years," the applicant confided, "has been, in company with two others, to guard the life of a person of some consequence."

“Your patron still lives?”

“He is, I believe, in the best of health,” was the cheerful reply.

“And why have you abandoned your position?”

“I became out of sympathy with the person whom I was guarding. I realised that I was drifting into a very dangerous position.”

“So you found your way here,” Mark Humberstone meditated. “And now?”

His fingers had ceased to toy with the revolver. His eyes were fixed steadfastly upon the little man whose face had become almost sphinx-like.

“I should like a post upon the personal staff of your executive, sir,” he confided. “I should like to act as a free lance remaining always in the background but always present—the number one bodyguard of you and Mr. Cheng.”

“What do you know about Mr. Cheng?” the young man flashed out.

“Not much, sir,” was the quiet reply. “Not much about you—not much about him. Still, this is a bureau of spies. Where there are spies there is danger. Where there is danger there I love to be.”

Mark Humberstone contemplated his unusual visitor with thoughtful eyes.

“You are a curious sort of fellow,” he remarked.

“So your father said more than once when I guarded for three years his private laboratory at Beaumont Park,” Mr. Jonson observed imperturbably.

Mark Humberstone sat up with a start. His face cleared.

“Now I remember you!” he exclaimed.

Mr. Jonson appeared gratified.

“For three years,” he went on, “my orders were to watch over the person of your father, and if there was trouble to waste no time asking questions—to shoot. That you may remember, sir, I did three times. The professor was always protected. No one was ever able to lay even a finger upon him.”

“You called yourself a Russian in those days, and you came from the staff of some notorious bootlegger.”

“What of it?” Mr. Jonson said placidly. “I have a dozen passports, and if on each one of them I claim a different nationality what does it matter? The bootlegger died a natural death, your father did the same, so now I come to look after you—and Mr. Cheng. It is a post for which I am admirably suited,” he continued after a brief pause. “I am a master of jiu-jitsu, I can fence with my arm against another man’s stick and break it in his hand. I know all the tricks of garrotting and gagging, and I have various other very useful accomplishments which I picked up during my study of Oriental conjuring. With a revolver or any sort of gun I am untouchable.”

“Your drawback in life I should think,” Mark observed drily, “is your overpowering modesty.”

“I am neither modest nor a braggart,” was the carefully spoken rejoinder. “I speak the truth.”

“Why, then,” Mark demanded with a suddenly keener thrust in his tone, “did you lie to us about your nationality when you applied for your position here? Why didn’t you tell me at once who you were? You served my father well.”

Mr. Jonson was the picture of misery. He cast a furtive glance towards the girl. His vis-à-vis understood. “You can say what is in your mind,” the latter enjoined. “This young lady is one of ourselves. She has our entire confidence.”

“It was in my mind,” the visitor admitted, “to enter your service under another identity just for this one reason: my experience has taught me that it is generally against the staff of a threatened man’s own household one has to guard.”

There was another short silence, then Mark rose to his feet and tossed the revolver lightly back into Mr. Jonson’s outstretched hands.

“You are attached to my Bureau,” he announced. “I am not sure,” he went on, “that either Mr. Cheng or myself are in any particular danger but there are certainly people in the world with whom we are not popular. This young lady,” he added, turning to Catherine, “will take you to the staff secretary. He will allot you a room and provide you with what money you require. Until you have definite instructions keep out of sight as much as possible. Afterwards, Mademoiselle, you will be so kind as to send for Suzanne.”

Mr. Jonson picked up his bags, bowed low to his new patron, and followed Catherine Oronoff across the room. From the doorway he looked back. Once more he bowed. There was a suggestion of the Orient about the man which, considering his complexion, his figure, and his neat precise English, seemed ridiculous. He departed without any further spoken word of farewell. Mark watched him with fathomless eyes. Both men seemed to possess the gift of silence.

Chapter II

Suzanne of the International Bureau, concerning whose real vocation in life there were various rumours afloat, held in these days a premier position amongst the courtesans of Nice. She was tall, willowy, and exotic in her characteristics. The sheen of her yellow hair, untouched by any form of artificial colouring, was her chief beauty. She had, however, the eyes of an eastern slave—languishing and passionate—the sneering but at times very attractive mouth of a Parisian cocotte of the haut monde. In Nice she had achieved great success, and in the only night restaurant which she frequented she reigned as a queen. She curtsied to Mark Humberstone as she entered his audience chamber a few days later, and assumed an air of devout attention.

“You have sent for your slave,” she said, stifling a yawn. “I was expecting your summons but it is early for me—and a little inconvenient.”

“Yes, I sent for you,” Mark, who had seated himself at Catherine Oronoff’s desk, observed.

“Eh bien?”

“You are living happily these days they tell me, Suzanne.”

“Comme ci, comme ça,” she answered with a little shrug of the shoulders.

“You will perhaps learn presently,” he said, “how to die happily.”

She mocked at him, yet somehow or other there was a chill feeling in her blood. Not many people had seen that look in Mark Humberstone’s eyes without fear.

“Oh la la!” she exclaimed. “Have I not worked well?”

“Your work is an utter failure,” was the calm reply. “Costoli has broken his leave to lie in your arms. Henceforth the man is useless to our clients and I know of no other who could have served their purpose.”

“Useless?” she cried passionately. “What do you mean? You have had the secret sailing orders of September the seventeenth, you have had the new charts of which only a dozen have been issued. Costoli is a ruined man and he knows it. He lies in my flat—he is there now—like a whipped dog. What more can I do?”

“Costoli dismissed from the Service, Costoli no longer Inspector of Naval Gunnery and a member of the Admiralty Board of his country, is useless to those for whom we are working,” Mark said coldly. “I told you what was required. The man was to have been your slave until the moment came when the great things were near. Now, in less than a week, you have made him compromise himself with his government, you have made him desert his post, his honour is gone, his life forfeit. What use is such a pricked bubble to us?”

“Well, he is no more use to me,” the girl declared with a heartless little shrug of the shoulders. “You had better get rid of him. I should not advise you to hand him over to the authorities. He might in a fit of remorse tell them about me and anything that he suspects about the Bureau.”

“So your little tongue has been wagging, eh?” Mark asked quietly.

“It is false!” she shrieked. “You should not accuse me like this—I who have worked for you as a slave. Antonio is not a fool. What does he suppose I want the papers for? He knows that I am a spy. He has given me what you asked for and I have given him the payment he craved. How am I to blame if he loses his head?”

The man whom she was addressing yawned—very lightly and very delicately. It was just an indication of weariness but it brought a shiver to the heart of the girl who watched him.

“You have captured the pawn, Suzanne,” he admitted, “but you have not only failed in the great things, you have made it impossible that you can ever succeed. Costoli in a month’s time could have given us information that would have been worth ten millions. So long as he was going to sell his honour, he might have done it for something worth while. He behaved like a fool. So also have you. A woman of the world knows how to keep a man at her feet better than that.”

She threw herself into a chair and swung her leg. It was obvious, from her scanty attire, that her abode was somewhere under the same roof.

“So I am dragged down here to be found fault with,” she complained, “to be told, I suppose, that the hundred thousand francs I wanted for next week will not be forthcoming.”

“In that you are correct,” Mark agreed. “The hundred thousand francs will not be forthcoming. On the other hand,” he went on, unlocking a drawer and producing a square sheet of paper, “something else may be coming that you will prize less highly. You have heard of the death warrants of the Bureau, Suzanne?”

She went suddenly rigid. There had never at any time been any natural colour in her cheeks but her eyes were terrible in their fixed stare.

“You do not really mean,” she faltered, “that I am to die?”

Illustration:

Her eyes were terrible in their fixed stare.

„You do not mean," she faltered, „That I must die?"

"Precisely what I am contemplating," he answered coolly, "and quickly too. You know very well that you could not escape the cordon I have drawn round this little corner of Nice, but one prefers to do things decently. You shall die with your lover—a drama of jealousy or despair, eh? The press will welcome the story."

She threw herself on her knees by his side. He drew his chair away.

"Don't dare to touch me," he ordered. "You know that that sort of thing is forbidden. You have thrown away the chance of a generation. What was at the back of your head? Why did you let Costoli desert his ship?"

Real tears were streaming from her eyes.

"I prayed him not to," she pleaded. "I pushed him out of my room. I bade him listen to the clock as it struck. I sent for a car. I did all I could. My master, he was drunk—drunk in his soul—drunk with love for me—drunk as you will never be with any wine or for any woman. I lost my senses too, perhaps. I gave myself and then it was—too late. Antonio may know more. What if he joined you?"

"He lies there like a whipped cur," Mark said calmly. "I have no use, Suzanne, for those who betray their country for such paltry things as you. I thought that Costoli was at least a man—that he would put up a battle—or I would have planned differently. And as for you—any little gamine from the street would have answered my purpose as well as you have done. I would not have such a man as Costoli working for me. There is nothing for him but his revolver, and he must know it. Why not conclude this matter in a friendly fashion—carry out the little drama pleasantly and with all the stage surroundings. Rush to him now, tell him that all is lost, shoot him and then yourself, or vice versa. I promise you that there shall be no scandal. We have our own ways of dealing with that, you know."

She clutched at the table by his side, breaking her beautiful nails recklessly. She feared to touch him, his disgust was too obvious, yet it was her life for which she pleaded.

"Listen," she cried, "Costoli has a brother—you know that. He knows as much as Antonio ever knew. He could perhaps satisfy you. Antonio shall die—I promise you that. He will shoot himself this morning if I tell him that I am a spy and never loved him. But the brother—he was wild with love for me but he had brains enough to go to his Admiral. He got a month's leave. He is in Toulon, I believe. If I send for him he will come."

The young man smiled sardonically, certainly not pleasantly. He looked down at the-girl who was pleading for her life—beautiful even in those agonies of hers—and his expression was that of one who looks upon some nauseous thing.

"Get up," he ordered. "Go back to your chair. Do not think that you have triumphed. I have as much pity for you as I have for the rats they kill in the sewers day by day. Still, you have given me an idea. You want to live. It might be arranged."

"Tell me how," she implored. "I will do anything. You would be mad to kill me. There is no one else who can turn a man inside out and play upon his heartstrings as I can. Sometimes I feel like a tigress and that men are my food. You can have what you waft from Costoli's brother—I promise you that. He was madder about

me even than Antonio. I thought that Antonio was your man or I should have taken him."

Mark said nothing and more and more every second Suzanne seemed to feel the terror of his silence. The light had gone out of her face. She was like a whipped animal sprawling in the chair waiting for the final lash.

"Ever been to Warsaw?" he asked.

"I was born there," she confided.

"A fact which does not appear upon your dossier."

"What does it matter?" she answered. "I was not born at all if it comes to that—I was kicked into life. My mother was a chorus girl at the opera. She never knew who my father was."

"How old were you when you left?"

"Four or five—I do not remember."

"But you went back again there."

"That is in my dossier all right," she told him. "I danced there when I was thirteen. When I was fifteen I had a lover with money. He took me back to Paris."

"Ever hear of a family of the name of Agrestein?"

She became an animate person again through the sheer shock of surprise.

"Warsaw millionaires!" she cried. "It was Paul Agrestein's grandson who took me to Paris."

He glanced up from a small book at which he had been gazing.

"These dossiers have their value," he remarked. "This one, my dear Suzanne, may save your worthless life. You want to live, I gather."

"As a bird wants to sing," she answered wildly. "I have life in me. It hurts. I will live."

"Well, you were the mistress of young Paul Agrestein," he observed. "That may make a difference. Sit up and listen to me."

She obeyed at once. Mechanically her fingers stole into the little bag which had fallen to the floor. He laughed as he saw her use her vanity case.

"Not worth while for me," he told her contemptuously. "Listen—the Costoli business is finished. You yourself have brought it to an end and it will be better for you to disappear for a time. For the moment you are reinstated. You go back to your lover. He is sober now?"

"He is what I choose to have him," she said carelessly. "Je m'en fiche de lui! He has lost his spirit."

"Take him away from here in an hour's time," Mark directed. "You can order a car. Take him to one of the hotels. Engage a suite of apartments. By the by, be sure that he takes his revolver with him."

"What is to be the end?"

"He is to shoot himself to-night. See that he does it. There will be very few formalities afterwards. You can return here, then I shall speak to you again about Warsaw."

"But the French police…" she faltered.

"When have you found the French police interfering with us or anyone belonging to us?" he asked. "You may be served with a notice of deportation, but whatever happens you will come here and nobody will stop you. Is that understood?"

She rose to her feet and drew a little breath.

"Yes," she answered. "Antonio Costoli is to die tonight. That pleases me. I am to live. That pleases me more still. I submit to the French police. I know nothing of why Costoli committed suicide. He may have talked a little—not my affair."

He pointed to the door and she slunk away closing it behind her.

"Ciel!" she exclaimed under her breath. She felt her knees trembling. "Pourquoi est-ce qu'on ne tue pas ce sale Americain?"

* * * * *

"It is the man with the bags," Catherine Oronoff announced as she stood, a short time later, by the side of Mark Humberstone's desk.

"What about him? He has all his instructions."

"He wants to know if he can give his ridiculous show at the Jetée Casino. He prefers," she continued, "to establish his identity at any place where he is likely to stay for any length of time."

"I see no objection. As it happens I wish to speak to him. Telephone, if you please, for him to come at once."

In a few minutes Mr. Jonson appeared. He had changed his clothes to a well-fitting suit of dark blue and he wore a bunch of violets in his buttonhole. He had evidently paid a visit to the coiffeur, for his pink-and-white cheeks were smooth and his coarse brown hair straight as the fibres of a mat. His new employer looked him over with a scrutiny from which most men would have shrunk. Mr. Jonson welcomed it with a pleased smile.

"What sort of a man are you, I wonder," Mark speculated.

"My deeds will show."

"Spoken curiously like an Oriental."

Mr. Jonson bowed.

"If I undertake service I serve honestly and well, but I choose whom I serve. I choose for what cause."

"In a strange service, such as this will be, amid strange surroundings," Mark warned him gravely, "you may come across much which you should ignore."

"I am not the sort of man who, when he has a mission, looks either to the right or to the left," Mr. Jonson confided. "I do not run about on four feet and I do not count the grains of dust in the road before me as I walk. The sunshine which you have lent me for a covering is where my eyes turn, and I have kept the soul with which I was born."

"You are a man of constant purpose, then?"

Then Mr. Jonson did an astonishing thing. He made the sign of the cross. Ever so slightly his questioner frowned upon him.

"What is the meaning of that?" he demanded.

"A cabalistic sign," was the apologetic reply. "I am not a Catholic. The cross is my visiting card in some places. It is the only fashion in which I talk to myself."

"I begin to wonder," Mark exclaimed, "whether it is a lunatic whom I have appointed to take charge of my safety!"

"You need have no fear," the other assured him. "It was no lunatic who kept your father safe from assassination. I am so far from madness that if you wish it I will answer now one of the unspoken questions you have had in your mind to ask me."

“Are these the tricks of the Jetée Casino, of the man who stops the spinning of the world when he chooses?”

“I possess the art of divination,” Mr. Jonson asserted, “but not in that fashion. Mine comes from the brain and from a curious apprehension I have always had of the motives of others. I suggest that you have sent for me to ask some question with regard to Warsaw.”

There was a moment’s silence. Catherine Oronoff swung round in her chair to look at this strange man with the egg-shaped head and the curiously precise appearance. Mark, if he felt any surprise, disclosed none. He flicked away the ash from the cigarette which he was smoking.

“Another Casino trick?” he remarked smiling. “Well, I fall. Have you ever, I wonder, heard of the house of Agrestein there? In the old days when millions flowed into the Riviera banks the Agresteins fashioned tiaras worth a king’s ransom. Is there one of the family still living in Warsaw?”

“I seem to remember,” Mr. Jonson said, gazing straight into the sunlight with unblinking eyes, “that Paul Agrestein, the head of the family, still lives in the old palace.”

“He would be a man of what age?”

“About sixty.”

“He travels sometimes this way?”

“I have heard of him in these parts once,” Mr. Jonson admitted. “He and his father before him had the reputation of being great gamblers.”

“The Poles have that proclivity,” Mark observed, rising to his feet.

“Have I your permission, sir, to depart?” the visitor asked.

“Why?”

“My men are at work fixing my apparatus at the Casino. It has to be very accurate and the performance commences at five o’clock. I need a particular sort of lunch first, and I have not yet cashed any money.”

“You may go,” Mark acquiesced.

The magician rose smiling to his feet. He bowed to Catherine Oronoff and he bowed to Mark Humberstone. The latter looked curiously at the door through which, in a moment or two, he had disappeared.

“I am beginning to wonder,” he speculated, “whether I am wise in accepting the services of a clairvoyant.”

She shook her head.

“He is no clairvoyant,” she declared. “When he entered the room you had his passport in your hand. Three times you turned back to the page where his Warsaw visa was inscribed.”

“That is all very well,” Mark agreed. “A reasonable explanation indeed; but, I ask myself, where did he find that only slightly mutilated quotation he made use of apparently for my benefit? I am becoming suspicious about the fellow,” he went on thoughtfully. “He stops the earth with his forefinger in places of public amusement, he apprehends already, I believe, my interest in Warsaw, and he knows a quotation which it is not humanly possible that he has ever seen.”

Catherine Oronoff sometimes told herself that it was her mission in life to keep the feet of the man she served upon the earth. She yawned slightly as she turned to a file of papers she was sorting.

“I do not think that he is quite so wonderful as all that,” she remarked. “There are explanations for everything. Some day or other, I should think, you may find Mr. Jonson quite useful.”

Mark rose suddenly to his feet. A ripple of the April breeze had stolen into the large, severe-looking room and brought with it a breath of the perfume from the waving lime trees, perhaps also a wave of the odour from the heaped flower stalls in the market. From where he had been seated, too, he had caught a glimpse of the blue sky.

“We are going to St. Paul for lunch,” he announced. “How long will it take you to get ready?”

She smiled.

“I am ready, but—”

Mark was suddenly the autocrat. He swept away her protests. In less than five minutes they were in his automobile passing along the Promenade des Anglais.

Chapter III

Seated opposite to one another at a small table on the terrace of the restaurant of the Colombe d’Or, drinking the white wine of the country out of thick tumblers whilst they waited for their trout, they breathed the atmosphere of a different world. Spring was warm in the air. The early butterflies were flitting round them. Fleecy clouds were being driven lazily across the blue sky by the south wind.

“Was this wise?” she asked.

“It was not only wise,” he answered, “but it was necessary. For days, Catherine Oronoff, you have been looking pale and tired. It was time we broke away. You work too hard. For you, at any rate, it is not worth it.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because,” he said, leaning slightly forward in his chair, “you work too conscientiously, and you are simply doing the work which finishes each day when the Bureau is closed. You are just where Mr. Cheng has placed you and where I found you.”

“I am an automaton, of course,” she agreed a little impatiently.

“Do not resent it,” he begged. “Every task that comes to you to perform is done, and perfectly done. If the French Government closed us down tomorrow, if Cheng or I were assassinated or exiled, as might very well happen, you would still have done your daily work without a moment’s failure or without a single responsibility concerning it.”

“Even that,” she replied, “can scarcely bring happiness, can it? I have a country which is merely a memory. Almost all my friends and relations I lost before I was old enough to know what they meant. Nearly all of the few connections I have pass their time crawling miserably through life and praying for death. I am the fortunate one, it is true, but do you wonder that I find life bitter?”

“Not on a morning like this—” he begged. “Forget it. Look at those trout. Delicious! I am going to forget for a time this great business of living. There—I am

filling up your glass. We will drink red wine with the chicken when it comes, but we will finish every drop of this Vin Blanc de Saint-Paul."

"Spoken like a hero," she laughed. "I believe that I am silly. When I think of you and Mr. Cheng I know that I am. But then, you see, you are up in the high places, you are working amongst the clouds. It is only now and then that you come down to move the pawns."

"We are working at a great scheme," Mark admitted. "We will talk of it sketchily," he added glancing around at the empty tables close at hand. "I'll tell you one thing, Catherine, which impresses me more every day. Mr. Cheng is one of the greatest personalities I have ever come near."

She nodded.

"I am interested," she acknowledged. "He seems always so remote and yet he never makes a mistake. He seems to have mastered the philosophy of quietism."

"He lives in the clouds," Mark observed, "and yet when he comes down to earth he seems to know everything that has happened. He moves about just as naturally as a courtier or a statesman. And work! Do you know, Catherine, that we were up in the great dispersing room for fourteen hours with those army men from Washington? We had food and wine carried up, but they scarcely left off work. That was all very well for me because I am stronger than most people and my work lies up there, but Cheng never left us. He ate and drank scarcely anything and when we had finished he was the freshest of the lot."

"Some day," she remarked, "I suppose I shall know what it is all about."

"Some day, perhaps very soon, you will know everything," Mark assured her. "Cheng has the same idea as I have. We both of us trust you, as you know, with everything, but we build our scheme as we proceed and there is a great deal which we can tell nobody."

"I am not curious," she told him with a touch of her former weariness. "I walk along the broad level pathway of life and it seems to me when night comes I am breathing the same air, I am looking down the same hopeless avenue. You bring me here to lunch. I wonder why, Mark Humberstone. I cannot amuse you. My heart is always heavy. Why do you not take out one of these gay little French girls who can chatter away and keep you amused?"

"Mayn't I choose for myself?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. The cape she had been wearing had fallen back and he saw how thin they were.

"You choose ill," she sighed.

"I still maintain that I am the best judge of that," he answered smiling. "I watch you every day and you grow more like a ghost the whole of the time. You are going to drive me into an indiscretion. I am perfectly certain of that. I am not sure that I care very much. Take your eyes off that chicken for a moment and look at me."

It was a thin sort of smile, yet it was almost a smile.

"Your position at the present moment," he went on, "is that you are private secretary to Mr. Cheng when he needs you, and to myself. You do a great deal of work during the day. You think that it is leading nowhere and you are just as disheartened at night as you are in the morning. The days have lost their savour for you, is it not so?"

“They have never had any,” she told him. “I have never been anything but miserable since I went to that wretched school in that famine-stricken nunnery. Since I came out to share starvation and misery with the others, now in Paris, now in London, I have never known what it was to live or to feel that I wanted to live.”

“That will do,” he begged. “The red wine, waiter. Good. Now for my great indiscretion.”

“Alas,” she sighed. “I am still incurious.”

He looked into her still cold face, into those beautiful eyes which were like pieces of glass under her perfectly shaped eyebrows. She was probably telling the truth.

“Catherine Oronoff,” he said, “you realise, I suppose, that there is some meaning behind the establishment of the International Bureau? You don’t think that we are keeping hundreds of people working night and day just to do a little ordinary spy business?”

“I have given up wondering about it,” she acknowledged frankly.

He reached across the table and clasped the fingers of her left hand. Notwithstanding the warm spring sunshine he was conscious at once of their icy chill.

“We are working for a great end, Mr. Cheng and I,” he said. “Years ago we talked and dreamed of it when we were at Harvard together. Since I became one of the legatees of my father’s great discoveries we have gradually, step by step, evolved a definite plan of campaign.”

“For what purpose?” she asked.

He saw with delight the birth of that faint light of interest in her eyes.

“We are working,” he confided, “at a vast scheme which is now beginning to take definite shape day by day. We want to succeed where all the more experienced statesmen of the world have failed. We want to bring to the world the genesis, at any rate, of permanent peace.”

She shook her head dubiously.

“You are both dreamers,” she said, “you and Mr. Cheng. He lives apart from other men—too far apart—to know what an ugly and sordid place the world has become. And you, my dear Mark—”

“Leave me out of it for a moment,” he interrupted. “You know very little of Mr. Cheng, Catherine. Let me tell you this: not only has he travelled continually in his own country and brought about the beginnings of great changes there, but he has lived in Russia, he has lived in Germany, he has visited Paris. He was partly educated in England and partly in the United States. He absorbs in a flash what it would take some men weary years to assimilate. His judgments seem to come to him almost as naturally as the breath he draws, and he is always right. You may smile, my dear, but I know him better than anyone else and I tell you that there is something sanctified, godlike, in his swift mastery of all the great problems we set ourselves years ago to solve. As for myself I plod a long way behind, but where he has conceived some marvellous ideas I have been able to carry them out. Everyone who is going to move in the great places of life, Catherine, has to start by being a dreamer; but, believe me, we have our hands upon the great levers which will rock futurity, and we are going to use them.”

He withdrew his hand from hers and poured out wine. They continued their lunch. Every now arid then he glanced at her. There was a change already, he told himself joyfully.

"All this coming and going of strangers, of men of every nationality," he went on presently, "has meant something. I could tell you wonderful things, and I shall before long, of what is happening on the top floor of our huge building. We may not be able yet to speak to the stars, Catherine, but there is never a night when we do not speak for hours, never a day when we are not making plans with Mr. Cheng's friends in China. We are in touch in a new way with a new world and all the time we are building and making ready. The next thing I shall tell you—well, that will be very soon now," he went on, watching the waiter who was hovering close at hand, "will do more than awaken a little mild interest in those wonderful eyes of yours. You will begin to feel that this is a real world and that you are a real human being with your feet planted firmly upon it."

"Mark," she exclaimed, "why are you telling me all this?"

"I trust you," he answered.

"But ought you to? You know the sort of people we are surrounded with at the Bureau. Everyone who comes is suspect. All the time they are expecting to be spied upon just as we use these creatures such as Suzanne to spy upon other people. You know so little about me."

"More than you think," he assured her. "I know, for instance, that Catherine Oronoff is about a tenth part of your name. I know that you are a kinswoman of all the Romanoffs. I know that Alexander is your cousin and I know that it is he, in the eyes of a few at any rate, who is the legitimate ruler of your people. Mr. Cheng knew this when he brought you here. The secrets of the Bureau pass through your hands. Mr. Cheng has placed his absolute trust in you because he possesses that wonderful instinct which never fails him. I trust you, too, for another reason."

"You may," she said softly. "I am beginning to wonder what there is left that you can have to tell me."

He leaned across the table. He stretched out his hand and she clasped it eagerly.

"Our plans," he told her, "will involve vast changes in your own country, Catherine."

His words were quietly spoken but to her they seemed vibrant things. Her fingers gripped his. Her lips were parted. There was a subdued light which he had never seen there before, never even the symptoms of it, blazing in her eyes. Her right hand was pressed against her bosom. Simple words, but a new world seemed to be unfolding itself. She sat for a while in a state in which speech was impossible.

"We will talk of this again, Catherine," he said, withdrawing his hand and reaching for the coffee machine. "It is enough, I hope? There is nothing more to be said. Plans are still to be made, and until they are—silence."

"There shall be silence," she promised.

* * * * *

They drank their coffee and smoked cigarettes in the lazy spring sunlight. There was actually a faint flush of colour in Catherine's cheeks, a new life in her face

and movements. She sighed with regret when Mark called for the bill and rose to his feet.

"We must go?" she asked reluctantly.

He nodded. He, too, was a different man.

"Do you know where we are going?" he asked, as they walked hand in hand across the little palisaded garden.

"Back to the Bureau—yes?"

"Not for the moment," he answered. "We are going to the Jetée Casino. I want to see our new friend's performance."

Chapter IV

In less than an hour's time Catherine Oronoff and Mark Humberstone were seated at the back of one of the side boxes in the Casino. Mark tapped with his forefinger upon the programme.

"Excellent staff work," he remarked, smiling at his companion. "Our friend's turn comes next."

Almost as he spoke the curtain rose upon what was described as "the greatest scientific riddle of the century." They both leaned curiously forward. The strangely still, sombrely attired figure of Mr. Jonson was disclosed standing outside a small open tent. He was rather far back upon the stage and about ten yards in front of him was a thickly drawn white line of chalk. He waited until the complimentary round of applause died away and then he addressed the audience in excellent French, without apparently raising his voice, and yet with such clarity of tone that he was heard in the remotest corners just as distinctly as he was heard by his unseen observers.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began. "I come once more to place before you a scientific problem which I presented in this same building two years ago and which remains to this moment unsolved. I claim to have made a great discovery in one of the byways of an unexplored science and though full acknowledgment of my success has not yet been made, that I know will arrive in due course. My challenge, ladies and gentlemen, is at your disposal once more. You observe the steps leading from the auditorium to the stage? I invite any member of the audience who chooses, to mount them and to endeavour to cross the white line and approach me. I warn him that he will not be able to do so because at that particular point I have interfered with the rotation of the earth. To anyone who succeeds in passing it and reaching me I will present the sum of two thousand francs."

Already the eager competitors were forming in line. The first to mount the steps was a stout young man of consequential appearance carefully, almost foppishly dressed, his manner full of bravado. He paused on the stage and bowed to the man who stood looking at him gravely from the opening of the tent.

“It is understood, monsieur,” he demanded with a note of challenge in his tone, “that if I pass the chalk line between you and myself you pay me two thousand francs?”

“It is perfectly well understood,” was the calm reply.

The young man walked forward gingerly yet with unabated confidence. All of a sudden, about a yard from the line, he stopped and threw up his hands, his feet began to move faster and yet he made no progress. His hair seemed to become disarranged as though by the action of an unsuspected wind. He threw up his arms to balance himself. Those who were in the front rows saw the colour leave his cheeks, saw fear creep into his eyes. Those who were behind saw nothing but the funny sight of a human being who had lost control over his feet. His paroxysms were like the frantic efforts of a man trying to walk backwards down an automatic stairway. Roars of laughter came from the rear of the auditorium. From the front rows, however, there were gasps of something which sounded more like exclamations of fear. Then the showman’s voice, clear and bell-like, rang through the auditorium.

“Try a little harder, my friend,” he mocked. “Two thousand francs is a good deal of money. You can take the young lady out to-night, yes? You think that the earth is rising to meet you? That is fancy. It is because the earth has ceased to move that you find progress difficult. Come—try once more.”

The man suddenly seemed to lose control. He collapsed upon the floor a yard or two away from the chalked line. An attendant, who apparently had been waiting in the wings for that purpose, rushed forward and raised the adventurous competitor to his feet. The latter seemed a smaller person, shrunken with some fear.

“You wish to try again?” Professor Ventura asked.

The young man shivered. He turned towards the steps. The attendant helped him down. He staggered back to his place amidst a chorus of mingled applause and cries of ridicule.

“If the next person will kindly come forward,” the Professor invited. “It is unfortunate that what we call the stationary vibrations were too much for our friend… What, no one is anxious to come? That is distressing.”

A man in the audience rose to his feet.

“What is it that you have in that tent?” he asked.

Mr. Jonson turned and threw wide open the flaps. The tent contained nothing but an iron table upon which rested a small machine, the flywheel of which was whizzing round in space.

“There is nothing here, as you see,” Mr. Jonson explained, “except the instrument of my own invention with the aid of which I perform the miracle.”

A youth of a different class came resolutely forward. He was shabbily dressed and carried with him an unpleasant impression of life in the unsavoury places. He stood stolidly upon the platform and gazed at the imperturbable Professor.

“I ask you, Professor Ventura,” he demanded in a loud voice, “whether there is any trick in this business?”

“If there is a trick find it out,” was the curt reply. “Tiens—”

Mr. Jonson never finished his sentence. The young man had apparently made up his mind to try rush tactics. He made a spring forward for the chalk line. He had reached it within a foot when he suddenly jumped into the air. For the space

of sixty seconds he gave a far more exciting performance than his predecessor—then he too collapsed and was led away. Mr. Jonson advanced to the extreme edge of the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced. "To show you that there is no trick in my marvellous discovery I will now earn my own two mille."

He lit a cigarette. Half the audience rose from their places to watch him. He glanced over his shoulder towards the table on which his little instrument stood. With his cigarette in one hand he turned round.

"You will observe, ladies and gentlemen," he said, "the conditions remain exactly the same. Voilà!"

He turned and walked—sauntered perhaps would be the better word—across the space. He stood with both feet upon the chalk line, re- entered his tent a moment or two later, and with a farewell bow disappeared amidst the usual storm of confused applause. A small crowd of supers rushed out from the wings. Some of them busied themselves eliminating the white chalk line, two others removed with great care the instrument and the table, another one folded up the tent and disappeared with it upon his shoulder. There was no sign anywhere of Professor Ventura…

"How does he do it?" Catherine asked curiously.

Mark shrugged his shoulders. There was a slightly puzzled frown on his forehead.

"To tell you the truth," he confessed, "I don't quite know, but I am beginning to understand where he got the idea."

Chapter V

Mr. Cheng glanced up from his place at the opening of the door. He was seated at a beautiful sandalwood desk strewn with papers and charts of every description yet distributed with a singular neatness which eliminated any idea of disorder. A very exquisite bronze Buddha occupied the centre of the table and on his right was a blue Nankin bowl of red roses. The walls of the room were panelled with some light-coloured wood. A few beautiful rugs lay upon the highly polished floor, but the room itself contained very little in the way of decoration or furniture. Somehow or other, though, it seemed a fit setting for the man whose sanctum it was.

"You have not been wanting me, I hope?" Mark asked a little anxiously.

Mr. Cheng shook his head.

"Too much to do and think about to miss even one's dear friends," he confided. "And now, Mark, behold what has happened! I am summoned to London."

Mark obeyed his friend's gesture and seated himself in one of the high-backed chairs. He leaned forward and helped himself to a cigarette from an ivory box upon the table.

"Well," he observed, "I suppose it had to come sooner or later. To tell you the truth I am surprised that it did not come before."

“So am I,” the other confessed. “All the same the work here is so enthralling that I do not like to leave.”

He rose to his feet and walked the length of the room and back again with his hands behind his back. He was slightly taller than Mark, with a slim and supple figure, deep-set thoughtful eyes, dark brown hair and a complexion the duskiness of which was scarcely more than an ordinary sunburn. There was little about him to suggest the Oriental. His mouth was strong and firm—curving faintly upwards. His features had all the impassivity of the East, in repose. He spoke with singular distinctness but with no trace of a foreign accent.

“Whom did you hear from?” Mark asked.

“From Wang Kai-Hsiung himself. The dear old fellow in his quiet way is beginning to worry. I do not think, Mark, that he really understands. Why should he?”

“How can anyone understand except you and I and our friends up above?” Mark rejoined. “Thank goodness the time is not very far off when we can raise the curtain.”

Mr. Cheng distinctly chuckled.

“How they will stare across Europe,” he observed, “those chattering politicians who sit and bargain around their council rooms like merchants, bargain for safety, bargain for a few less ships there or a few more somewhere else, shake their heads with horror at the idea of war but take good care to be prepared for it. Mark, I used not to think so,” he went on, “but I am coming to the conclusion that your people and mine are the only people with a real love of peace in their hearts. The others are all ready for a scrap so long as they think that they are going to get the best of it. If it had not been for that amazing parent of yours I fancy there would have been changes upon the map before now.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” Mark agreed. “Tell me, when do you leave?”

“To-night,” Mr. Cheng replied. “It is a full moon and we could find the way blindfold. I shall take my coffee with Wang Kai-Hsiung in the morning and present myself in official circles at midday. By the by, you knew something about this man Jonson who has joined the staff?”

“He was one of our vigilance men out at Beaumont Park,” Mark confided. “He came here from Moscow. I have just been watching him perform at the Jetée Casino. Professor Ventura, he calls himself there. I am half inclined to believe that he makes use of one of those devices that the old man used to amuse himself with. Anyhow, I think he’s all right. He wants the job of looking after us. I don’t think he will do any harm.”

“Not if he keeps in the background,” Mr. Cheng assented. “Anything in the nature of a bodyguard, as you know, is loathsome to me.”

Mark nodded thoughtfully. He threw away the stub of his cigarette into the small fire of pine logs which was burning in the open grate and lit another.

“And yet,” he went on, “history has offered us a great many warnings as to the folly of risking the lives of those who are precious to the world. The rats are always there, you know.”

Mr. Cheng swept away the subject with a wave of the hand.

“From what Wang Kai-Hsiung divulges,” he continued, “suspicion is growing fast in influential quarters. It may be difficult to satisfy this inquisitive minister. How do things progress above?”

“Precisely according to plan,” Mark replied. “In a month’s time one could press the button. General Wu Lu Chên has left Manchuria and will be back in Pekin tonight. As I daresay you know, we have twenty-four military experts from my country hidden about the premises at the present moment. They will be leaving for Pekin to-morrow or the next day. When General Fan Sik Tsun leaves here again it will be for the last time.”

“On that day,” Mr. Cheng said quietly, yet with a curious hidden force in his words, “we shall begin to rewrite the history of the world.”

* * * * *

Both men rose quickly to their feet. There was no mistaking the unexpected sound. Someone was tapping softly at the door. Mark crossed the room in a half-dozen strides. His right hand was resting on his hip pocket as he threw open the door with his left. Mr. Jonson stepped blandly but respectfully into the apartment.

“What the devil are you doing here?” his employer demanded.

Mr. Jonson seemed to have become the complete foreigner. He bowed very low to Mr. Cheng. He bowed again to Mark as he answered his question.

“I came for my orders, sir.”

“What orders?”

Jonson seemed a little hurt. He continued, however, with untroubled calm.

“One of my two masters is leaving for a strange country,” he said. “Is it not my office to accompany and protect him?”

Mr. Cheng smiled tolerantly. Mark was still angry.

“You have no office,” he declared, “except to obey orders. How did you get here anyway? Don’t you know that this part of the building is shut off from the Bureau?”

“But not from me,” Jonson pleaded. “I am the guardian of my Chiefs.”

Even Mark felt his anger abating. The little man seemed so sure of himself, so sure that he was doing the right thing. His protests were gently worded. The look of a hurt dog shone out of his brown eyes.

“See here,” Mark pointed out, “you have no right on this side of the building at all and you are only required as a guardian when Mr. Cheng or I order you. Besides,” he went on bluntly, “what good would you be anyway? Is that gun in your hip pocket?”

“No, sir,” Jonson answered gently. “I do not often make use of a gun. It is my last resource.”

“Then supposing when I opened this door I had seized you by the collar and thrown you out of the window, as you very well deserve for daring to come to Mr. Cheng’s private room—What about that, eh? What sort of protection would you have been able to offer?”

“The circumstance did not arise,” Jonson pointed out respectfully.

“But supposing it had, you idiot!”

“I would like very much,” Jonson said, “that you should have the idea of throwing me out of that window, if it is really permitted that I am to demonstrate my ability as a protector.”

“It is permitted all right,” Mark assured him. “Look here.”

He leaned forward and in a second Mr. Jonson was lifted into the air. But in the next second other things had happened. Mark felt himself suddenly whirling around with his feet off the ground, felt himself somehow tucked under the arm of a giant, felt an excruciating pain in his elbow and pain in his throat—and suddenly discovered that he was seated in the chair he had just vacated on the other side of the table from Mr. Cheng. Before him Jonson, unruffled, was regarding him with unabated respect.

Illustration:
Before him Jonson, unruffled, was regarding him with unabated good humor. „It was your wish that I show you, sir,“ he said gently.

“It was your wish that I show you, sir,” he said gently. “You see, it would not have been possible to throw me out of the window. Many other things might have happened, but you would never have been able to lay your hand upon Mr. Cheng.”

The latter, from the other side of the table, regarded the two with sphinx-like calm. If there was any change in his face at all it consisted of a slight deepening of that humorous line.

“Well, what do you think of that?” Mark exclaimed at last. “God bless my soul, what are you, Jonson? A pocket Hercules? Or is that another of your tricks?”

“It was just a trick, sir,” the man acknowledged. “I asked your gracious permission. But you see Mr. Cheng whom I was protecting was always safe. As you revolved I felt your pockets. They were empty. No weapon.”

“A very interesting exhibition,” Mr. Cheng said quietly. “Perhaps you had better understand, though, Jonson, that notwithstanding my admiration for your skill and muscle it has always been my custom to deal with an aggressor myself. When I need help I shall know where to look for it. In the meantime—” he moved his head towards the door.

Jonson sighed but turned away.

“One moment,” Mark called out after him as he reached the door. “How the mischief did you know that Mr. Cheng was leaving?”

The intruder smiled very slightly.

“I am attached to the establishment,” he said. “It is part of my duty to know everything.”

“And the key?”

“I possessed myself of it,” Jonson explained. “That also was part of my duty. You will find, sir,” he concluded as he took his leave, “that I shall never fail in my duty while I am attached to your Bureau, even when the problems presented to me are more difficult.”

He walked down the corridor swinging his arms. Mark even fancied that he had developed a slight swagger.

“It appears,” Mr. Cheng remarked smoothly, “that you have added a magician to the staff. Where did you pick him up?”

Mark shook his head.

“I didn’t exactly pick him up,” he protested. “There had been some correspondence before, but nothing definite. He just arrived with two bags, some scarlet pants and a black velvet coat. As I told you, he performs at the Jetée Casino here.”

Mr. Cheng rose to his feet with a smile.

“They will be waiting for me in the dispersing room,” he observed. “General Wu Lu Chên will be arriving at Pekin and I must talk to him before I leave.”

“What about this fellow Jonson?” Mark asked.

Mr. Cheng laid his hand upon his friend’s arm as they crossed the floor.

“Let him go his own way. Unless you have serious occasion to do so do not interfere with him.”

Mark was somewhat staggered but he made no protest. “Your fatalistic instinct, I suppose.”

Mr. Cheng shrugged his shoulders.

“I have no doubt,” he said, “that the man is capable of evil deeds, that he is capable even of assassination, yet I believe that when he is in our presence evil is not with him.”

“Darned if I get you there,” Mark protested.

His friend smiled gently.

“You must make allowances for my outlook, Mark,” he begged. “I have adapted myself to your Western ways and your Western philosophies, but there are some things belonging to my own instinctive beliefs with which I cannot interfere. I, too, can be a mystic sometimes, you know, and I have even some credence in the art of wizardry. I shall, as you would so epigrammatically put it in your own phraseology, take a chance with Jonson.”

There was finality in Mr. Cheng’s tone. The subject was evidently closed. He strolled across the room with his hands behind his back and stood gazing out of the window over the tops of the lime trees opposite, over the red roofs of the town, up to the fading blue of the distant hills. He stood there motionless for several moments. Without turning his head, presently he spoke.

“When I come back, Mark,” he said, “the time will have arrived for my pilgrimage into the mountains. I spoke this morning with Pekin. Every day the temples in the southern provinces are being reopened. The President has disappeared. Only a few of his ministers are left. Everywhere the voice of the people is being heard calling, clamouring for government. They are asking for Hou Hsi, the descendant of the Great Empress. The statesmen who will serve us in the future are already at their places, but the time is coming, Mark, when we must disclose ourselves—therefore I must take that journey up into the mountains.”

“Good luck to you, my friend,” Mark declared as the two young men shook hands. “I may have something to say to you myself when you come back.”

Chapter VI

There is a certain seaward curve in the Moyenne Corniche between Nice and Monte Carlo from which, looking backwards, one can catch a glimpse of the necklace of lights fringing the Promenade des Anglais. Mark, when he reached it, brought his high-powered roadster to a standstill close to the outside wall.

"Mind if I have a cigarette?" he asked his companion.

"Of course not," she answered. "I too, if you please."

He produced his case and lighter. Then he swung round in his low seat and looked back across to Cap Ferrat, behind which Nice lay hidden. For several moments he remained speechless. In that fantastic spot they seemed raised so high above the roaring life of the last few weeks that the very tranquillity of it brought him a peculiar sense of rest. Everything down there was going on according to plan, but he himself had escaped for a few hours from the maelstrom. He drew a long breath of relief.

"My, it's good to get clear away, even if it's only for a short spell!" he declared.

She looked at him curiously.

"I find it always difficult to make up my mind why you have given yourself over to that amazing enterprise," she said. "For me it is different. I am just an employee there. I have no responsibilities. For you I think sometimes it must be terrible."

"It surely is," he acknowledged tersely. "Still, there are times when I am glad I have not Cheng's share of it to handle. Poor old fellow, he hated his journey to London."

"How long will he be away?" she asked.

"Might be back to-morrow—might not be back for a week. I shouldn't think that he Will stay longer than he can help. I hate having to interview all this swarm of officials who are buzzing around the place."

"What made you join up with the Bureau at all?"

He paused for several moments before he attempted any sort of answer.

"It is a very serious question that, Catherine," he said at last. "It is one of the branches of a Trust that came to me—well, because I was my father's son and had been his fellow worker. If he could have lived a few years longer he could have carried the thing through to the end, alone and without help from anyone, but he just couldn't. That's all there is to it. When he felt himself failing he just had time to tie up everything into this Trust."

"But Mark," she went on. "You will not mind, will you, if I ask you one more question? Why have you the control of it? It seems to me that you are terribly young for such a responsibility."

"I share it with others," he reminded her. "I share it with the Vice President of our country, whoever he may be, the Chief Admiral in Command of our naval forces, the Commander in Chief of our Army, the Secretary of War and one or two others."

"Of course, that is wonderful," she admitted. "But how is it that you are in that galère at all?"

“I happen to be the only one,” he confided, “who really knows how to harness and set in action these new elements.”

“The only one!” she repeated. “But supposing that anything were to happen to you?”

He took off his driving glasses, wiped his eyes and smiled.

“The clue to the secret itself,” he told her, “and the name of my successor are deposited in Washington under the Presidential seal. I suppose if it had not been for that, I should have been assassinated a dozen times over.”

They were in a sheltered part of the road almost hidden by the shadows of the falling night which had followed so closely upon the passing of the twilight. Occasionally a car raced by, its headlights throwing lurid gashes of illumination up the mountain and over the sides of the precipice, but at that moment the road was deserted. She leaned towards him.

“Mark,” she whispered.

“Catherine.”

“Those messages which you are sending out hour by hour from the observatory—”

He interrupted her—not sharply but with definite words, definitely spoken.

“Catherine,” he said, “I don’t want you to ask me any questions I could not answer.”

Her eyes shone at him through the misty light.

“You do not think that I, too, have caught the fever, that I am also a spy?”

“Why, of course, I could never think that,” he assured her with perhaps a little unnecessary emphasis. “I have never opened my mouth upon these subjects except to Cheng, and that was only after he had won the Nobel Prize for his treatise on ‘The Final Peace.’ I will go farther with you than with anyone, though. I will tell you what no one else has been told in plain words. The only time this new destructive agency which I possess has been used in warfare was when the Council sanctioned its employment after the Japanese Fleet had committed an act of war and attempted to seize the Philippines. You know the result of that? The Japanese have lost their place as an International Power for at least another twenty-five years. That is the only time we have ever used the forces which we control in warfare. At the present time I will admit we are using every day one of our minor discoveries—a wireless installation which reduces all others to impotence. We are also using the television which the Council decided some time ago might be exploited for military surveying as apart from regular warfare.”

“I shall ask no more questions,” Catherine decided abruptly. “Mark, I am afraid to ask any more. We will go on, please. Let us get to Monte Carlo.”

He smiled as he threw away his cigarette and started the soft purr of his twelve-cylinder engine.

“You are so wise, Catherine,” he told her. “There is some knowledge which lives with one like a pain. It isn’t worth having but if it comes you can never quite get rid of it. It’s like a fire which can never be put out. You and I will talk of other things this evening.”

“I agree gladly, Mark,” she said, settling down with a sigh of content. “Notwithstanding that ingenuous countenance of yours and those delightful

freckles, which at times give you the appearance of extreme youth, I am beginning to believe that you are really a person to follow and to trust."

"It's good to hear you say so," he acknowledged earnestly. "I have been living, as you know, practically ever since I left college, with the one idea of carrying creditably the burden which the old man strapped on to my shoulders. I have had some close shaves, but I managed to come out all right somehow or other. I am talking to you seriously to-night and it is because I want to possess your confidence."

"You have it," she assured him.

"And because of other reasons," he wound up, "which I hope to explain later on."

She remained demurely but provocatively silent. They were commencing the tortuous descent into the Principality. When they had turned the last corner, however, and were on their way along the straight road with the Sporting Club ablaze with lights on one side and the gaily illuminated gardens on the other, he glanced down at her, smiling.

"I shall now park the car at the Hotel de Paris," he announced, "and we will have our first and best cocktail in the bar."

Mark swung through the narrow entrance, helped her out and led her to the long comfortable lounge. He gave a prompt order to the linen-coated attendant who had hurried out, smiling, to greet them.

"Two of the best cocktails on the Riviera, Louis. Your 'White Ladies' with sweet lemons, Cointreau, and Gordon's gin. And look here—get your boy there to telephone to the Sporting Club and ask André to bring me the dinner menu, and see that the flowers have come for the table I ordered, for two, against the wall…Catherine, I am beginning to feel that we are out on a party."

She laughed gaily.

"I have been feeling like that ever since I put on my new frock," she confided.

* * * * *

Mark gave the sommelier a hasty order as they took their places at the table a half-hour or so later. Catherine glanced at him in surprise.

"Another cocktail!" she exclaimed. "Why, we had two in the bar."

"Can't help it," Mark regretted. "I caught sight of you in the mirror coming down those steps into the restaurant and I heard—well, never mind about that. Catherine, I must tell you, though, that I never saw you look so stunning in my life."

She smiled at him across the table.

"You do not often look at me, Mark."

"I—well, we do get sort of absorbed at the Bureau, don't we?" he pleaded hesitatingly. "But Catherine, you're beautiful."

"I felt that I was going to have a pleasant evening," she sighed.

"You should have heard what all those other people were saying," he went on.

"I do not think I should have cared much," she assured him. "I am rather sorry that you had to hear it from others."

"That dark blue gown," he continued. "Just the colour of your eyes, Catherine. And your black hair brushed back like that—I never realised that you had such a

beautiful forehead or such a delightful figure. Why, you walked down those steps like a princess."

"But I am a princess," she reminded him.

For a moment Mark seemed stupefied, then a flood of memory came to his aid.

"Of course," he stammered. "I had quite forgotten."

"Well, you need not look so worried about it," she laughed. "It was my cousin Alexander who introduced me to Mr. Cheng. I had been doing some wretched work on a woman's journal. We agreed from the first that I should come to work as Catherine Oronoff."

"Come to think of it, Cheng is a prince himself," Mark observed. "He has a page of the most picturesque titles."

"How did you discover that?" she asked.

"I saw it in the newspapers when he entered Harvard."

"Ah, well," she smiled. "I remember the time when I would have given my title away for caviar like this! And vodka! Delightful. I never expect to be princess to anyone again. Cheng is different."

"Why do you say that?"

"It just seemed to me that it was a different matter," she replied. "I have learnt to live without curiosity. I never ask myself to-day why people do things or leave them alone. Still, since we have come to the subject naturally, I suppose Cheng has some great object in the future at which he aims."

"Cheng is an idealist," Mark said gravely. "To me he seems to reach out even too far, but one can't tell these days—anything might happen."

"What I like about him," Catherine confided, "is that underneath that calm, unemotional exterior he is desperately in earnest about life. He is deeply religious, he is wonderfully patriotic. All the world who have read his marvellous essay know that he is a great pacifist—and all the time he has, I believe, a really deep affection for that little Chinese girl, the great-great-granddaughter of the old Empress, whom some day he is to marry."

"Hard to think of his marrying anyone, isn't it?" Mark observed.

"I have never tried," Catherine confessed. "The idea of that sort of thing in connection with him seems so utterly off the picture."

"Anyway, he has a mighty fine brain," Mark declared. "Cheng is a great man. The only thing I'd be afraid of for him would be that he would expect too much out of life, that he wouldn't be satisfied with what he got, that when his time comes to realise it he will find that life has cheated him."

"He has philosophy," she meditated. "He has probably counted up very seriously the values fate has to distribute."

"We most of us get sold some time," Mark concluded. "Fate's all on my side to-night, though."

She smiled.

"That is a very gallant speech."

"It's a very truthful one."

A slim young man, pale and with features good enough but worn as though with anxiety or privation, approached their table and bowed to Catherine. She half rose to her feet but he waved her back.

“Thank you, my cousin,” he said, “but those things are left behind for the moment. Will you present me to your companion?”

“With pleasure,” she answered. “This is Mr. Mark Humberstone—the Grand Duke Alexander.”

Mark rose to his feet. The two men shook hands. Alexander’s tone was courteous but a little cold.

“Are you, too, a great discoverer of hidden forces, Mr. Humberstone?” he asked.

“I’m afraid I rather live on my father’s reputation, sir,” Mark replied.

“You work with my friend, Mr. Cheng, in Nice, I believe?”

“I belong to the International Bureau,” he admitted.

“An amazing association, I understand,” the Grand Duke said politely. “You will excuse me for a moment, sir.”

He placed his knuckles upon the table and, leaning a little towards Catherine, began talking to her in Russian. As she listened the careless gaiety of a few minutes ago seemed to pass from her face. Once or twice she interjected remarks. Afterwards she sat quite still. When Alexander had finished he waited for a moment. She looked into his face and answered him in French.

“Je n’oublierai pas ce que vous m’avez dit, mon cousin.”

The Grand Duke lingered for a moment but Catherine had the air of one who had finished a conversation which had afforded but little pleasure. Her eyes were bright, she seemed to have drawn herself more upright in her place. He bent over her coldly proffered hand, raised it to his lips and turned away. Even as he went the orchestra struck up one of the popular tunes of the moment. Catherine’s face changed as though by magic. The scornful quiver had left her lips. She leaned towards her companion.

“We shall dance—yes?” she asked.

It was a gala dinner at the Sporting Club, and a great many of the habitués of the place had remarks to make about the good-looking young couple who danced so well and to whom the Grand Duke had been talking. Mark was well enough known on the Riviera. He had been a member of the polo team at Cannes, won races with his motor boats, and played some amazing rounds of golf at Mougins and Cagnes. He was only an occasional gambler but his stakes, when he did play, were heavy, and he had the reputation of being a multi-millionaire. Catherine, on the other hand, puzzled everybody. She was distinguished, she was beautiful, she danced superlatively well, and though she was a stranger to everybody else she was evidently well known to Alexander, who had finished dinner early and passed on now to the gambling rooms. It was a Russian General, very well known in the Principality, who, after listening to numberless queries with a somewhat cynical smile, set the general curiosity at rest.

“The young man most of you know, I suppose,” he remarked. “He is the son of Humberstone, the great American inventor, a multi-millionaire, a friend of the mysterious Prince Cheng, and mixed up somehow or other in that curious International Bureau at Nice. The young lady I have never met in society, but she is a first cousin of Alexander’s, the Princess Catherine Oronoff. She occupies herself, I believe, at the Bureau in some sort of research work.”

“A very interesting trio,” a great lady remarked, handing her fan to her cavalier and rising to dance, “but what I should like to know is—why was Alexander scolding his lovely cousin, and, what did the young man think about it all?”

Chapter VII

The Right Honourable Sir Walter Temperley, British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, was in an unusually hesitant mood. He sat at his accustomed desk in the library of his official residence in Grosvenor Square. His distinguished visitors who had just been ushered in were seated in the comfortable chairs close at hand usually allotted to callers of distinction. Nothing, so far, about the few words interchanged had been of a disturbing character, yet Temperley was conscious of a sense of strain. How was he to learn anything from these two men? The elder, Wang Kai-Hsiung, First Secretary of the Chinese Embassy to the Court of St. James’s, had the reputation of being the most inscrutable and the most silent amongst the diplomatists. This handsome, grave-looking young man who was his companion and whom he treated with so much ceremony had, notwithstanding his conventional attire, more the appearance of a Trappist monk than of the lighthearted, studious and brilliant scholar whom Temperley had known as his son’s friend at Oxford. He opened the interview, however, with a few courteous words of reminiscence.

“I hope you remember me, Prince Cheng,” he said. “I was at Oxford twice, visiting my son, whose rooms were next to yours, I think, and we had the happiness of having you spend a week with us in Devonshire during the long vacation.”

“I remember you perfectly, sir,” Cheng replied. “You and Lady Temperley were very kind to me. I gained my first experience of English country houses under your roof. Lady Temperley is well, I trust?”

“Quite well, and she heard of your arrival with interest. If you make a stay in town I hope we shall have the pleasure of a visit from you.”

“That, alas, is not possible,” was the regretful reply. “I leave London to-night.”

“And you arrived this morning?”

Cheng acknowledged the fact.

“I have affairs of some importance which await my attention at my home in the south of France,” he explained. “I paid this visit, Sir Walter, at the request of Wang Kai-Hsiung here, the esteemed representative of my country. That request I believe was inspired by you.”

“I can assure you that your visit is appreciated,” the Foreign Secretary declared, leaning back in his chair. “I will try and condense as far as possible what I wish to say to you. For many months,—I might say for several years in fact,—but more particularly during the last few months, we have been aware of a curious state of affairs in the East—disturbances the origin of which we have been unable to trace, rumours which we have never been able to verify, stories of large troops of Chinese posing as brigands but well armed and possessing all the modern paraphernalia of

warfare. Our first idea naturally was that China had at last found a leader and was arming against any further encroachments by foreigners. Then all those speculations were upset by the fact that we heard of considerable numbers of Americans in China—of American military men of all ranks—mingling on friendly terms with the Chinese. Furthermore, we have been given to understand as a positive fact that China and America have opened up new relations of friendship and that China has been buying enormous stocks of munitions and even guns from the United States."

"Some purchases there have been without a doubt," Cheng acknowledged. "My country wishes to stand well with America and she loves best the people with whom she can trade. We have certainly made large purchases of war material."

"With the object of a further campaign against debilitated Japan?" the Foreign Secretary asked.

Very faintly but in marked fashion Cheng raised his dark eyebrows.

"That is scarcely a question, sir, for me to answer, even if you feel justified in asking it. I am a long way from home, and are you not taking it for granted that I am in the councils of my nation? Probably these munitions are not destined for any particular campaign. America, I understand, has shown an increased disposition lately to treat with China and, from frequent conversations with my friend Wang Kai-Hsiung here, I learn with the greatest satisfaction of my country's improved commercial position."

The foreign secretary appeared entirely unimpressed. He glanced down at some pencilled notes which lay upon his desk.

"Leaving alone for the moment," he continued, "the question of these huge purchases of war munitions and this continual training of troops, which would certainly seem to indicate an intention on the part of your country to go to war with somebody, I wish to touch for a moment upon a matter concerning which I believe that you, Prince Cheng, are in a position to give me direct information. During the whole of the last year, and especially during the last few months, our communications with nearly every place of importance within the Chinese Empire seem to be curiously and effectually blocked. As soon as we have news of a gathering of troops in one direction the whole thing fades away and the rumours are contradicted. I am going to be quite frank with you, Prince Cheng, and with Your Excellency. At least half the cables and wireless messages we have received from the East during the present year have been bogus ones and our diplomatic representatives are continually making complaints. Even the journalists and representatives of our press appear to be in very much the same state of bewilderment as to what is going on."

"It is a condition of affairs which appears incomprehensible," Cheng observed gravely.

"It is nevertheless true," Sir Walter persisted. "Not only that, but the cables are continually suffering damage as though by violent storms, our wireless stations in many parts are rendered useless by the interposition of stronger currents, and the diplomatic agents, of whom we maintain a reasonable number in the East, leave this country on special missions and then disappear from the face of the earth."

"It is," Cheng acknowledged, "a most extraordinary state of things."

“I am glad that you realise that, Prince,” the cabinet minister went on drily. “Affairs have now reached a crisis. We can no longer stand in the way of the press getting hold of these sensational rumours, we can no longer keep them from being brought to our official notice in Parliament. The matter will then become urgent. It is my deep wish, Prince Cheng, that nothing should happen to disturb the friendly relations between our countries, which induced me to beg for your visit.”

“But my dear Sir Walter,” Cheng protested gently, “how could you imagine that I, so far away from home, would be able to explain what is going on there? I have scientific interests of my own in which I am engrossed.”

“I will tell you why I have asked for your help,” the Foreign Secretary continued, leaning back in his chair and with his eyes steadily fixed upon his younger visitor. “We have heard a great deal about this wonderful International Bureau of Espionage of which you are the reputed head in Nice.”

“Our operations,” Cheng assured him, “are chiefly local.”

“That is what I have been given to understand,” Sir Walter acknowledged. “Less than a week ago, I believe, one of your spies got hold of some important plans and valuable information from an Italian officer whose ship was lying in Villefranche. France is so nearly our ally still that you can understand there were certain particulars which were passed on to us.”

Cheng remained silent. His companion intervened suavely.

“You could scarcely expect, Sir Walter,” he expostulated, “that the Prince would be in a position to discuss these matters with you. The Bureau in question is, I understand, a private venture.”

The minister shrugged his shoulders.

“Very well,” he conceded, “we will not dwell upon that for the moment. We proceed now to another matter. We are informed, Prince, that in connection with the Bureau, you have control of a wonderful wireless station.”

There was a moment’s silence. The Chinese minister nodded several times. He seemed only mildly interested. Cheng’s expression was immovable.

“We are told,” the Foreign Secretary continued, “that you have associated with you in the manipulation of this institution Mark Humberstone, son of the greatest scientist America or the world has ever known. We are told that by means of instruments which are now coming into use under the roof of your building for the first time in history you are enabled to hold continual conversations with people at the other end of the world. We are also told that you have developed television to an extent which is utterly unknown to the public and that you are able at any rate to generate a current of such power that you can practically put out of action any other wireless station.”

Cheng shook his head very slowly.

“There is much exaggeration in these reports,” he said. “I was at college with Mark Humberstone and I myself have developed a passion for the science of which he is so great a master, as befits the son of such a father. It is possible that our experiments interfere with other stations. Concerning that you should address yourself to my friend, who would listen willingly, I am sure, to your representations.”

“And what about these military movements?” the Foreign Secretary asked.

“Concerning those,” Cheng replied, “who am I that you should ask questions of me? I do not represent my country. Why do you not apply to our friend here, Mr. Wang Kai-Hsiung?”

“Believe me I have already done so,” Sir Walter assured his young visitor coldly. “As I daresay you know, however, Mr. Ting Fu Tai is the accredited minister to this country and he, unfortunately, is on leave of absence for four months and is somewhere in China. Neither Mr. Wang Kai-Hsiung nor anyone else at the Legation can give us any information as to what is going on. Their reply to every question is the same—uplifted hands, a blank shake of the head, all must wait until the return of Mr. Ting.”

“But surely there must be some news that reaches you?” Cheng ventured. “The newspapers publish ridiculous reports, without a doubt, but that is their business. They publish them for the sake of being able to deny them the next day.”

“The press is often misled—as we have been,” the Foreign Secretary said. “The time has arrived when we need facts.”

Cheng for a moment departed from the suave methods of the diplomatist.

“What is it that you fear?” he asked simply.

The foreign secretary answered without hesitation.

“An alliance between a reorganised China and Russia.” Cheng’s eyebrows were once more slightly raised. His tone was smooth and expostulatory.

“These things are all conjectures,” he pointed out. “There is no reason why the very thought of them should be so terrifying. I am quite sure that the statesmen of European countries, including Great Britain, are brave men. I think that it is your newspapers which make cowards of you all. I am an alien figure here and I sit and watch. I make myself an observer. One day there is France shivering at the idea of a German and Italian combination, your own country, Sir Walter,—forgive me,—muddling along trying to be friendly with everyone, sending her diplomats like commercial travellers to every ruler in Europe to try and secure good will. Then there is Italy, drenched with the bombastic eloquence of a dictator, who defies the world one day, seeks the safest alliance to evade a European imbroglio the next, and finally, with all the pomp and glitter and panoply of a nation marching to seek eternal fame, declares war against a partly civilised, partly armed nation of vastly inferior strength. Lastly, the centre of all the hubbub, Germany, sits panting like a half-human monster in the middle of Europe, aching to fight anybody. Europe is becoming like a gigantic circus. I shall continue to speak frankly, if you wish. I think the Continental statesmen are all of them too fond of talking peace in florid and high-sounding phrases and too timid to follow their star and strip for battle when the hour would seem to have come.”

“You are not exactly complimentary, Prince Cheng,” Sir Walter remarked.

“Did you send for me here to pay you compliments?” was the gentle rejoinder.

“You must pardon His Highness,” Wang Kai-Hsiung begged, “if he speaks with some of the overenthusiasm of youth. In our own country for thousands of years war has been one of the stern facts of life. We are not great at making treaties, we do not seek too many friendships, but when the time comes we march cheerfully to battle prepared, if the Fates ordain it, to fight alone.”

“If I have been too bold, forgive me,” Cheng pleaded. “What His Excellency has just said is so true. With us, although we have been for a long time a disrupted

nation, war has become an accepted necessity of life. The tragedy which has affected Japan and the reverberation of which is still felt all through China has altered the whole situation throughout Asia. If China has decided that this is her time to renew her strength, to break away from the stranglehold which at one time was crushing the life out of our nation, can you not sympathise with us? If we are to blame which of the European powers is prepared to criticise us? And why? If indeed it be true that we have sought the advice of the United States in the technical reconstruction of our army and navy, have we not the right? If any European power fancies itself concerned in this matter should it not be rather to Washington that it should turn?"

Temperley moved uneasily in his place. This interview was not proceeding exactly along the lines which he had intended.

"We are wandering a little, I think," he pointed out, "from the immediate subject of discussion. We have every reason to believe that communications between your country and the rest of the world are being continually interfered with by the use of powerful wireless installations of the type for which that great man, Professor Humberstone, was responsible, and doubtless by other methods. The whole press of Europe is complaining. It seems to us as though it had become the business of the Chinese Government to rebuild their world-famous wall, only this time it is a wall of secrecy. All Europe is becoming uneasy, Prince Cheng. We want to know what is going on behind that wall and why it is, for instance, that our weekly airship services to Singapore are continually being interfered with."

Prince Cheng glanced at his companion and rose to his feet. He made a formal bow.

"Sir Walter," he said, "I am a private individual. I have no authority from the Government of my country to answer the questions which you have addressed to me."

"How then are we to obtain the information we need?" the Foreign Secretary asked. "Your Minister is away on sick-leave, Mr. Wang Kai-Hsiung can tell us nothing, our Minister in Pekin complains all the time that he finds it almost impossible to obtain an audience with the President. We have sent a special envoy to China, and he has been held up on the western frontier on ridiculous pretexts for nearly a month. Tell me at least this, Prince Cheng: In whose interests is your Bureau at Nice working? It is, according to the reports we have received, practically under the protection of the French Government."

"We have their good will," Cheng acknowledged. "They have our confidence. We have worked for their Secret Service, we have worked for Italy, we have worked for other countries."

"Your institution then is, I gather, an institution of mercenaries," the Foreign Minister observed.

Cheng smiled. His expression remained sphinx-like. His farewell words left a curious impression behind him.

"Sometimes," he said, "one finds in history that the mercenaries of the world have fought under many banners and against various enemies but for one cause."

* * * * *

Cheng and his companion hesitated for a moment upon the pavement outside the imposing house in Grosvenor Square. Wang Kai-Hsiung made a sign to two of his servants who stood at once to attention.

"I beg of Your Highness," he said with emphasis, "not to delay your departure. Believe me, there are others in this city to-day besides the British Foreign Secretary who are eager to talk with you and who have perhaps more than words and hints with which to threaten. We had a special warning only this morning of some Russians who have arrived by plane."

Cheng looked around him with unruffled composure.

"Your Excellency must be obeyed," he assented reluctantly. "At the same time, is it really necessary for me to deposit myself in that bleak-looking limousine which looks like an armoured car, with an obvious detective seated by the chauffeur?"

"It is regrettable," Wang Kai-Hsiung admitted, "that the protective measures offered by Scotland Yard are somewhat obvious, but this brief journey can, I think, be made in safety under these conditions."

Cheng's apparently careless glance around as he was preparing to step into the car had suddenly become a transfixed gaze. He was watching a small man who was coming down from the north end of the square walking in the middle of the roadway, his hands in his overcoat pockets, his hat set at rather a rakish angle, his lips half formed for a whistle.

"You see that little fellow?" he pointed out as he stepped into the car. "I do not know him very well or very much about him, but you had better tell the chauffeur to hurry. T fancy that there is some trouble about."

Chapter VIII

The Government car—a loan for the day to the Chinese Legation through the courtesy of the Home Office—a policeman on a motor bicycle, and a Scotland Yard squad car swung through the entrance to the Heston Flying Ground almost alongside, and raced down the straight avenue to where a large German plane, throbbing with the beat of its mighty engines, seemed to be on the point of departure. But the passenger who descended from the automobile, brief though the pause en route had been, was not the man who had stepped so lightly across the pavement outside the Foreign Secretary's house in Grosvenor Square and swung himself into the waiting car. He was a smaller, cheerful-looking little person in neat black clothes, smoking a long cigar which he threw away with reluctance as he crossed the space between him and the plane. An official called out to him to hurry. There was a brief argument. The little man who had seemed so eager to take his place in the plane withdrew. He vanished completely for a few moments, then he reappeared on the outskirts of the straggling crowd standing by the side of two other men whose faces were both upturned to the sky. From the other side of the aerodrome a smaller plane had mounted with incredible speed and, even as they stared at it, passed with smoothly beating engines over their heads.

“What plane is that?” one of the three asked the attendant.

The latter glanced upwards.

“Not on the schedule,” was the stereotyped and curt reply.

They all three gazed after the machine, which, going at a great speed, was already almost out of sight. The German plane had begun its race down the track. With scarcely an effort it too mounted into the air. The passenger who had changed his mind and the two companions whom he had temporarily joined seemed to have disappeared. The inspector of the squad car looked for them in vain amongst the loiterers. He strolled away to exchange a few remarks with the officer in charge of a second squad car which had just driven up from a distant part of the grounds.

“A neat job, inspector,” the latter remarked.

The inspector smiled.

“A clever getaway,” he agreed. “I think, though, I had better have a look for the little man. He is as clever as they make ‘em, but those other two are dangerous. The tall man’s a killer all right.”

“Going back to the Yard first?” the officer asked.

The inspector assented.

“Got to change my clothes,” he confided. “I only want to have just a glance at the little man, Mr. Jonson he calls himself, and see that he is not in trouble. I think I know where to find him.”

* * * * *

The three men who had left Heston separately came together an hour later in one of the smaller cafés of Soho. Mr. Jonson, the first to enter and seat himself, occupied an empty table in a distant corner; the taller man with whom he had exchanged a single word on the flying ground, who had the appearance of a gaunt and unsuccessful commercial traveller in foreign commodities, joined him within a few minutes; and a third man, wearing a mackintosh over a suit of grease-stained overalls, followed close behind. The proprietor, who had watched their entrance uneasily, came over and accosted them. He was a large fat man and he addressed his apparently unwelcome clients in German.

“If there have been happenings this evening,” he said, “it is not a good place this. Two men who are strangers to me have visited the restaurant. They looked around as though in search of someone and departed. One of the inspectors who comes here in plain clothes has only just left the place.”

Mr. Jonson smiled at him reassuringly.

“Have no fear, my friend,” he enjoined, “but serve us quickly with a large steak and beer. See that it is of the usual quality. At ten o’clock I may be performing at the Palace as an extra turn. I am no conspirator, I can assure you. The police to me are bosom friends. I am the magician who stops the spinning of the earth! Jonson my name is. You have heard of me?”

“Never in my life,” the patron grunted.

“You shall know my stage name, then, and you shall understand how much your little café is honoured. I am Professor Ventura.”

“He speaks the truth,” the man in overalls declared impatiently. “He is a magician. Bring us food and beer.”

“And mark you, Fritz,” Mr. Jonson assured him, “nothing has happened to-night. There has been a little excitement in various quarters, but no cause for it. Nothing has happened. Do us the favour, my friend, of hastening with the food. This wait has already increased my appetite. Vermouth and gin for me—a drink of it, mind—not a sip. The others will ask for vodka, I suppose. So be it.”

He laid a note upon the table. The patron withdrew. The tallest of the three unwelcome visitors produced a crushed packet of cigarettes from which he helped himself and began to smoke furiously.

“That man whose life we seek is a devil,” he pronounced. “This is the third time to my certain knowledge that we have made plans of cast iron. This is the third time we have failed, and Moscow does not understand failure. I ask myself who throws the spanner into the works—who whispers in the ear of that high and mighty Chinese Mandarin and leads him always out of danger into safety?”

The apéritifs were brought. The last speaker drank his vodka savagely, the others with more obvious enjoyment.

“You are a foolish person,” Mr. Jonson said, “to ask questions like that. One would think that you were a newcomer to this business. In the secret councils of the society which employs you, my dear Krakoff, but fails to give you its confidence, they know more about our friend who rides the skies to-night. There are police of a sort in every country, even the English police have their points, but the police of the man who has mocked us to-night are better than any other in the world. They seldom fight, you seldom see even the slightest evidence of their work—not in this hemisphere at any rate—but whenever we are seriously up against them something happens as it did to-night.”

“Why does it happen? How is it?” the third man demanded, beating upon the tablecloth with his pudgy fingers and looking over his shoulder at his neighbour. “I begin to think, my wonderful magician, that you are a bird of ill omen for us. Tell us what went wrong.”

Mr. Jonson pursed his full red lips and raised his hands.

“It was simply this,” he confided. “I had a friend behind the scenes and everything was carefully arranged. The first squad car, which I myself saw standing outside the residence of the Foreign Secretary, was pulled up to a standstill at the corner of the square at exactly the point arranged. I jumped in to find no one there. The chauffeur, when I banged on the window, seemed equally astonished. The police guard who had been sitting by his side had simply disappeared. While we were talking, another squad car rushed up and I saw our man seated inside. We followed him down to Heston. I followed him to the very steps of the plane. He was not there, nor were there Any signs of the other car. Yet I ask you how can I complain? If I went to Scotland Yard they would laugh at me.”

“That is all very well,” Krakoff grumbled. “There is truth always in the information you bring—some truth—and yet whenever we build upon your words something is wrong. We come near the great prize and we fail.”

“What word are we sending eastwards tonight, Krakoff?” the man in overalls asked.

“The same story,” was the sullen reply. “We failed. We followed the wrong man. We always follow the wrong man.”

The food arrived. The man addressed as Krakoff fell upon it ravenously, the others with more moderation. Jonson, indeed, found time to talk.

"Our friend here," he observed, "speaks of me as bringing to our efforts bad luck."

"So you do," Krakoff snarled. "Every time you start off on one of your certain enterprises which should bring us each a fortune we stumble along to within a hair's breadth of success and then—hey presto!—the cloth is snatched off the table and the gold has vanished!"

"Your simile being, I presume," Jonson remarked, signalling for more beer, "a compliment to my profession."

"You may take it so if you like," was the angry reply. "I do not feel like paying you compliments about anything."

"You should try, my thickheaded Slav," Jonson exhorted pleasantly, "to retain your common sense. You have failed in this exploit. You have failed in two others with which I was connected, but—my slow-witted, ill-mannered comrade—reflect upon this: But for me you would never have come into the enterprise at all. There would have been no enterprise. But for me you would not have known that the world's Enemy Number One had come for a moment out into the open and that the chance was here."

"The man speaks the truth," the third in the little party declared. "But for Jonson's information we should not have been able to make the effort we have made. We should never have heard that he was in England. Further than that I agree with him, too, that when we attempted the grand coup before we could never have got so far as making the movement at all if it had not been for his information."

"You hear?" Jonson exclaimed, turning towards his neighbour. "Hanson, at least, does me justice. It is the sign of a mean spirit to quarrel amongst ourselves because we have met with failure. It will not always be failure. Why should we ever have hoped that the task would be easy? The man we seek to destroy is famous in every country of the world. He has not won that fame through being a fool."

"We come so near that huge fortune," Krakoff muttered. "Hell, how that money—the thought of it—maddens one! I want money. I am sick of this life of danger and poverty. From to-night onwards we have to go back to the old job. We become protectors, not hunters. For that there is only a grudgingly dealt-out wage."

"There is nothing for us," Jonson said calmly, "but patience. Patience is not one of the characteristics of your race, Krakoff. You should cultivate it. You are a man of suspicious nature. That is what may destroy you. The greatest enterprises in the world have been broken up when members of a small society have begun to distrust one another."

"You have a mouth like butter," Krakoff growled.

Hanson drank long and deeply from his glass mug. He set it down empty with an air of content.

"Jonson has a mouth like butter, perhaps," he admitted, "and has probably the heart of a Judas also. So have I if there is anything to be gained by it. So have you, Krakoff. But is there anything to be gained by it? I think not. We—the three men chosen to protect a tyrant who loves life but is too mean to pay more than a

pittance to his bodyguard—have still a chance of the great prize. Think of what it means, you two. Our man pays us for protection barely enough to keep us in food and drink and women, yet it was he himself who fixed the price. Thirty thousand pounds divided between three—ten thousand pounds each—for the life of the Chinaman Cheng! The thing stands. Did either of you expect the task to be easy? Never did I. Our quarry has the brains of a Satan."

"Do you suppose," Krakoff warned them thickly, "that the man whom we serve takes that into account? In his mind there is a perfect fury. He knows that he and his world—everything he stands for—are in danger. We are killers, all three of us. We have done good work with knife and gun. Five times we have saved the man who pays us so stingily. Now paralysis seems to have set in. Our bullets falter and our knives are blunt."

"Krakoff," Jonson sighed, "will never forget that he used to write poetry. There is too much allegory about his conversation. Speak plain words, Krakoff."

"Well, why cannot we kill this blasted Chinese prince?" the latter demanded. "Tell me that. We are no fools. We have brought death easily enough to others. That is why we have become trusted. Now we fail all the time. We sit here drinking our beer, which should be champagne, and somewhere up in the clouds that man flies precisely where he wishes and leaves us who had the whole game in our hands to-night in this foul den eating coarse food and swilling beer."

"No philosophy," Jonson observed shaking his head. "That is what you lack, Krakoff."

"Blast your philosophy," the latter spat out. "I want ten thousand pounds. It is little enough, but I need it."

* * * * *

Then tragedy came very near indeed. A thin, languid-looking man opposite, who had slipped in unseen and at whom they had glanced curiously more than once, paid his bill, folded up his paper and strolled across the room towards them. His destination was obvious. Krakoff, who was in an evil temper, had his hand in that cunningly devised pocket of his before the stranger had come to a standstill. The lust to kill held him in a fierce clutch. Action of any sort he felt would make a stronger man of him.

"My name," the newcomer announced, "is perhaps known to you three gentlemen. Hendren—Inspector Hendren. I belong to the foreign branch of the C.I.D."

The three men waited. Their faces were a study in expressions. Jonson's was bland and enquiring but his underlip clung close to his teeth. Hanson's eyes were agleam with menace and his frame seemed to have stiffened, yet the smile upon his lips was almost natural. Krakoff alone sat apparently unmoved but with the lust for action hot in his blood.

"Inspector Hendren," Jonson repeated courteously. "You have business with us?"

"Not at this present moment," Hendren observed, striking a match, lighting a cigarette, and glancing curiously at Krakoff's right hand almost at the same time. "I was at Heston this afternoon in the regular course of my duty. I was involved in

some slight change in the arrangements to facilitate the departure of a foreign guest."

"What is this man talking of?" Krakoff demanded truculently.

"You have passports, gentlemen?" the Inspector continued, without taking the slightest notice of the intervener.

"But naturally," Jonson admitted. "You do not expect, however, that we carry them about with us."

Inspector Hendren waved his hand.

"That is not necessary," he said, "but I would like to remind you if I might, without wishing to take a liberty," he continued smiling at Krakoff, "that passports were meant for use. Yours I think have remained too long in your despatch boxes or pocketbooks. To-morrow would be an excellent time to use them."

Still silence. Krakoff's fingers were twitching. He was ghastly pale with the effort to control himself. Hendren deliberately buttoned up his coat.

"To-morrow," he repeated. "After then there are certain questions my department might feel inclined to ask of any one of you—either you, Paul Hanson, or you, Jonson, or even you, my angry-looking friend with the disturbed wrist—Nikolas Krakoff. Remember, I should use those passports to-morrow."

Hendren strolled away. Krakoff's hand was half out of his pocket but Jonson's fingers were gripping his arm. They sat in silence. The swing door opened and closed.

"The hint of our friend, the Inspector," Jonson said calmly, "seems to me opportune. We may follow in slower fashion, but it seems to me that our way too should lie southwards."

Chapter IX

Catherine Oronoff rose from the high-backed chair behind her desk and indulged in a little exclamation of dismay as she welcomed her visitor.

"But my dear Mark," she cried. "Where on earth have you been all day? You look like a ghost."

He pointed upwards and threw himself into a chair.

"I have been up in the observatory for something like fourteen hours," he confided. "No news of Cheng?"

"Nothing yet. You did not really expect him until tomorrow, did you?"

"That's right," Mark agreed.

"But what ever have you been doing up there all this time?"

"Talking some of the time—listening the rest. It is the wonder of it all, Catherine, that seems to sweep your senses away. I have seen the streets and the square of Pekin. I have been talking to two of my old friends—staff officers in Manchuria. I have been watching troops march by until my eyes ached. I never realised quite how far on we were with the work. There will have to be a big move soon—a tremendous move."

She glanced at the calendar.

“Well, you expected something to happen soon, did you not?”

“I scarcely realised,” he confessed, “that we were so far advanced. I have been talking to General Mayne. He tells me that newspaper correspondents, travellers of every sort, are streaming into the capital.”

“Well, it all had to come out some day, did it not?” she observed.

He nodded.

“It’s coming out all right. I cannot help wishing Cheng were here.”

“What could he do?”

“Nothing that I am not doing myself. All the same, he is an inspiring fellow. He never gets flustered, never has any doubts.”

“Have you?” she asked.

He pushed back the unruly masses of hair from his forehead.

“I don’t know, Catherine,” he admitted. “Sometimes the thing seems too vast for me. I am terrified of the powers we are wielding there—of the state of utter confusion we are going to bring upon the world.”

“You are only carrying out your legacy,” she reminded him.

“I know,” he answered, “and yet I cannot help wondering sometimes whether that marvellous old father of mine ever realised what he was doing when he handed over the control of all these forces to just a few of us and pointed out the way we had to go. Supposing things don’t work out just as he planned them, supposing we bring upon the world the one thing he spent his life fighting against—war!”

She came over to his chair. He grasped her hand as she leaned over him.

“Catherine,” he continued hoarsely, “I am nearly—I am almost afraid. Those voices—from those thousands of miles away—the faces I have looked into—the glory and the horror of it all…Supposing they got Cheng and I had to face it all alone! There are dozens of them out after him. That little fellow Jonson—I could not have trusted him as Cheng did.”

She patted his shoulder.

“Have you had anything to eat to-day?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Come with me,” she insisted.

She led him to the small dining room in his own suite, rang a bell and ordered food. He drank a whisky and soda feverishly, then he sprang up.

“I cannot wait, Catherine,” he declared.

“You are not going to leave this room,” she said firmly. “I shall forbid it. You will drink another whisky and soda—you see, I am not a hard mistress—but you will wait for a minute or two until some food comes. If there is anything pressing I can see to it.”

He sank back into the chair and dozed for a few minutes. When he opened his eyes it was to find sandwiches by his side and his tumbler refilled.

“Don’t think me every sort of an idiot,” he begged as he helped himself. “I am all right now. It was just those few minutes! The thing seemed to be growing bigger all the time up there. I almost thought I should go crazy!”

She laid her cool fingers upon his forehead.

“You are very foolish,” she said, “to have stayed there all that time. You must not do it again.”

“I won’t,” he promised. “Cut me some more sandwiches, please, then I will smoke a cigarette and you’ll see I shall be myself again.”

He was as good as his word. If, indeed, he had been near collapse half-an-hour before, his recovery was amazing.

“For the first time,” he confided, “I am really glad Cheng is away. Do you look after him as well as this, Catherine?”

“He never needs it,” she replied. “Sometimes I ask myself whether he is really human,” she went on after a moment’s pause. “Never at any time, under any conditions, have I ever seen him show any sign of human weakness.”

Mark nodded.

“He has been like that ever since I first knew him. I remember we once persuaded him to take up tennis: that was when we were both at Harvard. In a week he was playing the professional, even. Our best men hadn’t a chance against him. He drives that big plane of his, which I daren’t touch, across Europe and he gets out just as fresh as when he started. I don’t really believe that he has a nerve in his body.”

“He terrifies me,” Catherine confessed. “He is so still and so—what is the word—inevitable. If it were not that I have seen his face soften a little when by chance he has been looking at or talking about something really beautiful, I should be more afraid of him than I am.”

“I wonder how he got on in London,” Mark reflected. “I suppose we shall know soon,” she answered, “or rather you will.”

“You think that after all he may be back this evening?”

She nodded.

“I went out for an hour after luncheon,” she confided, “up to where his private aerodrome is on the Upper Corniche. They were evidently expecting him. The two big lamps were there ready for lighting and there were a great many of his men about.”

“Well, the sooner I can get a talk with him the better,” Mark observed. “Meanwhile I must not forget I have a commission from headquarters. I must talk to Suzanne. Do you think we could get hold of her?”

“Of course,” Catherine replied. “She never goes out till late. Where do you want her?”

“Oh, anywhere—in the Bureau.”

“Not in here?”

He dissented vigorously.

“Can’t stand the odour of all those perfumes. They would hang about this place for hours. I’ll see her in Cheng’s room.”

“Sure you are feeling all right again now?” Catherine asked as they walked down the corridor.

“Fighting fit,” he assured her.

“Strong enough to resist the wiles of this dangerous young lady?”

“Not my sort,” he declared. “Lovely as sin, of course, and all that, but I never can quite see why all the men fall for her.”

Catherine paused with her fingers upon the handle of the general staff room door.

"I can send for her then without a qualm?" she asked. "I am not handing you over to the beasts of prey?"

He shook his head.

"Come and hear me talk to her," he invited.

"Too much work to do," she replied. "You could let me know when Mr. Cheng comes, if you will."

"I wish he were here now," Mark sighed, as he turned away. "I am not so good as Cheng with these yellow-haired houris."

* * * * *

Suzanne shivered when, a few minutes later, she reluctantly tapped at the door of Mr. Cheng's room. When she saw that it was Mark alone who awaited her, however, her face cleared. Anything was better than having to converse with the sphinx-like Mr. Cheng. Mark Humberstone she had always found a little difficult, but after all her opportunities with him, she reflected, had been scanty. He motioned her to a chair.

"I understand," he began, "that your little difficulty with the police over l'affaire Costoli is arranged?"

"Monsieur Déchanel assures me that I shall never hear of it again," she replied. "He proposes, by the by, to pay me a visit this afternoon."

"Good business," Mark approved. "You will embrace the opportunity, my dear Mademoiselle Suzanne, of enquiring whether he knows anything about a weird-looking Turkish gunboat which lies in the harbour."

"Again an affair of the sea," she complained. "The memory of the last one still troubles me. For my own pleasure I have lost what you call the taste for the Navy."

"This time," Mark observed, "you will not need to be so precipitate. It is Monsieur Déchanel of whom you must first ask a few questions."

"Bien, monsieur."

"There are two men of importance on board, I believe," he continued. "The Commander and the Admiral. They are reported to be waiting for a cargo. Any information with regard to the nature of that cargo would be welcome."

Suzanne drew a brief sigh of relief. She was to be trusted again, then.

"Entendu, monsieur," she murmured. "The good Monsieur Déchanel shall tell me all that he knows within an hour. The nature of the cargo! Oh, la la—that will be simple."

"Perhaps at Maxim's to-night," Mark suggested, "you might look around for the Commander. Even a slight acquaintance with him might prove valuable. An invitation to take tea on board might produce results."

"It probably would," Suzanne agreed, "but what sort of results are you looking for?"

"There are two ways in which the Commander might prove to be a useful acquaintance," Mark explained. "The first is that we want to know why he is lying in Nice Port and what manner of cargo he is expecting."

"That should not be difficult," she said hopefully.

"Another little matter in which we are interested," Mark continued, "is the fact that either the Commander or the Admiral was a director of naval defence, at any rate until a few years ago. An Admiral with whom I was talking this afternoon

believes that one of the two is probably at the present moment working upon a chart of the Dardanelles. That chart would be quite valuable to us."

"If I can once find my way on board," she promised, "I will bring you the chart."

Mark rose to his feet. Suzanne, with a little grimace, accepted the hint and like a sleepy cat, with just one backward glance over her shoulder, stole away. At her own door she was met by her maid.

"Monsieur Déchanel of the police awaits Mademoiselle," she announced.

Chapter X

Suzanne, her masses of yellow hair warmer and more lustrous than ever against the white skin of her neck and her black gown, flung herself upon the couch and pointed out an adjacent easy chair to her visitor.

"It is very kind, Monsieur Déchanel, that you come to pay me a little visit under this roof. What an entourage we have here, eh? You find it a little strange in the midst of your wonderful Nice, an establishment like this dealing with world affairs?"

Monsieur Déchanel, who held a prominent position in the Bureau of the Chef de la Sûreté of the neighbourhood, and was inclined to think that Suzanne was not treating him with sufficient respect, twirled his black moustaches and disposed of himself more comfortably in his chair.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "we consider it somewhat of an honour that your Chief has chosen Nice for his headquarters."

"An honour," Suzanne repeated with a peculiar smile upon her lips. "Well, that may be so."

"Nothing in the activities of your Bureau," he went on, "has ever come to the notice of the police which was not strictly in order."

"And of course," she commented, "the police know everything."

"You are inclined to be facetious to-day, little one. Nevertheless, I can assure you we who know look upon your director as a great person who is highly thought-of in Paris. He mixes in the important affairs of the world—sometimes no doubt with profit to himself—but he preserves always for us and our Government—"

"Excellent, mon ami," Suzanne purred.

"Then, for a further guarantee as regards the stability of the Bureau," he went on, "consider Monsieur Cheng's partner. Is he not the son of Professor Humberstone, that marvellous American, the greatest savant the world has ever known?"

"It is true," she admitted.

"Why do you wonder, then, that we—the French police—hold this Bureau in the highest possible respect?"

Suzanne lit a cigarette from the box by her side and tossed the latter over to her visitor.

"I wonder no longer, mon ami. As usual, you are right. Help yourself, dear—am I to call you Henri?"

“It may be permitted,” Monsieur Déchanel conceded, edging his chair a little closer.

“Well then, mon cher Henri, tell me this,” Suzanne continued, “not that I am particularly curious but you know how I love the sea and all naval men. I drove yesterday around the port and I saw there a strange-looking ship—I suppose it was an out-of-date cruiser—flying a strange flag.”

“Well?”

“Tell me—what is she? Of what country, I mean?”

His fingers toyed with the gold chain on his ample stomach. He looked at Suzanne with his head a little on one side. He had the air of one who was up to all the tricks of her sex—a man impossible to deceive—a man who demanded the truth.

“Tell me exactly why you are interested in that boat, Mademoiselle,” he questioned.

She blew out a little cloud of smoke at him. The slight pursing of her scarlet lips he found full of pleasant suggestion.

“I like naval officers,” she confessed, “but I am tired of the usual types. I wondered whether there might not be some novelty for me—Chileans I have heard are most attractive men.”

“Mademoiselle will have to go to Chile to find them then,” he warned her. “Chilean ships do not ride these waters. The ship concerning which Mademoiselle is curious is a third-class cruiser, very much out-of-date, from a country one hears little of nowadays—Turkey.”

She extended her arms with a sudden gesture. She wore very loose sleeves. The arms were shapely.

“Turkey! Oh, la la!” she exclaimed. “I knew a Turk once—he was a minister—a friend of a friend of mine. He was so ‘andsome!”

He shook his head disparagingly.

“They have not the fire or the élan of the French,” he assured her.

“Nevertheless,” she sighed, “my Turk was marvellous, and one needs a change. All women are different, you know, Henri, but men are all the same.”

“How do you know that at your tender years?” he demanded. “Your experience has not been large enough. If you found the right Frenchman you would never be unfaithful to your country.”

“The right Frenchman, then, does not disturb himself to find me,” she confided. “I find them bold in words but evasive, and alas the things that count, my dear Henri—they are not too fond of spending their money. The little presents do not come so readily.”

Monsieur Déchanel, who was a married man with a growing family, edged his chair a little closer still.

“My little one,” he said, “a Frenchman gives romance which a Turk never possessed. He gives fidelity which is but a jest to a semi-Oriental. Furthermore—”

Illustration:

„My little one,” said Monsieur Déchamel,

„A Frenchman gives romance which a Turk never possesses.”

“My Turk gave me pearls,” Suzanne interrupted.

“Those were other days,” he pointed out. “We are not poverty stricken but, we French of the official classes, we have not great fortunes. Fortunately we have other gifts. We can give protection to our friends.”

“Protection,” Suzanne repeated thoughtfully.

The chair was a couple of inches nearer now. He laid his fingers caressingly upon that beautiful white arm.

“There was a little affair at the Ruhl not long ago,” he reminded her. “Everything about that was managed by the French police in a fashion which would have been impossible in any other country. The body of an Italian officer, par exemple, was conveyed at night back to his ship. There were rumours of a companion. It was I indeed who was in charge of the case. The companion was a Frenchwoman. What affair was that of ours? I tear up a few odd papers, I put the fear of God into a loquacious waiter, I seal the mouths of those who would have chattered. Voilà! Is not that protection, Suzanne?”

She looked at him with eyes full of well-simulated admiration. He was beginning to feel a trifle lightheaded. Most men who spent an hour with Suzanne were taken that way.

“It is wonderful to have power. That counts for much with us women. One cannot deny it. Will you bring the captain or the first officer of the Turkish ship to see me, Henri?”

“You would be disappointed,” he warned her. “The Admiral is a fat and greasy man. He spends most of his time in his cabin eating sweetmeats and reading novels—French ones, alas, of the salacious type. You would disgust yourself with him. The Commander who does the work of the ship, he is better, but he is one of the new party of Turks—he keeps a still tongue in his head. The Commissioner, and also the General in command here, are both curious to understand the presence of a Turkish warship in these waters. I, having gifts in that direction, was sent to call and entertain these officers. The Commander knew nothing. The first officer would tell me nothing. They have a purpose in coming here, but what it is I cannot tell.”

“Perhaps,” she said with a smile which was full of self-confidence, “I might be more fortunate.”

Monsieur Déchanel was distraught. Such a picture of loveliness as Suzanne that afternoon the whole of Nice could not display. There was no woman of his acquaintance—and he knew many—who could compare with her. His fingers closed tightly around that alluring arm.

“Why should I bring this man?” he demanded. “There is no way he could be of service to you save in one fashion and for that I am jealous.”

She turned slightly towards him.

“But my dear Henri,” she reminded him with her lips very close to his, “you need not bring him until to-morrow and you are here to- day.”

* * * * *

There was something akin to a mild sensation amongst the officials of the famous night restaurant in Nice when Monsieur Antoine, the manager, discovered a new patron of most distinguished appearance standing at the head of the room

glancing down the long line of tables. The two chief maîtres d'hôtels were already offering their respects, suggested tables were being pulled out. Monsieur Antoine presented himself, with a low bow.

"Monsieur is alone?" he enquired.

"I am alone," Mark replied. "And I wish to remain alone," he added a little significantly.

"There is a gentleman who makes signals to Monsieur," Antoine pointed out.

Mark glanced down the room again and smiled faintly. It was Monsieur Déchanel who had risen from a table and was seeking to attract his attention. Antoine glanced questioningly at his unexpected patron.

"It is a high official in the police there who invites that Monsieur should share his table," he confided. "Monsieur would rather be alone?"

"Not at all," Mark replied. "I will join Monsieur Déchanel."

With a bodyguard of waiters surrounding him, Mark passed about halfway down the room to where Monsieur Déchanel was already pushing out his table. With a nod of dismissal to his escort and a bow to his friend, Mark took the vacant place.

"The best wine you can offer us," Mark ordered. "A sandwich, perhaps, of caviar. You are sure that I do not disarrange you, Monsieur Déchanel?"

"You do me a great honour," the latter assured him, "and you are very welcome."

"You will give me the gratification of joining me in a bottle of wine?"

Déchanel pushed his own half-bottle of very inferior vintage away.

"It will give me great pleasure," he agreed.

Mark lit a cigarette and, leaning back against the wall, glanced at his companion. Monsieur Déchanel was apparently not altogether at his ease. There was an unbecoming flush upon his cheeks, his small black tie which without a doubt had started the evening in its proper position had escaped control and was in rapid progress towards his right ear. One of his studs, too, had come unfastened, disclosing, when he leaned forward, a vest of an alarming shade of blue.

"Been dancing?" his host asked.

"For me that is not possible," was the somewhat formal reply. "In my official position I am bound to visit these places sometimes, but to dance—no. That would not be in order. I sit here and watch. It is interesting to me to mark down the frequenters, to discover who makes use of the place. It is the centre of the night life of Nice."

Mark was silent for a few moments. His eyes were searching amongst the crowd. Suzanne was by far the most remarkable-looking woman there. She was clasped in the arms of a tall, handsome young man of olive complexion and with heavy black eyelashes. She was leaning back laughing into his admiring eyes.

"So this is where a portion of our work is done, eh, Monsieur Déchanel?" Mark remarked with a smile.

"I myself—" Déchanel began.

"I do not include our two selves. You have your spies here without a doubt. So have we. I watch with interest the beautiful Mademoiselle Suzanne. She has found a new victim."

Monsieur Déchanel's face was dark with anger.

"She is a good worker, without a doubt, this Mademoiselle Suzanne," he admitted, "but she lacks tact—discrimination."

"Yes?" his companion murmured interrogatively. "She throws herself too precipitately into an affair. She has no manners."

"For that," Mark observed indifferently, "she can scarcely be blamed. I do not suppose that good manners are part of the equipment of the demi-mondaine."

"I am not of the same opinion," Déchanel objected, wiping the perspiration from his forehead. "I do a great service to Mademoiselle Suzanne. I present her to her present partner who was seated with me at this table. They have danced together all the evening. Suzanne has called for a table of her own. They have left me."

"Suzanne, without a doubt, has a method," Mark admitted. "Who is this young man to whom she is clinging?"

"He is an officer from the Turkish boat that lies in Nice Harbour."

"Turkish boat?" Mark repeated.

"It is something that—yes?" Déchanel exclaimed. "What business, I ask myself, can Suzanne have with a Turk? They are out of the world—thrown out of Europe—outcasts as they deserve for their share in the war. They count for nothing. Their wretched little tub is commanded by a greasy old: Turk who sits in his cabin munching sweetmeats."

"But what is she doing in these waters?" Mark asked curiously.

Déchanel made no reply. The wine had arrived and he drank off a glass with evident appreciation.

"I feel better," he confided. "I was a fool to let myself be annoyed, especially as the incident has given me the honour of Monsieur's company. To be left planté là, though, by a young woman whom I have brought into the place! It was undignified. These men do not realise that it is an affair of business."

"An Italian officer, an English one—yes," Mark soliloquised. "Even a Danish one or an American. But a Turkish officer! I scarcely believed that such a thing existed. Of what use can he be to our friend Suzanne?"

The two men exchanged glances. There was a gleam of cunning enquiry in Déchanel's eyes. Mark seemed genuinely puzzled.

"Perhaps," the former observed, "Suzanne is working on her own."

The two were still dancing. Suzanne seemed to have given herself over with complete abandon to her partner. Mark watched with unseeing eyes and expressionless face. The girl knew her business without a doubt.

"I sometimes fancy, my friend," he said, "that you in your official capacity also make use of Mademoiselle Suzanne."

"In my official capacity," Déchanel answered in a consequential tone, "that might be true. The Department—but then one does not speak of these things. The girl is well-behaved. She has a good dossier. She is the sort of young woman one might find useful."

"Discreet I see, my dear Déchanel. An admirable trait."

"Of course I know that you use her too," the Frenchman declared, with a little burst of candour. "Why, she is established in your precincts. To-night, however, she must have found a new client. There is nothing I could learn from that young officer. Turkey lies outside the scope of our interests."

“One might be mildly interested to know why that lone craft has been brought into Nice Harbour,” Mark reflected.

“As to that,” Déchanel replied with a savage little twirl of his moustache, “I should think that Suzanne is already informed.”

“Or will be presently,” Mark added under his breath, as he watched the cloakroom attendant bringing her fur coat.

Chapter XI

Mr. Jonson remained cheerful in the face of adversity. Things were certainly not looking well for him. At first, he had applied for this interview in vain and now, when he had at last been admitted to the audience chamber of the International Bureau of Espionage, Mr. Cheng, who was watching him from the other side of his table, showed little signs of friendliness.

“Is it like this,” Jonson asked, “that you treat all your staff, sir, even when they have done you great service?”

The glimmer of a smile passed over Mr. Cheng’s set face.

“You consider that you have rendered me great service?” he enquired.

“Indeed, yes.”

“Why did you go to London without orders?”

“I went there to save your life. I served you well inasmuch as I succeeded.”

“You saved my life, did you?”

“Without a doubt.”

“Explain.”

Jonson smiled.

“There are still a few things which your wonderful International Bureau has never discovered,” he said. “One of them, let me tell you, is that there is a triumvirate of men nominated by your greatest enemy, whose mission in life is your assassination.”

“I know all about them,” Mr. Cheng assented. “One is called Nikolas Krakoff, another Paul Hanson.”

“And the third?”

Mr. Cheng looked steadily across the room towards his questioner.

“The third is a man who has borne many names,” he replied. “He is known at present under the title of Jonson.”

The little man was perturbed. The wrinkles which were so seldom visible creased his face.

“Astonishing,” he murmured. “Did you chance to know that, sir, when you consented to have me join the staff? Did you know it when you saw me crossing Grosvenor Square?”

“Perfectly well. I consented to your engagement because I came to the conclusion that you were safer working under my direction. When I saw you as I was leaving the house of the British Foreign Secretary, it was perfectly apparent to me that for the moment you were harmless.”

“Well, you chance to have been right,” Jonson reflected. “Nevertheless, it was a brave action to take me into your entourage.”

“Why?”

“You knew that I had presented myself with a false passport.”

“Naturally.”

“You also knew that I was one of the triumvirate delegated in Moscow to guard the life of the acting head of the Soviet and incidentally to arrange for your assassination.”

“Bravery is not a word the meaning of which you understand,” Mr. Cheng said scornfully. “I run no risk from you or, I should think, from those other two assassins. Not one of the three of you was ever meant to harm me. You would never succeed.”

“You have a charm over bullets?”

“It never comes to bullets.”

“Nevertheless,” Jonson persisted, “I saved your life in London.”

“Explain, if you please,” Mr. Cheng invited.

“It was simple. Mr. Wang Kai-Hsiung gave me a chit to the Inspector of Police Squad, Scotland Yard. They were worried about you and were only too glad of outside help and information. There were two police squad cars at work that afternoon.”

“That I already know,” Mr. Cheng assented. “I was asked to change from one to the other in a side street about a hundred yards from Grosvenor Square: some Mews, they called it.”

“Precisely. The other car took a somewhat roundabout route, entered Heston by the back way, and took you to your plane in safety. A pleasant ride, I trust, and without misadventure?”

“Almost monotonous,” Mr. Cheng admitted. “There was not a soul to see me off except the officials of the aerodrome.”

“Not so with my brief promenade,” Jonson recounted with a bland smile. “Yes, it was exciting while it lasted. A slight drizzle of rain, as you may remember—most convenient. There was a fog that threatened. Alas, it never came. As we passed along the park by the barracks I fitted in the bullet-proof windows on the left-hand side of the car. A very remarkable invention! Really I think Scotland Yard improves. I can assure you that as we neared the shelter at the beginning of the broad byway to Heston I felt that adventure was back again. I placed myself in the far corner of the car in a careful position. At precisely the spot agreed upon, the bullets came spattering against the window like the large drops that fall on to the pavement before a thunderstorm. Very thrilling. It is not given to everyone to sit a yard or two off from these bullets and remain in safety.”

“This interests me,” Mr. Cheng acknowledged.

“From the flap window behind,” Jonson continued, “I saw Krakoff and Hanson spring into their car and drive off. Then I spoke through the tube to the chauffeur. He hoisted the police signal and we made Heston going at something like sixty miles an hour. I was at the plane ten minutes before they arrived. I joined them just as you, my lord, passed over our heads.”

“You joined them?” Mr. Cheng exclaimed. “They did not suspect you of interference?”

"Why should they?" Jonson protested with wide-opened eyes and his head a little upon one side. "The car passed the shelter at precisely the appointed hour. With the drawn shutters they could not have had any idea as to who was inside. They had their message from me, with the police number as arranged. I was there on the grounds waiting for them. I gave a lifelike impression of a disappointed traveller whose friend had failed him—and that is all."

Mr. Cheng sat for a moment in silence. His eyes were fixed speculatively upon his companion.

"An interesting adventure," he remarked. "One thing puzzles me."

"I will explain," Jonson promised cheerfully.

"I do not see why, when Krakoff and his companion, who have a great deal of experience in such matters, saw the armoured windows in the car, they took the trouble to risk firing at it."

"That is to the credit of the British police," Jonson pointed out. "These armoured shutters have blue cloth on the side that faces the window. They have a tassel. They resemble in every respect a closely drawn curtain through which, naturally, a bullet would go as though it were butter."

Mr. Cheng nodded gravely.

"And what," he asked, "has become of your companions?"

"Oh, we shall hear of them soon," Jonson declared. "I have an appointment to meet them a week from to-day at a small hotel sacred to Russian emigrés, 'the House with the Red Blinds,' they called it. It is at the far end of the Promenade des Anglais."

"So they are coming here?" Mr. Cheng reflected. "Are they still hoping to carry out their enterprise against me?"

Then—a thing he seldom did—Jonson hesitated.

"I cannot tell," he admitted. "They may be coming here for other reasons. I know that it was their wish to be successful with you in London before they came here. They will perhaps receive further orders before we meet."

"Does it never occur to you," Mr. Cheng asked him, "that to remain one of that triumvirate and yet to be secretly my man is a post of some danger?"

Jonson smiled again, that fat comfortable little smile which changed his whole appearance.

"I love danger," he confided. "Favour me with a sheet of paper and I will show you how I love to court a knife between my shoulder blades or a bullet in my heart."

Mr. Cheng passed him a sheet from the table by his side. Jonson produced a pencil which travelled like lightning here and there across its smooth surface. A score of words. No more. He held it out to his Chief. There was in the latter's immobile face a gleam of admiration as he studied it.

"I wonder," he reflected, as he tore the page to pieces, "how you can possibly expect me to allow another man to live and share with me a secret like that."

"Yet that is what you will surely do," was the confident reply, as Jonson backed towards the door.

* * * * *

Mark came presently into the room. His fatigue had passed, his step was once more buoyant, but his expression was grave. Cheng nodded and tapped the telephone receiver which he was holding. He held it away for a moment.

"They have rung me up from the Quai d'Orsay," he confided. "I must hear what they have to say."

Mark nodded and sank into an easy chair. Cheng held the receiver once more to his ear. All the time he spoke and listened he betrayed no signs of any special interest. He wound up, however, in a different tone.

"You must explain to Monsieur le Ministre," he said, "that this matter, important though it may be, scarcely comes within the scope of my activities. We deal with smaller affairs altogether. However, I am very much at the disposal of General Levissier when he arrives. It will give me great pleasure to receive him here. How are things in Paris?"

Again Mr. Cheng became a listener. He hung up the receiver with a few final words.

"I shall await the arrival of Monsieur le Général," he said.

"And who," Mark asked, "is Monsieur le Général?"

"Someone who would be a very unwelcome visitor for us just now," Cheng replied. "He is the head of the whole police system of France. He wishes to look over our observatory. However, we have faced difficulties before. Tell me—how are things going?"

He lifted his arm and forefinger towards the ceiling. Mark rose lightly from his chair, lit a cigarette and paced restlessly up and down, talking a little disjointedly all the time.

"Fan Sik Tsun," he said, "has been with me up there for fourteen or fifteen hours. He is lying down for a short time. I promised to let him know when you were here. No, not now," he went on, waving his hand as Cheng rose to his feet. "The General is in the same condition as I was when I came down some time ago. He is almost speechless."

"Nothing has gone wrong, I hope?"

"On the contrary," Mark went on, "every enterprise seems to be maturing at the same moment, according to plan. I liked Fan Sik Tsun's simile just now. He said it was like a huge bouquet of blossoms all creeping into flower at the same time. I can see what is happening in Vladivostok," he continued. "We could not bottle them up as we have the western frontier. They have had more direct news of what is happening. Our outposts have reported thirty-five trains crawling back to Russia. That must be pretty well half the garrison. The fourteen routes, as planned, have all been cleared right up as far as the railway. Wu Lu Chên reports a million men under arms."

"That is all good news," Cheng said quietly. "The moment is arriving when it will be impossible any longer to hide from the world what is happening in Asia. Yet you know, Mark, there is one more task to be accomplished before we can flash the great signal around the world."

Mark paused in his restless perambulation of the room. He stood by his partner's desk—a grim expression of distaste upon his pleasant face.

"I don't like that much, you know, Cheng," he said.

“It is fortunate, then,” was the smooth rejoinder, “that its execution does not fall within your province.”

“It is part of the joint scheme, though,” Mark pointed out.

“In any case, the affair is not imminent,” Cheng observed. “I have been thinking it all out,” he went on, leaning back in his chair and looking meditatively out of the window towards the mountains, that one particular corner which was so dear to him. “It will be next month, Mark. The third week of next month. We cannot strike before. Until then, I think we can keep all this restless flood in check. Some time between now and then this thing will happen. Do not concern yourself with it. You will have no time to waste over such a trifle. Remember this too, Mark. If there are two men in this world who will move along in peril upon the borderland between life and death during those five weeks, it will be you and I and not that other one.”

“Getting scared?” Mark asked with a grin.

That very rare smile softened for a moment Cheng’s whole expression.

“That,” he said as he ‘rose to his feet, “would, I think, be a new sensation for either of us, my friend Mark.”

Chapter XII

Suzanne was sulky. She was unaccustomed to failure, and it was failure which she had to report on the following morning. Perhaps because she knew that she was to be interviewed by Catherine Oronoff she had dressed with less than her usual care. Her sleepy eyes had lost their charm, her hair its sheen, and her manner its allure. She had to confess her failure, too, to another one of her own sex, which made things no better.

“I could do no more,” she declared sullenly. “The Commander laughed at me when I hinted and was contemptuous when I pleaded. He was also very rude.”

“Quite an unusual experience for you, I should imagine,” Catherine Oronoff remarked.

“Anything I set out to do I generally accomplish,” was the curt rejoinder. “Men of any ordinary type are easy. This one is an exception. Why not try him yourself, Mademoiselle Oronoff? You have the interests of the Bureau at heart as much as I. Stroll along the Quay once or twice until he takes notice of you and then invite him to tea with you. You may be his style, perhaps.”

The Russian girl struck back with glacial poignancy.

“I have not the usual inducement to offer,” she said. “Apart from that, I desire that you do not address me again with such suggestions. Will you be so good as to remember that or leave the room immediately.”

Suzanne glanced at the speaker, then cowered in her chair as though she had been struck with a lash.

“Je regrette,” she faltered. “Mille pardons, mademoiselle.”

Catherine dismissed the matter with a wave of the hand.

“All the same, I am surprised that you failed so completely, Suzanne,” she went on coldly. “What do you propose to do about it? The Bureau is keener than ever. They will not be satisfied with your report.”

“I can deal with any man who is a natural human being,” Suzanne grumbled. “With this one I can do nothing.”

“Take a few hours to think it over,” Catherine advised. “Mr. Cheng is not satisfied with Posing the elder of those two Italians. Elise and Mademoiselle Despard are coming down to the Opera House next week. He may choose to put other singing birds in your cage.”

“He had better not try,” Suzanne cried. “One learns things here, you know.”

Catherine Oronoff was leaning forward in her place. She seemed to have gone very stiff and rigid. Her eyes were steely.

“Are you threatening us, Suzanne?” she asked.

The girl bit her lip.

“No, I am not threatening,” she answered. “I am not going to be sent away, though—especially for a Turk. Turks are only half-civilised creatures. Ils sont plutôt des sauvages.”

“I have no right to suggest that the Bureau would go so far as to send you away,” Catherine said, “but they abhor failures and people who have failed. I should advise you to go and think it aver. There may be another way.”

Suzanne obeyed her companion’s gesture of dismissal and left the room, but on her return through the labyrinth of passages to her own suite of apartments, another way dawned upon her.

* * * * *

It was about six o’clock that evening when, raising her skirts a little and making careful progress to avoid the sinking of the high heels of her shoes into the crevices of the imperfectly laid pavement, Suzanne descended the steps and walked slowly along the Quay at Nice. She paused at the spot where the small Turkish cruiser lay alongside the dock. The gangway on board was a very easy one to surmount. At the top stood a uniformed sentry, smoking a cigarette.

“I should like to come on board, please,” she said.

The man stared at her, waved his hand as though bidding her go, and answered her in Turkish. Suzanne shook her head and commenced the slight ascent. The man stood at the top of the gangway immovable. She reached him and paused.

“You are in my way,” she told him smiling. “Please.”

He shook his head and stamped on the deck with his heel. Another man, in the uniform of a junior officer, made his appearance. He, too, stared at Suzanne, and it was perfectly obvious that the Commander’s inclinations towards playing the Saint Anthony were not shared by his subordinates. He saluted and addressed her courteously in French.

“This is not a visiting day. Mademoiselle desires something perhaps?”

“I desire to speak to your Admiral,” she confided. “I have even forgotten his name, but he may remember me. We met, I feel sure. I think it was at Alexandria.”

“This ship has never been in Alexandria,” was the somewhat suspicious rejoinder. “The Admiral is resting in his cabin, Mademoiselle. He does not see

chance visitors. I am afraid I must ask you to leave the ship. If it were possible," he went on, dropping his voice, "to take an apéritif a little later on—"

"Charming," she interrupted. "Ask for me at Maxim's, at seven o'clock, but in the meantime be very kind—let me have one word with your Admiral."

"Mademoiselle," the young man assured her, "we are not disciplinarians of the strictest here, but to do as you ask me would be utterly impossible. It is my duty to prevent your arriving on the deck."

"Seems a pity," she murmured, leaning her arms upon the white rail and smiling at him.

"Nothing but the thought of that apéritif," he replied "keeps me from being desolated."

Suzanne's fortunes were changing. An exclamation from the officer with whom she was arguing attracted her attention to the figure of a tall, enormously stout man standing in the open door of the adjacent companionway. He was wearing a sort of undress uniform, the long coat of which was unbuttoned, and smoking a cigarette. There was tobacco ash upon his tunic, his brown shoes were hideous. The young officer stood at attention. The Admiral looked at Suzanne. She smiled at him and her heart grew lighter. Here was a man of a different order. Turks were Turks after all.

"Mademoiselle understands that it is not permitted to board the cruiser except on visiting days?" he said in passable French.

"How is Mademoiselle to understand?" she protested. "I simply saw your beautiful ship. I ask what she is and hear that she is Turkish, and I remember that I met a Turkish Admiral a year or two ago—and I thought that I would see if he was on board."

"What was his name?"

"I have forgotten his name," she confessed, "but he was very like you—only not so tall, not so fine here," she said, with a movement towards her chest. "I would like to talk to you, please. Will you tell this obstinate sentry that he is to let me pass?"

To do the Admiral justice he hesitated, but his hesitation did not last very long. He rattled out a brief command in Turkish. The junior officer fell back, the sentry stood on one side. Mademoiselle tripped airily onto the deck.

"I will give myself the pleasure of receiving you in my own quarters," the Admiral suggested. "Will you kindly descend?"

Suzanne made her way gaily down into the very comfortable but terribly stuffy saloon. One porthole was open but a considerable quantity of cigarette smoke was still hanging about. All the improper French papers that she had ever seen were strewn upon the table and a few that she knew nothing of. There were also paper-backed novels. On the writing table there was a chart. Suzanne felt quite at home.

"Mademoiselle will be seated," he begged.

"And Mademoiselle will smoke if she is invited," Suzanne said. "I am so excited to meet someone again of your race," she added, assuming a comfortable but not too austere position in the corner of a divan. "Tell me all about yourself, please, and why you have come here, and how long you are going to stop, and if you really are as nice as you look."

He came and established himself by her side. His hand touched her knee—by accident, no doubt—as he seated himself. There was nothing about him which reminded her of the Commander.

"You are inquisitive, little lady," he remarked. "What may I call you?"

"Just Suzanne," she answered. "We do not need to waste time, I hope, with the other names, and unless you tell me your prénom I shall call you Hemal. That was the name of someone I once knew."

"I like Hemal better than my own name," he declared.

"I will be Hemal to you and you will be Suzanne to me. You shall sit here and smoke my cigarettes and eat my sweetmeats and tell me stories about the naughty places of Nice."

"And you?" she whispered.

"I shall make love to you," he answered. "It is not often that I see anyone so charming."

"First of all let me tell you," she said, "that I have met your Commander at Maxim's. Where is he?"

"He has twenty-four hours' leave and he has gone to return a call on a British man-of-war at San Rafael," the Admiral confided. "It was a happy chance that he chose to-day."

"For myself I am content," Suzanne assured him.

* * * * *

Nevertheless, although her countenance had cleared and her step was more sprightly when, an hour or so later, she was received once more by Catherine Oronoff, Suzanne wag not altogether herself.

"You have a report to make?" the former asked in her usual precise tone.

"A report—yes. I have learnt something, but oh—"

There was no coherent ending to the sentence. Suzanne had closed her eyes in an orgy of self-pity. Catherine took up the treasure of her life—a little white ivory private-telephone instrument.

"If you have a report to make," she said, "I am going to send for Mr. Humberstone. It is he who is interested in this business. It is perhaps as well for you that you have something to tell him."

She spoke for a moment or two and put the receiver back on its pedestal.

"Mr. Humberstone is coming," she announced. "Excuse me, please."

She went on with her task of filing reports. Presently Mark appeared.

"So last night, which appeared so promising, came to nothing," he remarked, as he seated himself at Catherine's desk.

"It came to nothing," she admitted. "Never have I come across a man so immovable. I wore myself out to no purpose. His sole reply was that a Turkish officer in the Army or the Navy answers no questions concerning his profession."

"H'm—a lesson to some of the others," Mark observed. "And then?"

"I made my report this morning. Mademoiselle here seemed to think that you attached great weight to the affair, so I studied the position to think of other ways. This evening I strolled down upon the Quay."

"Ah, that showed enterprise."

“I found the ship. There was a gangway. The sentry stopped me. A junior officer came. He too refused to allow me on deck. Before they could absolutely turn me away, however, the Admiral himself had arrived.”

“And with him you had more success?”

“When I think it over,” Suzanne replied with a shiver,

“I fancy that it was he who had the success. However, my visit was not altogether barren. I made myself sick at the stomach with sweetmeats and sick at the throat with scented cigarettes, and I feel that my lips will never be clean again after that old man’s kisses. He too would tell me nothing, or little, but he was not very careful. I saw stretched upon his table a chart upon which he had been working, with a marine atlas on either side.”

“Well, that sounds better. Continue.”

“It was a map of the Dardanelles.”

There was a brief silence. Catherine Oronoff glanced quickly at Mark as though to see the effect of the disclosures. He gave no sign.

“The Dardanelles,” he repeated thoughtfully. “A chart of the Dardanelles. Any marks upon it?”

“A lot of little black specks. I could not make out what they were for. I was afraid to seem curious. I do not think that he suspected me in any way, but I noticed that when we went up on deck he locked the door of his cabin and took the key with him.”

There was again a somewhat tense silence. Suzanne began to feel more pleased with herself. It was obvious that her information was of some importance. Her reminiscences of the Admiral were a little less fraught with disgust. She took courage and produced her vanity case, dropped a few spots of perfume on her handkerchief, and wiped her lips vigorously.

“You have seen, apparently by accident,” Mark confided, “something that interests me. Now tell me. Did the Admiral give you any idea as to what he was doing in Nice Harbour?”

“Waiting for some sort of supplies.”

“Any idea about those supplies?”

She shook her head.

“I do not even know whether they were food or drink or what,” she confessed.

“Are you going to see your friend again?”

“I could if you think there is anything else I should get out of him,” she replied without enthusiasm.

“What sort of dots were they on the chart?” he asked abruptly. “Had they little points attached as though to make a star?”

“Plain dots,” she repeated. “Some seemed to have a faint circle round them and by the side of others there were some figures. I dared not look. I do not think that the Admiral suspected me in the least. I believe he thought that I was just a little ladybird wandering round to see if there was a nice-looking naval officer to be found. All the same, I do not think that if I went again I should find that chart upon his table.”

“You are sometimes an observant young woman, Suzanne,” Mark remarked. “Did anything else about the ship strike you—or the Admiral’s surroundings particularly?”

“It was not very clean,” she said, “and it seemed odd to see all the sailors smoking. Down in the cabin it seemed to me that they were prepared for rough times. There were two heavy old-fashioned revolvers lying on an empty bookcase and a box of cartridges, and I noticed that a very heavy bolt had been fitted to the door.”

“Not bad,” Mark approved. “I think another visit would be in Order, Suzanne. That could be arranged, I suppose?”

“Yes, I know how to communicate with him,” she admitted.

“You received your special grant for the papers from the Costoli brothers?” he asked.

She nodded.

“What have you done with it?”

“Invested half of it in rentes,” she confided, “and the other half in jewellery.”

He smiled slightly.

“A typical. Frenchwoman,” he murmured. “Now listen, Suzanne. The grant for that chart would be a great deal higher.”

“It would be a great deal more difficult,” she sighed. “Tell me why?”

“Because these Turks,” she explained, “the old man and his Commander too, they do not drink. The Italians and the French, if you are out with them, they drink from pure excitement and the love of pleasure and the joy of the whole thing, and before they know where they are they are easy. Oh, the wine helps. These Turks—why, the old man drank five coffees this afternoon, ready-made coffee from a sort of Samovar thing. When I wanted a drink he had hard work to find me a little cognac. As for champagne—not a sign of it. The Commander was the same. He understood, of course, how things should be done and he ordered champagne for me at Maxim’s, but he never touched it himself. He drank water.”

“Any chance of getting at the coffee?” Catherine intervened. “Dr. Luckstein could give you something quite harmless—just a pinch of it is all that is required.”

“Too risky,” the girl replied. “That old man he is fat and lazy and he moves about like an elephant, but he has a queer way of watching. His mouth too—he has the coarse thick lips of the man who has loved women all his life, and yet once I saw his teeth come together and the lips fold up, and his mouth was like a wild animal’s. I do not think I should like to be caught doing anything funny on that boat.”

“The grants for the Costoli papers,” Mark enquired, “came to how much?”

“Forty mille altogether,” she admitted. “It was good pay. It made me very happy. But you must remember that for that I had to see a man shoot himself and I had to risk the police.”

“For that chart, Suzanne, you would receive one hundred thousand francs.”

She sat stupefied. One hundred thousand francs! The vision before her eyes—fifty thousand in safe rentes! With the other fifty thousand, how one could amuse oneself at the jewellers’ shops—a visit here, a visit there. A bid, another bid at another establishment. Soon they would be all excited. Something would come off. Then something else. She could make her own price—the cash in her hand. And the joy of buying, too! She tried to frighten herself with the thoughts of what might happen on the cruiser, but she found it difficult.

“They would kill me,” she reflected.

Mark shrugged his shoulders. The possibility seemed to leave him indifferent.

"In our lives, petite," he said, "risks are the salt of life. Without risks nothing is accomplished. The bold man or woman takes every precaution but he looks only at one side of the picture—the result of success. One hundred thousand francs, Suzanne. And if you wish it we would move you into the suite de luxe which you wanted, the one we were keeping for La Belle Elise when she arrives from Paris."

The girl's eyes were full of greed. With a knife in a certain secret place she knew of, and that fat old Turk half crazy with her caresses—oh, it might be done! She drew a long breath.

"I will try," she promised. "I shall need another frock."

"Paquin will supply you. I will sign the order any time you bring it to me."

"I would rather not hurry."

"I give you a week," he agreed. "Only, if the cargo for which the Turkish ship is waiting arrives before, you may have to hurry. I have a man on the dock. At the first sign of loading we shall know."

"If I keep away for two or three days," she said, "that old man will send for me. It will be better…"

Chapter XIII

Suzanne was spending a very stuffy, highly unpleasant but somewhat exciting evening. From half-past five until seven she had drunk sweet coffee and sticky liqueurs without having achieved the slightest success. There was no sign anywhere in the saloon of that intriguing chart, and every time she tried to allude to the past or present activities of the ship her infatuated host had merely blinked and muttered unintelligible things down his beard. Notwithstanding the fact that it meant failure, she was relieved when seven o'clock came, and with apparent unwillingness she rose to her feet. For some reason or other her ardent companion made little effort to detain her. He himself, on the other hand, had been continually glancing at the clock for the last half-hour.

"I go," she announced. "It has been very pleasant. I like your little room, Monsieur l'Amiral. I like to be here with you, but alas—"

She sighed. The Admiral squeezed her hand. Just then the telephone bell rang.

"Wait," he begged. "I speak."

The Admiral drew the instrument towards him and held the receiver to his ear. Somehow he gave Suzanne the impression of a man who was receiving excellent news but who was struggling to conceal his satisfaction. He spoke rapidly and with many gestures. In the end he wound up with what was evidently a gracious speech. He hung up the receiver and turned towards his guest.

"I love mon Amiral," she said, patting his hand, "but even if you took me away with you to live in your distant country I could never learn that language."

"It is not so difficult," he assured her. "Listen—that was my navigating Commander who spoke."

She nodded.

"A man whom I do not like. He has no way with women. He does not please."

"He is very good-looking."

"Looks are not everything," Suzanne cooed. "I like a man—a man—a man who has lived—a strong man who understands and seeks to please. Your Commander is not like that."

"Listen, little one," the Admiral confided. "He went this afternoon to San Rafael to visit once more the battleship that is there. That is why I sent for you. He has just rung me up to beg leave for the night. There is a party at St. Tropez."

"He does not interest me, that man," Suzanne declared, edging gently towards the door.

Her host caught her by the wrist. She had been playing with him that afternoon, aching for a glimpse of that chart, wondering how she dared allude to it. His fingers were moist, his eyes were clouded.

"He will be away until nine o'clock to-morrow morning. It is an opportunity. I have a cabin here furnished for the occasion. Look here, and I will show you."

He drew her outside and opened the door of a gaudy little stateroom with faded pink sheets, a good many frills upon the pillow case, furniture of the cheap rococo style. He pointed out these atrocities with pride.

"I have kept this little chamber for you," he announced. "We dine together to-night, yes?"

"Oh, la la!" Suzanne laughed. "Are you going to put me in your harem?"

"Harems no longer exist," her host assured her. "At present I have no wife. As to that—we might see. It is against the rules to have a woman on board with us whilst we cruise, but after all, why am I an Admiral? And there is to be no fighting. We have a little dinner together—yes? My chef will show you how he prepares chicken with rice and livers. There shall be any dish you fancy—and champagne. What do you say?"

She patted him on the cheek.

"Méchant!" she exclaimed. "You wish?"

"Sit down with me and I will tell you how much I wish it," he answered.

"No, no," she insisted. "Behave yourself. I am afraid it is true what I have heard of you Turkish officers—you are not to be trusted."

He smiled. It was unfortunately a smile that ended in a leer. Suzanne looked away.

"After all," he remarked, "you and I—we are not ingénues."

"Why did you not ask me to dine with you before?" she enquired. "Was it that you were afraid of your handsome Commander?"

The Admiral frowned.

"He is a good fellow, that," he said, "but he looks too seriously at life. He thinks because we are on duty we should live severely. That is all very well for him. He has still steps to climb. I am an Admiral. I do what I choose. We are on duty, it is true, but we are not going into battle. It is a task of great importance to be accomplished, without a doubt, but an hour or two of love-making will only give one zest for the work."

"I will stay," Suzanne acceded, "if you do not ask me to drink any more of that sweet coffee or eat sticky stuff; and if you send your steward out for a bottle of French Vermouth, a bottle of the best English Gin, and some ice, I will make you a

Martini cocktail and we shall pass the time pleasantly until your dinner. If I drink more of your sweet things I shall be sick and there will be no dinner, et point d'amour."

He laughed until his sides shook.

"You shall give your own orders to my steward," he consented. "He speaks French."

"There must be plenty of ice for the champagne," she insisted.

"We will have an iceberg," he promised.

"And dinner must not be for at least an hour."

"Agreed."

"Then I stay," she decided.

Suzanne threw herself upon the settee and picked up one of the French papers.

"Before dinner," she announced, "I like to drink three cocktails. Send for your steward and give him the orders. I am ready for the first one now."

A steward made his appearance, received his orders and departed. Suzanne threw down the paper and jumped to her feet just in time to evade a caress.

"I shall now explore your saloon," she exclaimed. "Show me everything. Where is that funny-looking map with the black dots you had on the table the last time I was here?"

"That was not meant for observation," he grunted. "It is in the safe."

"Show it me," she begged.

"But why? You could not understand a line of it. It is a naval affair and you know nothing of the sea."

"Show me something else then. I do not care what. Tell me where you are going when you leave here."

The Admiral sighed.

"It will not be a pleasant voyage. I am of the old régime and to leave Constantinople was to me a tragedy."

"You are going to Constantinople?"

"That way," he admitted.

"Why?" she asked. "There is no fighting anywhere."

"The average warship lives for about eighteen years and spends possibly eighteen hours fighting."

"And the rest of the time?"

"Oh, practice—exercises—manoeuvres."

"What are you going to do now," she persisted, "when you leave here, I mean, and when do you leave here?"

"The little miss is curious," he remarked, looking at her out of the corners of his eyes.

"I am curious about everything," she confessed. "If you are not going to fight anyone why are those beautiful guns uncovered?"

"Not for use," he assured her. "We are on a special mission and, Mademoiselle, even though one is blind with love for the most beautiful of the fairies who ever trod the earth, one does not talk to her about the work."

She looked at him reproachfully.

"You do not trust me."

“It is the nature of our race,” he confided, “never to trust a woman. We love them but we do not trust.”

“I do not think I shall stay for dinner after all,” Suzanne declared, swinging herself to her feet.

He pulled her down almost roughly.

“You are here and you will stay,” he insisted, with a new note in his tone. “I shall place a sentry on the gangway. My little Suzanne, you cannot play too much with an elderly man who loves you. You have accepted my invitation and you shall dine with me.”

She shrugged her shoulders. After all, she liked him a little better in this mood. The cocktails were brought. She drank hers with approval. He attempted his and spat it out.

“Méchant!” she exclaimed.

“I never eat or drink what I do not like,” he grunted, his thick red lips pursed with disgust. “Sour things are like thin women—they are nothing to us.”

“I am not fat like your Turkish beauties.”

He felt her arm.

“You have the beauty of an angel.”

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” she laughed. “You talk like a schoolboy in love—and one has not yet dined.”

Nevertheless, it seemed as though Suzanne’s mission were foredoomed to failure. With dinner the Admiral, vastly more personable in his mess kit,—except that he reeked of scent from his bath,—was a little more coherent, a shade more dignified, but absolutely determined. Suzanne tried all her wiles in vain. In the end she ceased her questioning, dismissed the subject which lay nearest to her heart, and became her old self—provocative, at times almost tender. She had no more difficulty. The thing became almost too easy.

* * * * *

At midnight, humming a gay tune to herself but shivering with fear, she ran gaily down the gangplank, bade the astonished sentry, who looked more than half inclined to stop her, a mocking good-night, and tripped up the steps to the Avenue de la Poissonnerie. She jumped into a little voiture.

“Drive towards the Jetée Casino,” she told the cocher. “As soon as we meet a taxi, stop. I pay you well—four times the fare—if you find a taxi quickly.”

Crack went the man’s whip. She looked fearfully around. The Quay seemed deserted. There was no sign of movement upon the cruiser. Suddenly, she saw a light flash out from one of the portholes. Behind it was the cabin from which she had fled! She leaned over to the cocher shivering. He flogged his horse, only to pull it almost off its haunches at the corner of one of the streets leading to the market.

“Voilà un taxi,” he pointed out.

She thrust a hundred-franc note into the taxi-man’s hand and whispered an address.

“Vite, vite!” she cried.

The taxicab man knew her and laughed. He flourished his cap.

“As Mademoiselle says,” he agreed, and counted the traffic laws as nothing.

Another hundred-franc note and a storm of thanks. Suzanne chose to seek the quickest refuge by entering the vast premises of the International Bureau through the Café des Oiseaux Noirs. It was crowded with a very unsavoury lot of men, but the etiquette of the place prevailed. No one stared at her, no one watched her as she flitted through to the private exit. Madame lent her a hand there. Monsieur patted her on the shoulder.

"Gently, little one," he advised as he opened the door. "Monsieur will wait."

She threw them a laughing rejoinder. Already she was well on her way to recovery. She sped down the passage, up some steps, through a door which she opened with a kick, along more passages, downstairs and up—until at last she reached the door of one of the reception rooms of the Bureau. In a moment it was open. She sprang through and, turning round, closed it with a quick passionate movement. Fear had come back to her. She scarcely noticed who it was who had admitted her.

"Listen!" she cried.

"One hears nothing," Catherine Oronoff reassured her. "More trouble, Suzanne?"

Suzanne shook the door. It was firmly in its place, fastened with a spring lock. She rushed to the window, listened intently, opened it just a crack and peered out. The road below was deserted, the whole square was quiet. She staggered back and sank into a chair.

"More suicides?" the Russian girl asked calmly.

Suzanne searched in her bag with feverish fingers. She drew out a crumpled roll of parchment and thrust it into Catherine's hand.

"Lock that up," she begged. "Please—quickly! You have the keys of the safes. Oh, do not stand there looking at me! Someone may come."

Catherine Oronoff glanced at what she was holding, then she crossed the room swiftly, unlocked the big safe which stood against the wall behind her chair, placed the parchment inside, reset the combination and turned away.

"Well," she remarked, "whatever this precious thing is that you have committed murder for, it is safe now. Do not faint—be a good girl."

"Where is—he?" Suzanne demanded.

"In the wireless room. There are messages coming through late to-night."

"I wish I could see him," Suzanne faltered. "I think if I heard his voice I should leave off trembling."

With a contemptuous gesture Catherine turned to her desk, opened a drawer and drew out a flask of brandy. She filled a small glass and brought it across to Suzanne, who swallowed it at a gulp.

"Are you in serious trouble?" she asked.

"I might be," Suzanne admitted. "I was terrified. I lost my nerve. That old Turk—oh, he was horrible!"

"Ours is not exactly Sunday School work, you should remember," Catherine remarked. "It is no use your losing your nerve. Mr. Humberstone might come in at any moment. If he sees you in this state he will not trust you again."

The brandy was doing its work. Suzanne was sitting up in her chair, her open vanity case before her, when the door on the other side of the room was quietly

opened and closed. Mark came towards them. She rose to her feet. She was not exactly steady but in her eyes flamed the light of success.

"I have done it," she announced. "I have got it."

"Got what?" he asked.

"Suzanne is a little upset," Catherine interposed drily. "She has a plan or chart of some sort from that Turkish gunboat in the harbour. I have locked it away."

She crossed the room towards the safe.

"It—it was not easy," Suzanne faltered. "I lost my nerve—very nearly. He was obstinate, that old Turk. He seemed so easy, and then he changed."

"So it was the Admiral you suborned," Mark said smiling.

Catherine returned with the plan in her hand. Mark took it from her and spread it open. For several minutes he stood utterly and entirely absorbed, then he rolled it up again and pointed to the safe.

"That is a very valuable possession," he admitted. "Lock it up carefully. Tell us all about it."

"As you know," she recounted, a different girl now that she was under Mark's protection, "I had no fortune with the Commander. Twice I have visited the Admiral. I went this afternoon to tea and was nearly sick with sweetmeats and sweet coffee. The Commander rang up from San Rafael. He had gone over there to visit a British warship. He asked for leave until the morning. The Admiral was very pleased."

"Don't hurry," Mark begged, as he shook out a cigarette from his case and lit it. "I am beginning to be jealous of you, Mademoiselle Suzanne. You are getting what they call all the fun of the fair."

She shuddered. The fear was not quite gone.

"I think I will have no more fun just yet," she said. "Well, the Admiral said 'yes' to the Commander. Then he insisted that I stay for dinner. I stayed. I tried so hard to get him to talk about where he was going or what that plan had been. It was useless. More and more cunning he became. Still I stayed. We had dinner and drank champagne. Then there was coffee in the other room. There was nothing to be done. The old man was terrible. I—put something in his coffee!"

Mark nodded.

"A reasonable thing to do," he murmured.

"For some time," she went on, "nothing happened. Then all of a sudden he threw himself back, he was perspiring all over and his face looked awful. He tried to speak and could not. Then he began to groan. I tried to pull him up, but I think he was unconscious. He made awful noises, though, in his throat. I felt sure that he was dying."

"All very interesting," Mark observed. "And then?"

"I hurried out—took his keys, and opened the safe where he had told me the chart was. I snatched it out and then I rushed away. I ran down the gangway. The sentry tried to stop me but I was up in the Avenue de la Poissonnerie before he could make up his mind. I got a carriage, then changed into a taxi. Here I am!"

Mark nodded approval.

"You have done well, Suzanne," he told her. "You have brought me a document of great importance."

"The hundred thousand francs?"

“Are yours,” he replied with a little bow, “to-morrow morning or to-night—which you will. Meanwhile, remain in your room. You are safe there but nowhere else.”

Suzanne made her way towards the door. From the threshold she curtsied first to Catherine, then to Mark. Then she danced down the corridor towards the wing of the building where her apartments were. The terror had passed. She was no longer haunted by that old man’s face. She heard no more that gurgling cry in her ears.

Suzanne was riotously happy, and because she was happy she found the idea of sleep impossible. She looked longingly at the telephone, but, alas, its use for private purposes—except with special permission—was sternly forbidden by the rules of the Bureau. She slipped out of her gown and practised a few steps of one of the latest dances in front of a mirror, humming gaily to herself. One hundred thousand francs! No debts, plenty of new frocks, a small but precious piece of jewellery which she had long coveted, and fifty thousand francs into the stocking. Bless the old Turk...!

She wearied soon of her pas seul and, fired with a sudden idea, glanced at her watch. It was barely one o’clock. The idea was so wonderful that she was swept off her feet. Away went the remainder of her clothes. Already she hated every garment she had worn that evening. She threw open the door of the bathroom, took a hasty plunge in perfumed water, shook out a marvellous confection of peach-coloured chiffon which she had not as yet worn, paid a good deal of attention to her hair, drew on her stockings and shoes, threw a little cape around her shoulders, and stole out. In less than five minutes she was in the spot she loved most on earth—Maxim’s—greeted by bowing waiters and maîtres d’hôtels, the heavy atmosphere of the room already in her nostrils, her feet moving to the music. Very soon she was surrounded. One of the best tables was hers. She sat there a reigning queen, with an admirer on either side. Champagne was poured into her glass. She drank feverishly. The wine was like a new elixir. All those hateful memories in the background—the cramped cabin, the water gurgling against the side, the fat man with the protuberant eyes lying groaning at her feet, his eyes staring at her, the horrible gaze of a man racked with the fear of death. Ugh! Another glass of wine. A dance with Monsieur le Comte. How he danced! Breathless she regained her place. The ugly memories had vanished. Fresh admirers were always coming. The leader of the orchestra waited for her commands. She chose the music—danced and danced again. Then breathless she leaned back in her place.

“I am exhausted,” she cried. “I must rest. And behold my supper! No more dances for half an hour. Play what you like, André. I am starving. My dinner—oh, it was not a dinner—it was a funeral feast! Now I eat indeed. I starve.”

More champagne—delicious food. André was playing a little morceau for her—something of his own composition. What a world! Jazz music again. In the crash of those opening bars her little cry was unheard, the clatter of the fork she dropped was unnoticed. She sat stiffly in her seat, her eyes were fixed upon the door. It was a terrible vision. Inside, coolly divesting himself of cape and hat, untwining the white scarf from around his throat, stood the Turkish Commander. A maître d’hôtel solicitously pointed towards a table. The Commander glanced around the room. His eyes rested for a moment upon Suzanne’s, and though a few seconds before she had been warm and happy and as near heaven as she was ever likely to

go, she felt a queer chill—colder and colder. The blood in her veins seemed to be turning into ice. She must be dying. There was a haze in the room. With slow deliberate footsteps she could see the Commander walking towards her, a very personable figure, well and correctly dressed, an object of apprehension to no one except to her. No one interfered with him. If he chose to pay his respects to Mademoiselle Suzanne what more natural? They were the two handsomest persons in the room. The man who had been sprawling over Suzanne's table gave place. This newcomer had the air of claiming anything he desired. He reached the table. He leaned towards Suzanne.

"Mademoiselle," he ordered, "you will return to me that chart."

"I have no chart," she faltered.

She saw his hand come stealing out of his jacket pocket. It was underneath his cuff that something glittered, something was coming a little more into evidence. Surely someone could see that he had come to murder her! Someone would help. She opened her lips. No sound.

"You will give me the chart, mademoiselle?"

Five seconds. He raised his arm. The gun was in his hand now, hidden from the others by a napkin he had snatched up. He leaned closer. Arm and gun were plainly visible now. Simultaneously, as it seemed to everyone in the room, there was a loud explosion, the crash of the mirror behind Suzanne's seat, and the disappearance of the Turkish officer.

One second, two seconds, three seconds…The smell of gunpowder was in her nostrils. I must be dead, she thought. Little pieces of glass were falling down behind her. She bent over the table. The Commander was lying upon the floor. Someone was standing there—someone whom she had seen following him through the mist down the room, someone whose presence she thought must have been a dream. Four seconds, five seconds, six…She saw the Turk's hand steal out onto the dance floor—no longer a swaying mass of people—deserted. With a quick convulsive movement he had the gun once more in his hand, pressed it to his own temple. There were two quick reports and the gun fell on to the floor. The Commander's head fell back hideously. The man who had struck up his arm disappeared amongst the little oncoming rush of waiters and guests; but without a doubt the Commander was dead, and the hole from his first bullet was there in the mirror about a foot to the right of Suzanne.

Chapter XIV

Monsieur Déchanel, attached to the staff of the Chef de la Sûreté of the district, and paying a morning call upon Mark, shook his head gravely as he accepted a chair and a cigarette. He had the air of a man bowed down with anxiety.

"Am I in trouble again, Monsieur Déchanel?" Mark asked with a smile.

The police official gesticulated eloquently.

"To protect you, sir, is becoming an impossibility," he declared. "Your Mademoiselle Suzanne, too! C'est inouï! A week or so ago I smuggle the body of

one of her victims, who blew out his brains for her sake, onto his battleship for burial, and I aid her escape so that she reaches shelter here unseen and unharmed. And now again an attempted murder—a suicide in Maxim's at her feet—the one night place in Nice which is under my personal supervision! And, worse than all, you yourself ask for death—risking a life as valuable as yours for the sake of a little cocotte! Monsieur Humberstone, you depress me. I shall tell my chief that I can no longer be responsible for your safety. The situation becomes impossible."

"My friend," Mark protested soothingly, "you take this little matter too seriously."

The police official very nearly relapsed into hysterics.

"Too seriously!" he cried. "Name of God, what then is serious? The second in command of the Turkish cruiser a Corpse upon the floor of a public restaurant with a bullet in his head, thrown down by you as he was in the act of shooting Suzanne! And you—as the authorities of Paris assure us, one of the great figures of the world, here on a mission of vast importance—dead to a surety if the Turk had turned his head and seen you standing there!"

"But nothing serious has happened," Mark argued gently. "The Turk is dead. Well, probably he had played with the little lady. It may be that he was suffering from a fit of jealousy, but he shot himself. No one murdered him. If he chose to die it was bad taste to create a commotion in a public place, but he had the right. A suicide. Well, the man is dead. No more to be said. Why disturb me and yourself like this?"

"But everyone knows that it was Suzanne again at whom he shot—this man," Déchanel pointed out. "How can I keep people's tongues from wagging? They are of the gay world—true; but a little courtesan who has been responsible for the deaths of two men within ten days loses her popularity, mark you. One cannot continually cover up these affairs."

"There may be some reason in what you say," Mark acknowledged. "Suzanne had better disappear for a few weeks. In any case I thought of sending her to Warsaw, if Mr. Cheng is willing. She is not needed here. At the end of that time we will see. Conditions here are changing. The International Bureau may be shifting its quarters."

"At least one would have peace," the Frenchman groaned.

"Come, come, my friend, confess now that it would break your heart if we went," Mark continued, leaning back in his chair with an air of genial expansion. "Here is the centre of all movement and mystery for you. How you wonder, up there at headquarters, why I have spent millions of francs upon the most unique and powerful radio installation in the world! How you wonder what goes on under this roof, and to what parts of the world our spies steal to carry out their commissions! What does it all mean, you ask yourselves, you and the others—even some of your ministers in Paris who worry you so by telephone. Fancy if we were gone...You would have nothing to ask ask another. And, Déchanel,—a word in your ear,—your account! Awful. Nothing going in. Nothing for the stocking—nothing towards that little château!"

The police official mopped his forehead and looked steadfastly at the speaker.

"What a man!" he murmured. "You make the blague all the time."

“Confess, though,” Mark enjoined, “you would hate to see me go.”

Déchanel extended his hand across the table.

“Monsieur,” he confessed, “we should go into mourning. All Nice would regret you. You keep us alive. You provide us—well, with more excitement than is good for us. You are the son of the great Professor Humberstone, we know, and you seem to have found your way into the places where the wealth of the world is stored. You know what my own particular confrère said to me last week? ‘Read me the secrets of the International Bureau, and I will tell you what will happen in Europe during the next five years.”

“A very farseeing fellow, your confrère,” Mark observed. “We pull many strings, my friend. We have sometimes to employ strange people and to give our friends in authority anxious times. Never mind. When the grand finale comes no one shall suffer because of us…Suzanne shall go to Warsaw for a fortnight and to Paris afterwards. Come, that is a promise. You are satisfied?”

“You will permit us to put it in the records that she has been sent away by order of the police?” Déchanel asked anxiously.

“But certainly,” Mark assented.

Déchanel twirled his black moustache.

“I should like some evidence to put before my chief that the departure is bona fide.”

Mark glanced across at Catherine and motioned towards the telephone.

“A compartment on the Train Bleu, mademoiselle, for Suzanne as far as Paris to-day. From Le Bourgét, the morning plane to Berlin and through to Warsaw. All papers to be here in an hour…Good.”

The police official rose to his feet.

“As usual, monsieur,” he exclaimed, saluting, “you treat me like a prince. Is there any message I can convey if I am rung up from Paris?”

“There is one matter which needs arranging,” Mark observed. “The Turkish boat, which seems to be the cause of much of this trouble, has been hanging around waiting for a cargo. Will you give my compliments to your chief and say that if he has a chance to walk round to see Monsieur Renard, who I believe is the head of the Maritime Customs, I should be glad if he would use his influence to prevent the embarkation of the cargo.”

The police official stroked his chin.

“No explanation?” he asked.

“I have, from the Quay,” Mark confided, “studied the build of that small cruiser, and I am convinced that it would be a dangerous enterprise for the Port of Nice and for the cruiser herself to attempt to load her with explosives.”

“Explosives?”

“Precisely. That cruiser is waiting for a delivery of mines, purchased from a certain government, for delivery at Toulon. Toulon proved to be an impossible place, so the cruiser came here to Nice. Mines would be a very dangerous cargo for the cruiser. You see, she is not fitted properly for their reception, and they would have to be transferred somewhere or other between here and their destination to a mine-laying craft. Dangerous. Very dangerous. If your superintendent of the Maritime Customs would like to discuss the matter with me, I shall be here for a few days longer at any rate.”

Déchanel, with a final salute, made his way to the door.

"Your message shall be delivered," he promised. "In parting you will forgive my remarking, in case we should not meet again, that you are the most amazing man I have ever come across in my life."

* * * * *

A very crushed and deflated Suzanne answered Mark's summons. She entered the room reluctantly. She walked with heavy footsteps, the volatile grace which had been one of her most appealing charms had gone. Her eyes were beringed, and she sank into the chair which Mark indicated with a listless gesture. Nevertheless, something of the old light returned to her eyes at the sound of his level voice. She realised that her disgrace was not irretrievable.

"You leave this afternoon for Warsaw, Suzanne," he announced. "In your room within an hour you will find a packet containing your hundred thousand francs, your month's money, your expense account replenished, and your tickets."

"Very well," she assented wearily. "I would rather it were Paris, but Warsaw will do. You are not sending me away for always?"

"No," he replied coolly. "You are too useful. You will return when you have finished your task."

"And what is that to be?"

"You will go each day to the aviation office, you will find the names of those who are travelling westwards. The day that Paul Agrestein books a place you will telephone to me."

"The old man?" she murmured.

"Yes, the grandfather of your lover. Listen, you know him by sight?"

"Of course."

"The day he has booked his passage you must see the plane start. If it is indeed Paul Agrestein who travels you must report it. If on the other hand—this is important—there is someone else travelling with his passport, you must telephone through here as soon as the plane leaves the ground."

"That is easy," she admitted.

"Leave for Paris when you have carried out my instructions. Apply at the Bureau des Affairs Etrangères at the American Embassy each morning for a message. Remain in Paris until you get it. Repeat, now, what you are to do."

She repeated almost every word with parrot-like exactitude, then she leaned a little farther over her chair. Her face was drawn, her eyes were tense, and her voice had lost its music.

"How did you know?" she asked.

"You are overwrought, Suzanne," he replied indulgently, "or you would know that it is not permitted to ask such questions. However, this may be a lesson to you. You will understand now that whenever anyone leaves this place their destination is known to me or to Mr. Cheng automatically. I was told that you had disobeyed orders and that you were at Maxim's, within ten minutes of your entering the door."

"But why did you come there?" she asked feverishly.

"I had received a report from the police," he told her. "Commander Darnu returned from San Rafael in the middle of the night to find the Admiral

unconscious upon the floor of his cabin and the chart which was to have been the keystone of the work gone. The Commander dashed to the police. It was not a matter in which, for various reasons, they felt greatly concerned, and he found them unsympathetic. In a fury he went himself to Maxim's, obviously in search of you. The information was conveyed to me and I acted upon it…Now, you see, I have broken my own rule. I have condoned your asking a question by answering it. Be careful not to offend again."

"You knew that he would kill me?"

"I imagined so."

"But you ran a terrible risk," she went on, breathing a little more rapidly. "You ran a risk when you threw him down just as he was pulling the trigger of his gun. Even when he lay upon the floor he could have shot you first and then himself. The people were scared to death. Brave men were running for cover like rats. I saw one waiter under a table. The Turk could have killed you easily."

"I can assure you he could not," Mark answered with a thin smile. "I had no fear of that. It is not my fate to be killed in a minor squabble like that."

"You saved my life," she said half to herself, but with her wonderful eyes all the time challenging his, "I cannot imagine why. You have never spoken a kindly word to me. You have never looked at me as though I were a human being."

"I protect my employees."

"Was that all?"

He looked at her steadily, his eyebrows slightly raised, some inkling of surprise in his face.

"It was all and quite enough," he told her. "Take my advice, lie down now until an hour before the departure of the train. You must not be seen in this hysterical condition. You need rest."

"I am very grateful—"

"I dislike gratitude. Remember that, and forget your fancies."

She rose to her feet.

"I should have liked to have thanked you," she sighed. "I will keep what I feel in my heart. A miserable sort of place, you think? Perhaps so."

His eyes followed her until she left the room. He turned to Catherine, who had just entered, with a smile of gentle irony.

"A battered old portmanteau, I should think, Suzanne's heart," he remarked.

"Quand même, mon cher, why do you run such risks for the sake of such a creature?" Catherine asked. "Do you think it is fair to the great work—to all your responsibilities here?"

He installed her in his chair and watched her light a cigarette.

"You see, I am beginning to imbibe Cheng's wonderful fatalism," he explained. "I feel that I shall always have warning when anything is going to happen to me."

She looked up at him—a little differently. Her eyes seemed almost of a deeper blue, yet he fancied that they were softer—faintly misty.

"Would it make any difference, Mark, if I told you that as I do not quite share this wonderful fatalism you and Cheng talk about, I would rather you took a little more care of yourself?"

Mark felt his heart suddenly bounding. He leaned a little towards her.

"Catherine," he began…

Illustration:

He leaned a little towards her. „Catherine," he began…

They both of them heard the soft opening of the door. He turned his head unwillingly. Cheng was standing motionless upon the threshold. For a moment he did not speak, and a queer thought flashed through Mark's brain. He fancied that there was something ominous, almost sinister, in that brief silence.

Chapter XV

It was Cheng himself who dissolved the situation. He closed the door behind him and came a little farther into the room.

"I want Jonson," he announced. "Have his movements been reported?"

Catherine reached out for the book by her side. She glanced at one of the typewritten pages.

"He was on the sheet this morning," she told him. "He performed twice at the Jetée last night. There was rather a scene the second time. A man fainted. They say the police will stop his turn. What an advertisement! But of course they will not do anything of the sort."

"Where is Jonson now Cheng asked softly.

"On the Promenade des Anglais," she replied. "He starts from exactly opposite the Jetée Casino at ten o'clock and he walks to the first racecourse gate every day—wet or fine. He is somewhere about halfway there now, I should think."

"Have one of the men from the small car squad who knows him by sight go out after him at once," Cheng directed. "I shall expect him here in half an hour."

Catherine crossed the floor and spoke for a few minutes into one of the house telephones.

"You still trust him?" she asked, when she returned to her place.

"Why not? He has done odd things, but he has always had a reason for them. I rather like the man who has the courage to disobey orders. He must know before he does it that he is risking his life."

"I think that your little fat man is like you in that respect," she confided. "I do not think that he minds risking his life at all. He gives me the impression, though, of a man working always towards some set purpose. I ask myself whether that purpose is concerned with the activities of the International Bureau."

"Why should it not be?"

"Jonson is a man of parts himself," she answered. "He is not a man to work for others without a reason. Why has he taken the trouble to learn that trick of his on the stage? Not for your sake."

"He didn't learn it," Mark interposed. "He picked it up at one of the laboratories in Beaumont Park when he was working for my father. I was looking at the instrument he uses the other day."

“The only regrettable part of your Russian disposition, my dear young lady,” Cheng went on, “is that it has filled you with suspicions. Poor Jonson. That marvellous time-and-conduct sheet of yours tells us where he has spent every minute since he came to Nice.”

“If he is a man with a purpose, as I suspect,” Catherine replied, “it may be that the moment for that purpose to be fulfilled has not yet arrived.”

Mr. Cheng had nothing more to say. He never pursued an argument when he had already arrived at a definite conclusion.

“I have been on the roof all night,” he confided. “I want the morning papers—French, English, German, and Italian.”

“They are worth looking at,” Mark observed. “The Italians are trying to persuade the Persians to send an expedition out into the desert to discover our secret wireless bases. Russia claims to have discovered some of them already. The English Times complains that some mysterious force is interfering with her communications to India.”

“Well, you have no need to worry,” Cheng commented. “Unless we succeed, India will not belong to them in ten years’ time. They would be very foolish if they built this new line of airships they are talking about with India in its present condition.”

The papers arrived. Cheng’s face darkened a little as he read the same story in all of them. He threw them on one side impatiently.

“The sky will be strewn with aeroplanes before long,” he remarked, “all containing courageous and enterprising war correspondents on the way to a front—no one knows where. In the idiomatic language of the Western Hemisphere—they have their wind up.”

“I think before long,” Catherine said with a somewhat dreary smile, “we may be in the same position.”

“Because of these newspapers? Pooh! That, from our point of view, is the joy of this sensational press. They glut you with horrors every day and when the time for horrors really comes people still read but they do not believe. That English newspaper, for example, which for months and even years has embarked on a fierce crusade. War that is coming to-morrow, or the next day, or the next month…War inevitable! Pictures of airships raining bombs on London! Why, people have become so used to it that they have begun not to care if airships do rain bombs on London. If they only knew it—these newspapermen—there is something brewing for them which would make then stark with fear! They fancy they hear the thunders but they are not sure. They have heard the imitation for so long.”

Catherine lit a cigarette. She was a privileged person, but it was very seldom that she took part in these discussions.

“Mr. Cheng and Mr. Humberstone,” she said, “this is the plain speaking of a woman with her feet in France and her head not in Asia or in the clouds or even peering over the borderline into heaven. You have bribed every newspaper that could be bribed. You have engineered accidents to every cable line and wireless station not under your control. You have succeeded for months in cutting down to a shadow all news from certain parts of the Eastern world. It has been a wonderful achievement, but the limit has been reached. Travellers are returning who have

seen things with their-own eyes. You picked up the Viceroy of India's last message to Downing Street, but you could not stop it."

"And what is the meaning of all this tirade, Catherine Oronoff?" Cheng asked.

"The meaning is that you are putting off your grand coup, whatever it may be, until too late," she declared. "I think you love to loiter here with the strings in your hand. You gloat over the moment when you will gather them together and find the world in tumult. If ever you are going to play the great god behind the clouds, Prince, you should play it now. It is time you loosed the lightnings."

"You are in a strangely disturbing frame of mind, Catherine Oronoff," he reflected. "Still, I must remember your very apt simile. Your feet are on the earth in France. You read every newspaper that is published day by day, you know what the world is saying. Sometimes it may be that I pay too little attention to that. I have talked with statesmen in England and in France within the last few days. They do not talk like men who are awaiting their doom."

She smiled.

"France thinks of nothing but Germany," she pointed out. "She is obsessed, her very system is rotten, with craven fear at the thought of Germany. If another nation were knocking at her gates she would take no notice. All the time her eyes would be fixed across the Rhine. England—well, you know my opinion of England and English politics. England is even now a great home nation—a fireside nation, I call them. Across the world they have no men with vision who can see far enough and deeply enough to know what is happening. I am still bold, Prince. I have never been in your secret chamber, I have never looked upon the great map which hangs upon the wall, I do not know how near you are to the carrying-out of your great scheme. But I do know this. If you delay it any longer you are toying with fate, you are beckoning to failure."

A telephone bell rang. She picked up the receiver and listened for several moments.

"The messenger whom we sent out," she reported, "has driven to the racecourse and back. There are few people walking this morning and he has seen nothing of Jonson."

"Tell him to start from the Jetée Casino and do the whole course again," Cheng directed. "If Jonson said that he would not leave the Promenade des Anglais I do not believe that he did leave it, willingly. Let Jean go with him. François can walk back if they find our man. Tell François to watch those few queer-looking houses on the right before the racecourse—dens of iniquity, every one of them."

Catherine gave the orders.

"I know the houses you mean," she said, as she rang off. "Dens of iniquity they may be, but I do not think Jonson is the man to be tempted by them."

"Glad to hear you have a good word to say for the fellow," he remarked.

"I wish we had more like him. He looks simple and he is not. He looks ordinary and I do not think he is. He pretends to be timid and I do not think he knows what fear is. It may be that he will serve you well and honestly to the end. If he does, it is because your end and his are the same."

"Ring through to Chamber Fourteen," Mark directed. "Say that I am on my way up. See that the seal is off the door and the guard prepared."

Catherine unlocked the cabinet that contained the most private telephone of all. She spoke into it for a moment or two, replaced the transmitter and locked the cabinet. They all three seemed uneasily conscious that great things were happening.

* * * * *

With a master key in his hand Mark opened the fifth door, which led into the great observatory. He closed it carefully behind him. A sallow-complexioned young man, dressed in dark clothes and swift in his movements, hurried down the room. He bowed low to the visitors and remained awaiting orders.

"There is fresh news?" Mr. Cheng enquired.

"A thirty-seven-mile move in Manchuria, my lord," was the quiet reply. "Southwards, too, there is progress. Our night messages have been interfered with by thunderstorms in Persia. There may be more to come."

"And Fan Sik Tsun?" Cheng asked.

"His Honour, the General, was wakened from his sleep at the news of your coming," the man reported. "He will be here directly."

Mark and Catherine stood side by side at the head of the huge room. She drew a little breath of amazement as she looked around her. The walls were covered with a glittering and confusing array of bells and signal boards, and in the distance two huge receivers were turned seawards. A score of men were seated before small iron tables, on every one of which stood strangely shaped machines and instruments. A tired-looking youth wearing thick glasses removed an apparatus from his head and came across from his place to where the visitors were standing.

"General Percheron left word that he would like to speak to you if you came up, sir," he announced.

"Tell the General that we are in the chart room," Mark replied. "Can you leave your instrument for a few minutes?"

"I have just disconnected it, Mr. Humberstone. I have to fetch a fresh platinum sheet from the stores. I will send the General along."

The operator hurried away. Mark, laying his fingers upon Catherine's arm, drew aside a heavy curtain and led her into a sort of annex to the main apartment. The whole of one wall was taken up by a gigantic map about which there were dotted a number of black, green and red pegs. The map itself was guarded by metal railings, in front of which was a small swinging gate. Outside the railings, but close to them, was a long wooden seat with a high back, rather resembling a choir stall in a cathedral. In the middle of it Mr. Cheng was seated very erect and with folded arms. By his side, with a long ivory cane in his hand, was a man of medium height, solidly built and with complexion almost copper coloured, as though from lifelong exposure to sun and icy winds. He wore a black silk dressing gown tightly drawn around him. His grey hair was shaven close to his head. He bowed as Mark and his companion approached.

"Any report, Fan Sik Tsun?" the former asked.

"There is further news," the Chinese General announced. "It concerns the movement northwards of Ling Ho."

"Ling Ho," Mr. Cheng repeated. "What progress have they made with him, I wonder?"

“Two years ago his forces were nothing but brigands,” Fan Sik Tsun confided. “To-day they have fallen into excellent discipline, chiefly, I fear I must admit, under American direction. Ling Ho himself has taken the oath.”

“Put him in his place,” Cheng directed.

Fan Sik Tsun opened the little iron gate, peered at the chart for a moment and then thrust in a green peg with firm fingers side by side with a red one.

“His men are across the river,” he continued. “They have built their own rafts and have been of some assistance.”

Fan Sik Tsun returned to his master’s side and eyed the chart with his hands clasped together.

“All this in eight months,” he meditated. “Progress seems slow when one watches it from afar but my lord must realise it is a great advance that has been made. From Manchuria the news may come at any time. Nearly half our pegs are practically in touch with the railway.”

“Very soon then,” Cheng said softly, “the skies will flame.”

“Very soon,” Fan Sik Tsun echoed.

A tall thin man of soldierly presence, although in déshabillé, stepped through the curtains and made his way towards Mark. They exchanged brief but friendly greetings. Mark introduced him to Catherine.

“This is General Percheron from Washington,” he said. “Catherine Oronoff is one of our staff.”

“Hope you will excuse my costume, Miss Oronoff,” the General apologised. “We live a sort of isolated life up here and we are not looking for visitors.”

“Everything O.K., General?” Mark enquired.

“There has been some slight trouble,” the other confided. “Levissier, the head of the Police Intelligence Department in Paris, paid us a visit last evening.”

“He was not admitted here?”

“Certainly not. I interviewed him below. He insisted upon seeing our licences.”

“You showed them to him, of course?”

“It was necessary. When he saw the signature of the Minister of the Interior he seemed thunderstruck.” Mark flicked the ash from his cigarette.

“We paid ten millions for those licences.”

“I reminded him of the fact. He surely was in a state of distress. He pointed out that neither of the news services can get their material through distinctly and the cable service from the East is continually being disturbed. They have become convinced that the interference is caused by some new element which we have put into action. One of the deputies is to ask a question in the Chamber next week. He came down purposely to warn and to consult with you.”

“He wastes his time,” Mark declared. “Our licences cannot be revoked. We are using the most powerful instruments in the world because their patents and all the secret methods connected with their use belong to us. It is absolutely necessary that we dominate the news eastward for a short time longer. Afterwards it will be of no account.”

General Percheron nodded gravely.

“I understand the position, Mark,” he said, “but I can understand this fellow’s point of view, too. The whole thing is a question of time. Of course I do not know much about the political side of it but I should say, looking at the chart, that I

ought to have been in the air on the way to join up with Mayne forty-eight hours ago. Of course, there is this Odessa business."

Mark shook his head.

"That does not exist any longer. We have a complete chart of the mine fields in the Dardanelles and the last lot of mines will never be laid. One of our best flying men started an hour ago for Alexandria with the chart. Those Greek steamers can be beating it up at any moment."

"That's fine," the General declared. "Of course I know," he went on, "you and Mr. Cheng have got the political side of the whole affair at your fingers' ends. I won't even presume to offer any advice, but we have got to the end of our bluff. The storm is about due at any moment now."

"We wait only for one thing," Mark replied, "but that one thing is important. In a sense it is the base of the whole campaign. It might come, though, at any moment."

The General pointed towards the chart.

"Mayne is looking for me over there," he confided wistfully.

Mark reflected for a moment. He waved his hand in acquiescence to Catherine who was signalling her departure to him.

"You can order your plane for midnight, General," he decided.

Chapter XVI

Catherine, who had preceded the two men by several minutes, looked up eagerly from behind her desk as Mark, followed by Cheng, entered the room.

"I am afraid that something has happened to Jonson," she announced.

"Proceed," Mr. Cheng begged.

"You know we sent out two of the men from the squad to find him."

"Well?"

"At the far end of the Promenade des Anglais, which was almost deserted, they came across Jonson with two strange men. He was sitting between them on a bench and they were all three talking earnestly. François is a very intelligent person. Will you hear the story from him?"

"By all means," Cheng consented.

François, who was waiting outside, answered Catherine's summons without delay. He was rather an undersized young man, typically French, with wild curly black hair and a scarf around his throat instead of a collar and tie.

"Tell me about the man you went out to search for," Cheng ordered.

The young man broke into ready speech.

"We were driving slowly. The light was not very good and we were approaching the racecourse. Just opposite one of those three dancing cabarets on the right there is a seat. Upon that seat we noticed three men. The one in the middle was Jonson."

"Do you know who the other two were?"

“They were strangers, monsieur. Jean would have pulled up but it seemed to me that there was something the matter with Jonson. He was sitting uneasily and though he turned his head he made no movement to attract our attention. We passed quite slowly. He recognised us, without a doubt, but he turned away. We decided, therefore, not to stop. We went on as far as the racecourse gates.”

“Any other reason for not stopping?”

“Yes, sir,” François continued. “I was perfectly certain something was wrong. I stood up as the car passed and I saw over the top of the seat the man on the left had a gun pushed into Jonson’s side.”

Mark frowned.

“You left him there?”

“We went on to the racecourse entrance. Jean remained in the car. I climbed over the gate and came down on the other side of the hedge. I was able to get within thirty or forty paces of Jonson and the two men. They were standing up when I got there but I could not hear what they were saying. They crossed the road. They each had an arm through Jonson’s and one of the men still had the gun up his sleeve. They entered that little hotel which advertises a cabaret and dancing and has all those rows of shaded lamps. One knows the place. It has a bad reputation.”

“Well, what did you do—leave him there?” Mark repeated.

“But no, monsieur,” François remonstrated. “It is not our business to leave a comrade in trouble. I waved my hand to Jean. We drove the car down the road and we entered the place together. Everyone was talking at the same time and it was very noisy. It was full of people and much wine was being drunk. Two little ladies of the town—très chic, très jolie—were seated on stools at the bar and there was another who was singing a little chanson and dancing by herself. The two men were trying to persuade Jonson to go round to the back with them. Jonson was making a great fuss with one of the girls, though, and swore he would not go until he had had a drink. They looked at us with suspicion but we both made the pretence that Jonson was a stranger to us and we shouted for drinks. I heard Jonson call out, and although he did not look our way I felt that he meant us to hear. He said something like this:

“‘I will come. We will spend the evening together, but I have a fancy for the little one here. She must drink a glass of wine with me first, and then I will come. When we have talked I shall return to her. She pleases me!’”

Illustration:
„I have a fancy for the little one here.
She must drink a glass of wine with me first.”

“And the girl?” Mark asked.

“Oh, she took it all right. She was hanging around Jonson all the time just as though she were waiting for a message. She knew what she was up to, that girl. Soon I saw what his game was. His hand was in his coat pocket and was moving about all the time. When it came out there was a five hundred franc note in it but there was something in the five hundred franc note which was all twisted up. One of the two men whispered something but Jonson pretended to be angry.

"'Why should I not offer a cadeau?' he demanded. 'Mademoiselle will give me her lips presently and if she is as sweet as she looks I shall give her another note. Life is dull enough here. You must be more cheerful if I am to spend the evening with you. I would have you remember that I am an artist. At nine o'clock I appear at the Jetée!'

"They all laughed at him but the barman backed him up.

"'He is telling the truth,' he declared. 'He is Professor Ventura. He stops the earth.'

"Everyone in the room laughed again except the two men, who looked sullen and restless. The barman leaned across his counter.

"'You try and pass his line on the stage to-night,' he warned them. 'You will have the pins and needles in your legs. There was a man the other night—they say that he will be lame for life?'

"One of the two men took Jonson by the arm.

"'Come on,' he insisted. 'We cannot wait here for you all the time. We wish for that little conversation. Mount with us now, if you please.'

"'I shall give the young lady the note first, whatever you say,' Jonson said doggedly.

"They only laughed at that. He slipped it into her hand. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. They dragged Jonson off then towards the stairs, but Jean and I were one each side of the young woman in half a minute. She spread out the five hundred franc note. There was a piece of paper inside with something scrawled on it. In smoothing out the note for her I got hold of it. She saw me but I showed her that it was only a piece of soiled paper. We all had a drink, then Jean and I got out. I read what Johnson had scrawled by the light of the car. I thought I had better bring it to you. Here it is."

Cheng took the scrap of paper into his hands. Considering the manner in which it had been written the pencilled words were fairly legible.

"The Trio. Warn C."

"My London friends!" Cheng exclaimed.

"And after that we came back to report."

Mr. Cheng waved his hand in dismissal. François understood and left the room.

"Looks as though the little man were for it if we don't get busy," Mark observed.

Mr. Cheng was lolling in the depths of an easy chair. His forehead was wrinkled.

"I am, in western phraseology," he confessed, "upon the horns of a dilemma."

"The question being?"

"Shall I leave Jonson with these men, trusting to him to restrain their blood-thirsty impulses, or shall I plan a really bold coup?"

"I shouldn't leave Jonson with them," Mark advised. "They will probably have no more faith in him. They may even look upon him as a traitor and treat him accordingly."

"Assassination has no horrors for me," Mr. Cheng continued thoughtfully, "because I know that it will never succeed, but Jonson without a doubt prevented an attempt upon my life in London. As you say, they are not likely to trust him to

resume his place. Put me through on the private wire to the Chef de la Sûreté's Bureau and request that I speak immediately with Monsieur Déchanel."

The affair was a matter of moments only. Cheng recognised the voice of his friend.

"Déchanel," he enquired, "tell me, if you please, the reputation of the very pleasant-looking little hotel-café-restaurant where there is dancing and pretty ladies and a cabaret at times. The place I speak of is on the Promenade des Anglais just before you arrive at the racecourse."

"The reputation of the place is as bad as it can be," Déchanel replied. "Three murders have taken place in the hotel itself and in the grounds within the last eight months. The present proprietor is a Russian and the place is under surveillance."

"Listen, my friend," Cheng begged. "Pay us a little visit, I pray you."

"Within five minutes," was the prompt response.

"We will make no use of our own guerrilla forces, I think," Cheng reflected, as he rose to his feet and strolled up and down the room. "I will invoke the Aid of the police. What do you think of that, mademoiselle? The police, whom most of the time we are trying to outwit!"

"You and Mr. Humberstone between you pay a large subsidy for service," Catherine reminded him. "Why not make use of them sometimes?…"

Déchanel arrived a few minutes later, very spruce but a little breathless. He was wearing a buttonhole of violets and he brought with him a waft of strong odours from the coiffeur's. Things were going very well with Monsieur Déchanel those days.

"Listen, my friend," Mr. Cheng began. "One of our faithful servants has been trapped in that hole I spoke about. I appeal to the police for aid."

Déchanel twirled his moustache and smiled.

"This is a new attitude," he remarked. "As a rule we are all looking the other way whilst the International Bureau settles these affairs for itself!"

"This time it would be better if the International Bureau did not appear. There is too much scandal being talked about us already. You have seen the magician at the Jetée Casino—the man who stops the world going round?"

"He wearied me," Déchanel confessed, "but his performance was amazing. I do not even now understand it."

"He is the man who is in trouble," Cheng confided calmly. "He is in the hands of two Russians at the place we spoke of."

"The place shall be raided in half-an-hour," Déchanel promised. "Permit that I use your telephone? I will give orders for a squad. Myself I will undertake this matter."

"I am flattered," his patron murmured. "I beg, though, my friend, that you will not expose yourself to risk. These men are assassins."

"In that case it is my duty to remain in the background. From there, however, if there is trouble I can control the affair."

"Admirable," Cheng exclaimed. "I may expect a report then, mon ami?"

"Of a certainty. Within an hour's time."

Chapter XVII

Jonson, as he mounted the stairs of the cosy looking little hotel on the Promenade des Anglais with a gun pressed into his back, had altogether lost that cheerful smile with which he had commenced his constitutional. These two men were both killers, they were both desperate, they had a fanatical passion for the man whom it was their business to protect and they had every cause to suspect him as a traitor. The chances of his hastily scrawled appeal for help reaching the Bureau he felt were exceedingly slight, for Mademoiselle was scarcely likely to risk offending the patron of the place. Nevertheless, he kept his brain cool and clear—a chance was all he wanted.

"Take that damn' thing away from my back," he enjoined with a fine show of anger. "You two were never any use with firearms. The thing might go off!"

"It would only anticipate your end, Comrade Jonson," was Krakoff's sneering reply. "You have proved that you are no good to us alive. You will certainly be a great deal safer dead. Enter this room."

Krakoff had reached the first landing and threw open the door of a bedchamber. It was well but garishly furnished, with many evidences of feminine occupation. There were lace curtains, a pink coverlet, window boxes full of flowers, a divan with masses of pillows.

"Un nid d'amour," Jonson remarked, looking round with an amiable smile. "Which of you owns this apartment?"

"It is going to be a chamber of death unless we get the truth out of you," Krakoff threatened. "Tie him to the bedpost, Hanson."

"But what have I done?" the prisoner protested blandly. "What have you against me? Simply because we failed in London and I thought it wiser—"

"To escape and leave us to face the trouble," Hanson grunted.

"You would have faced worse trouble if you had gone on with the plan," Jonson assured the two men. "Half that crowd round the car were detectives. You will never get Mr. Cheng as easily as that, let me tell you. He is not like our Chief in Moscow who takes every risk. Mr. Cheng, on the contrary, takes every precaution. One of his spies must have known that he was in danger or that affair of the changed cars would never have happened."

"You are lying, my friend," the man who was completing the task of tying him up said calmly. "Neither Krakoff nor I have any more faith in you. We believe that you are a traitor. It is our intention to kill you."

"Get on with it, then," Jonson invited.

"We should like first," Krakoff said with an evil smile, "to ask a few questions. No, it is not necessary to gag you. This hotel is ours. The proprietor is a Russian and a friend. Every servant in it knows us."

"Well, ask your questions then," Jonson invited resignedly. "I can only tell you that at the present moment you are in greater danger than I am."

Hanson completed his task in scornful silence. To all appearance it was a wonderful performance. Their prisoner was bound hand and foot to the brass end of the bedstead. Krakoff approached him with a long knife in his hand.

“I might use this,” he confided, “to cut your bonds later on if you pleased us. On the other hand I might use it as the Chinese do—to cut little pieces from you when your answers annoyed.”

“You talk a great deal,” Jonson observed. “You do nothing. What are these questions you speak of? I have nothing to betray except our own cause.”

Krakoff slapped his cheek viciously.

“You are a lying dog,” he shouted. “We believe that you are in league with the man we are pledged to kill.”

“You are thick-headed enough to believe anything,” was the sneering reply. “I daresay you even believe that you are safe here on the main road in a house suspected by the police. You will find out all about that. Come on—the questions?”

“What are you doing in Nice?” Hanson demanded. “Why did you leave us with our task unaccomplished?”

“If you want to know what I am doing in Nice go and ask the patron here to tell you again. You will see my picture on all the hoardings. I perform at the Jetée Casino every evening. I get a mille note every time I go on the boards and if you want to know why I left you and came here it is because at the office in London they had no funds to pay—no funds, for our expenses. Work of any sort I am willing to pledge myself to, but I need pay. What about you two? Your bags are full of money—yes? The secretary of the Great Liberation Fund has dealt generously with you?”

“Quit this cackle,” Krakoff muttered angrily. “A little shortness of funds there may be. What does it matter? The money will come. Listen, Jonson. The man we seek is in Nice. Where is he?”

“If he is in Nice find him. I have finished working for those who do not pay, and who treat one in this fashion.”

“I see,” Krakoff exclaimed with an ugly grin. “You have transferred your services to the man with the full purse.”

“Ass!” was the scornful rejoinder. “I earn all the money I need at the Casino.”

“You have not found another master then yet?” Krakoff demanded, pressing the blade flatways against Jonson’s cheek and turning it a little towards the edge so that a thin line of blood showed itself. “Soon we shall begin business, eh? What is the name of this new master and where is he to be found? He is not connected by any chance with the International Bureau?”

Jonson laughed happily and to all appearance with sincerity. His head was a little on one side. He seemed to be listening.

“Push those curtains back, my friends,” he enjoined. “Look down onto the Promenade. You may see something.”

Both men rushed to the window. They peered out over the top of the net blind. They glanced up the fine curving road and their eyes swept the empty promenade towards the racecourse. Then Krakoff turned round, startled by a sudden exclamation from his companion. They looked straight into the barrel of Jonson’s revolver and Jonson himself, with a rope hanging loosely from parts of his person, was standing within a few feet of them. The expression of good-humoured scorn had left his face, his teeth were set, his eyes glittering. He was a very angry man.

“Now then you two—up with them—up, I tell you!” Krakoff’s right hand had strayed for a moment but at the second exhortation it followed his companion’s.

“Flat against the wall—the palms of both your hands,” Jonson ordered. “No hesitation. I would kill either of you with pleasure. When the police see your papers and your firearms and that knife they will shake me by the hand.”

The two men obeyed. They seemed paralysed by the shock of this amazing change in the situation. Hanson in particular could not remove his eyes from the rope.

“I may be going to die,” he muttered, “but that rope—you were bound as tightly as I ever bound a human being in my life!”

“You should have stayed and played with the kids in the nursery,” Jonson scoffed, “before you came out to rub shoulders with men. Did you not know I was a music hall performer? I have only two great stunts. One is I stop the world, and the other I free myself from any rope you can wind around me. Babes, fools to lay your hands upon a conjurer!”

He paused to wipe the blood from his cheek with his left hand. The direction of the gun, however, clenched in his other fingers never faltered.

“How long are you going to keep us here?” Krakoff demanded.

“Until I can find an excuse for killing one of you,” was the prompt reply. “I can then deal single-handed with the other. Come on, why do not one of you try a rush? You, Hanson, you are not afraid to die, I am sure. I can hit glass balls at fifty yards. I will pick you off anywhere you like.”

“I have not moved,” Hanson shivered. “I shall not move.”

The saliva of fear was upon his lips, his eyes were glazed with terror. Jonson turned smiling to his companion.

“Well, what about you?” he asked. “I want an excuse for shooting one of you. A quarter of an hour ago you were planning to kill me without any excuse.”

“You do not need an excuse to kill a bloody traitor,” Krakoff spat out.

Jonson shot him deliberately between the second and third button of his waistcoat. Krakoff, who realised what was coming, made one mighty effort and threw himself upon his opponent, but Jonson’s hand never swerved. Hanson, who might even then have settled the fight under cover of Krakoff’s attack, gave one yell of horror and sank fainting to the floor. Krakoff in his last effort kicked furiously at Jonson and brought him to the ground. Whilst he was still writhing with the pain there came a loud official knocking at the door. Jonson kicked the wounded man’s revolver into a corner and struggled up with the aid of the bedpost.

“Entrez!” he shouted.

The door was pushed cautiously open.

“Au nom de la loi!” someone pronounced in a deep bass voice.

“Enter,” Jonson repeated. “They have finished the fight, these two. Enter, gentlemen. There is no longer danger.”

Monsieur Déchanel, in the rear of the bodyguard of gendarmes, stepped into the room. He looked around him fiercely.

“What has happened here?” he demanded. “Are they dead, these men?”

“The tall one is wounded,” Jonson replied. “The other is a coward. He is unhurt.”

“And you?”

“I am unhurt. It was a fight between these two men.”

Déchanel twirled his moustache imperiously. He looked hard at the speaker.

"Your name is Jonson?"

"That is true, monsieur."

The agent of the police stood on one side. His signal was unmistakable. He pointed to the door. Jonson understood and limped out.

"Take him to my own car," Déchanel directed. "You understand," he added in a low tone to the sergeant, "he is to disappear. Those are my orders. It is a matter of policy. Take him where he wills to go and forget it."

The man saluted.

"Telephone for an ambulance to pick up this fellow," Déchanel continued. "I shall interrogate the other man as soon as he has recovered, but it will be at the Bureau. You understand?"

"Parfaitement, monsieur…"

There was a gathering crowd below but the sergeant cleared the way. With his hand resting lightly on the rescued man's shoulder he led him quickly through the deserted bar. Outside there were further loiterers attracted by the sound of the firing, but their departure was only a matter of seconds. The sergeant understood his orders. Soon they were whirling up the Promenade des Anglais, Jonson resting his bruised leg upon the opposite seat. The former leaned towards him.

"Will you be so kind as to hand me that weapon?" he begged, pointing to where the butt end of Jonson's revolver was showing outside his torn pocket.

Jonson passed it across without protest. The sergeant took it gingerly between his fingers and opened the breech. One cartridge was missing. He looked meaningly at his charge.

"That is not a good way to carry a gun—with one cartridge fired and one man probably dead," he pointed out. "See?"

He emptied the breech and transferred the remaining cartridges to his own pocket.

"Clean it as soon as you reach your home," he advised, returning the weapon. "Tell me now where you wish to be taken."

Jonson thrust his gun back into his pocket with a murmur of thanks. They had reached the narrow streets leading down to the Avenue Laperle.

"If you will be so kind as to put me down here," he requested, "I will find my way to my destination."

The car was stopped. Jonson alighted and turned to speak to his guard. The car was no longer there. He could see it—a disappearing speck—in the distance.

"It is a great thing," he muttered to himself, as he hobbled off, "to be protected…"

He called a petite voiture and drove the remainder of the distance to the Café des Oiseaux Noirs. He paused at the counter to toss off a glass of brandy, then he limped off along the entry and into the labyrinth of passages beyond. Soon he reached the guard. With very little delay he found his way to Mark's room. The latter greeted him with a nod of welcome and motioned him to a chair. There were more people in the bureau than Jonson had ever seen there before. Mark was writing despatches with his own hand. Two or three of the dark mysterious little figures from the observatory were there collecting them. Two others were waiting

for orders. Mark gave them briefly and motioned the messengers away. Then he turned to Jonson.

"So you found trouble up at that cheerful little Maison Rouge," he observed.

"I tried a bluff and lost," Jonson explained. "I was anxious to take my place again with those two from London. How else was I to know what they were doing down here and their exact plans?"

"Reasonable," Mark admitted.

"That fellow Krakoff had evil in his mind concerning me," Jonson went on. "He and Hanson seemed to have made up their minds that I was better out of the way. They were safely installed at the Maison Rouge. It is the headquarters of a Russian society. They have facilities there for ridding themselves of troublesome people. Well, they tied me up. That was foolish. Before I learnt how to stop the earth I used to go nightly upon the stage and defy anyone to secure me with any form of rope. They turned their backs for a moment and I freed myself. They were already beginning their little games of torture. That man Krakoff—he was suspicious. For some reason or other they were desperate. They wanted you as well as Mr. Cheng."

"They knew their job," Mark observed. "We are all up against it. It is either us or their master. I think that it will be their master."

"They took their eyes off me for one moment," Jonson repeated, with a beatific smile upon his face. "They turned round and they looked into my gun and I stood there a free man. I think the shock was more than they could stand. Krakoff was still the desperate bully. He watched for his moment and he tried to fling himself upon me. If Hanson had backed him up I was a dead man. Well, Hanson was too frightened to back him up. Krakoff is the dead man."

"And Hanson?"

"In the hands of the police."

"How did you get here?"

"Monsieur Déchanel pointed to the door. He sent me back in a police car and told the sergeant to lose me."

"Krakoff, you say, is dead."

"I was obliged to kill him," Jonson explained. "It was one of us and not a second to spare. I suppose I must have bungled affairs in London. All that I told them seemed plausible enough but for some reason or other Krakoff was suspicious of me. They did not wish my return. They wished my death."

"I think I can understand that," Mark reflected. "We sent Déchanel when your message arrived. Now listen! Only a few hours ago I received a telephone message from one of my agents in Warsaw."

Jonson was sitting up in his chair. His eyes were fixed upon Mark's.

"Paul Agrestein appears to have visited the aviation bureau in Warsaw. He has shown his passport and taken his ticket on the westward bound plane which arrives at Lyons on Saturday and here later in the day!"

Chapter XVIII

A few nights later, about an hour after the arrival of the Lyons plane at Cannes, a man and a woman descended from a shabby hooded motor car in front of the Casino Municipal at Nice. They left two bags inside the car and the woman addressed the chauffeur. Her voice was husky, her French fluent, her accent execrable.

"Pierre," she ordered, "you will take the valises of Monsieur to the villa, you will see that Lucie unpacks everything and puts warm night clothes by the fire. You will then return here for us. Be here at midnight."

"One o'clock will be soon enough," her companion intervened.

The woman sighed.

"One o'clock then," she said submissively. "Do not be late, Pierre, and remember your orders. Remember this too—"

"Yes, Madame?" the chauffeur replied stolidly.

"If you should be asked by anyone, mind, what you have been doing to-day, you took Madame into Cannes to her dressmaker, she had tea with some friends and you left Madame at the Casino in Nice where she plays always on Saturday evenings."

The chauffeur pointed to the bags.

"What about the luggage?" he enquired.

"They belong to a friend of Madame's who is coming to visit her to-morrow. Keep the bags to yourself, Pierre. Take them into the house yourself. It is understood?"

The chauffeur, whose manners were not of the best, nodded and drove off. The woman clutched her companion by the arm. They entered the Casino together. They crossed the hall, rang for the lift, mounted to the first floor and made their way towards the Bureau. It was Madame who addressed the clerk.

"Monsieur will take a carte for the season," she said. "Show them your passport, Paul. It will be one hundred francs."

The very polite clerk studied the passport, bowed and smiled, wrote out the carte rapidly, accepted the hundred francs, handed the visitor the pen with which to sign his name, and the business was over. The latter was out of the Bureau and started for the gambling rooms before his companion could pick up her bag. With a hoarse laugh, which was not altogether mirthful, she pulled at his arm and restrained him.

"Paul," she complained, "you have scarcely spoken to me. It is months since we met. I have sat and waited—"

"You have been playing here," the man interrupted. "The clerk recognised you. He addressed you by name."

"I play here two or three times a week," she assented. "What would you have me do?"

"Oh, you look after yourself without a doubt," he said. "Later we dine together. We go to the villa. Tomorrow night I shall not be so anxious. It is my one weakness, remember, Rosa. For the long months," he went on, dropping his voice a little, "I carry such a weight on my shoulders as no other man breathing could support. Here I am free. God, if only I could be free forever!"

Madame was welcomed with a bow. No need for her to show her card. The man's received a perfunctory examination at the door. They passed in. To the left were

roulette and chemin-de-fer tables, a crowd of people round each. The stifling super-heated atmosphere of the room floated out to where they lingered.

"One drink first," the man proposed after a moment's hesitation. "That will show you that I am sane, Rosa. Come."

He strode off towards the bar. She tugged at his coat and made him sit in an easy chair with a table before them. A waiter hurried up.

"Vodka—you have vodka?" the man asked.

"But certainly, sir."

"A double vodka. For you, Rosa?"

"Un verre de champagne," madame decided.

They raised their glasses, they toasted one another. She was a large woman with fine eyes and carnage, becarmined lips, touched-up eyebrows and lavishly powdered. She was without doubt a Jewess. The man was inclined to show signs of a paunch but his face was almost gaunt. He was clean-shaven but there was a faint bluish-black growth about his powerful chin and narrow lips. His hair was black, streaked with grey and badly needed trimming. His shirt was crumpled, a black wisp of tie was badly arranged and ill chosen. His clothes were probably new but they needed brushing and pressing. She sighed as she looked at him.

"You need care, Paul," she said. "You should have had a wash before you came in to play."

"Thirty or forty hours in planes," he reminded her. "One wants something to make one forget the rocking."

He lit a cigar and smoked feverishly, threw back his head and swallowed the vodka at a draught. Madame beckoned to one of the managers of the room, who came across to them.

"Monsieur would like a place for roulette," she confided. "Two places if you can find them together. Monsieur has only just arrived from a long journey. Listen, Monsieur Raymond," she went on, dropping her voice, "Monsieur plays high—not my poor little game."

"In two minutes," the man promised, hurrying away.

The prospective gambler, Monsieur Paul Agrestein—the name upon his passport—called for another vodka. He tossed it off.

"Come," he said to the woman, "we have our places. The chef is beckoning us."

She rose and followed him into the Salle des Jeux. Two places had been found. The man sank into the chair next the croupier. His face relaxed. There was something al most like a smile upon his lips.

"Come, come," he said, "roulette in Nice! This is a wonderful thing to see. Attendez un petit moment, monsieur," he begged, touching the chef who was seated on his high chair.

The hand of the jeweller from Warsaw went into his breast coat pocket. He brought out a bulging pocketbook. Slowly he began drawing out mille notes. The chef and the croupier both stared. He counted out twenty of them and passed them to the latter.

"Plaques et louis, monsieur?" the man demanded obsequiously.

"Plaques only," was the gruff reply.

There was a low murmur round the table. A visitor who changed twenty mille for a commencement and asked for plaques only was a rarity these hard times. He

sat there with three piles in front of him, looked at the table for a moment, leaned over, pushing the woman by his side, pushing the croupier, nearly upsetting a player without a seat who was struggling to put a humble five francs upon a transversale. He placed the maximum on two numbers, threw a mille on red, another mille on impair, then he leaned back in his chair. This was the lift…!

"Rien ne va plus!"

He watched the ball with eager eyes, pursed his lips as it fell and glanced back at the table. It was not so bad. He had a cheval and two carrés and one of his mille plaques had won at evens. He gathered in enough to repeat his stake, doubling the winners. The woman pushed a five franc piece on to an even chance…

The game proceeded. The whisper of heavy gambling soon brought a crowd round. The jeweller from Warsaw seemed indifferent as to their presence. He won at first, then lost steadily for nearly half-an-hour. His twenty mille had gone. He drew out once more the bulky pocketbook, changed more money. Almost immediately his luck changed. He began to win. At length the much desired coup came off. He won the maximum on a number en plein with the carrés, chevaux and transversales. There was a murmur of mingled envy and exasperation as the little crowd saw the piles of plaques pushed across the table. As is always the case amongst a French crowd, there was small sympathy with the winner. One or two of the women looked as though they hated him, others wondered how a man with such an appearance could have been permitted in the rooms. The woman who was seated by his side with her hands on the table in front of her leaned towards him.

"Give me a few chips," she begged. "I have lost everything."

He frowned, reluctantly seeking amongst the huge pile until he discovered two or three odd louis. He pushed these towards her.

"It is better for you to watch me," he advised in his harsh unpleasant tone. "You have not the flair for this sort of thing. You lose all the time."

"You had lost twenty mille yourself until that last coup," she reminded him. "As for me, I play only in trifles. I amuse myself in my own way—as you do."

The man made no reply. He was absorbed once more in the game. By degrees the people melted away. The woman rose to her feet. She stood behind his chair, her hips swaying slightly, her arms akimbo. She nodded to one or two acquaintances in the crowd. She was aware that the chefs were treating her with increased respect owing to the presence of her uncouth companion. She leaned down and touched him on the shoulder.

"The hour is late, mon ami," she said. "It is time we dined. One can play afterwards."

He was unexpectedly complaisant. He swept everything off the table in front of him, filled his pockets with the plaques and rose to his feet.

"It would be possible," he asked of the chef, "that the same seats be kept for me after dinner?"

"But certainly, monsieur," the man acquiesced, his face wreathed in smiles. "C'est entendu. Dans une heure peut-être ou une heure-et-demie. Nous attendrons monsieur."

Monsieur stalked down the room regardless of the bows on every side from the valets and waiters. He cashed his chips at one of the guichets. The woman stood

by his side. She saw the crisp rolls of notes which he transferred to his pocketbook.

"You have won eighty mille," she told him.

"Not so bad," he grunted. "It took some doing. Meanwhile, I am hungry. What dishes have they, I wonder?"

"We shall soon see," she answered, leading him towards a chair in a large bar and dining room combined. "We take our apéritif here—yes?—and we order dinner."

The man assented without demur.

"I will take a double vodka," he announced.

"And I a White Lady," the woman decided. "Meanwhile, Paul, go to the lavatory and arrange your tie, brush your hair and wash. You have too much the air of one who has just completed a journey."

The man looked longingly towards the counter but the vodka was not yet forthcoming. He did as he was told.

In five minutes he was back again. He had straightened his tie, washed his hands and brushed his hair but his appearance was not greatly improved. She looked at him critically.

"To-morrow," she confided, "I must buy you a necktie."

"With your own winnings, then, not mine," he stipulated. "I am not a fop."

"Neither am I a coquette," the woman rejoined. "Nevertheless I do not go about in rags."

A waiter brought the menu. The man ordered lavishly, not once consulting the woman by his side. He turned over the leaves of the wine carte and pointed to the most expensive champagne.

"Two bottles," he ordered. "Well iced. I like the wine cold, you understand."

The meal was well and quickly served. Agrestein ate vociferously and greedily. His eyes never left his own plate. He showed signs of impatience when the woman was served first. He sent away his champagne glass and demanded a tumbler. He drank not as a wine lover but as a man dying of thirst. Again and again he set his glass down empty with a little gurgle of satisfaction. As to his eating, the waiters in the background whispered amongst themselves.

"No wonder these French are a puny race," he observed to the woman by his side. "They eat nothing. Look at these helpings on one's plate."

"They will always give you more."

"They have to," he answered, "and after all," he admitted reluctantly, "the meat is better cooked than ours. It has more flavour."

When the meal was over, for the first time he leaned back in his chair and seemed to take an interest in his surroundings. His eyes were very bright. Notwithstanding his voracious appetite his complexion remained sallow, his skin hard. His gaze wandered restlessly round the room. He summoned a waiter and ordered coffee and double brandies.

"I have seen nothing of those men," he muttered. "As a rule in a strange place they present themselves, even though we do not speak. Once I fancied I saw Hanson in the crowd."

"They have never failed you," she reminded him. "I expect they are in the background somewhere. A Casino like this is one of the safest places. There is the

business of cartes and passports. Every chef and manager who walks the room is in a way a spy. You have always been safe, my brave man, with Rosa. For your sake," she went on, watching for the effect of her words, "I have been content to live in that wretched little villa, I have lived without servants, without luxuries. It is, after all, a folly. Who in the world has a right to spend money more than you?"

"I know what I am doing," he answered hoarsely. "If at any time there was a rumour at home where would they search? At the best hotels, the most luxurious villas. At home they know I have a taste for luxury and the last place they would look for me would be in your wretched little shanty with a single servant to wait upon us both."

"It is safety for you perhaps," she conceded, "but it means great discomfort for me."

His eyes flashed.

"You are like the rest of the battening crowd," he complained. "You talk of love and you hate to coarsen your hands. You would risk your man's life to live in ease and comfort. No more of that, Rosa."

"All the same," she persisted, "I hope that this time you will leave me more money. The hundred thousand francs are gone—rates and taxes, living is dear, all these people are greedy."

"Yes—and the tables," he muttered.

"I amuse myself with five-franc pieces," she answered. "You amuse yourself with mille plaques."

"You would compare us?" he sneered.

The woman was full of pent up anger. Some instinct prompted her and she stifled it. She kept her eyes averted from his, though. They were dark and full of expression and just now the expression was better hidden. She looked down into her plate. A chef, his face as usual wreathed in smiles, came up to the table and bowed.

"Le jeu commence, monsieur," he announced. "The places for monsieur and madame are reserved. We await only your coming."

The man rose to his feet immediately, brushed the crumbs from his waistcoat and pulled it down over his slightly distended paunch. He took a cigar from his pocket and lit it, a cigar of undoubted quality which the chef sniffed enviously.

"We are coming. The bill can follow—yes?"

"The management desire me to say, monsieur, that they trust you will accept their hospitality for dinner," the chef confided.

Paul Agrestein smiled. He turned to Rosa.

"Do you hear that?" he demanded. "A new game, eh? My compliments to the management and I accept with pleasure."

He flung a note on the table for the pourboire, not too generous a one, and strode off towards the gambling room, leaving Rosa to follow. He sank into his chair with a sigh of anticipatory pleasure. He looked round at the smooth green cloth, at the clearly marked numbers and chuckled. He brought out a fat roll of bills and handed it to the croupier.

"Twenty plaques in milles, the rest in hundreds," he directed.

"On peut commencer, monsieur?" the man asked as he pushed the pile towards him.

Agrestein did not trouble to answer. He was busy placing his stake. The ball was thrown in. It was already spinning round. The parrot-like announcement of the croupier followed.

"Sept, rouge, impair et manque."

The jeweller from Warsaw glared maliciously at the ball. It had hovered over his favourite twenty-nine only to drop into the voisin. He pushed out his next stake. The fever of the happy gambler was in his blood. All the same, he liked to win.

Chapter XIX

It was half-past one when the man and the woman left the Casino. Urged to it by his companion, Paul Agrestein distributed modest pourboires amongst the valets and waiters. He consumed a neat whisky at the bar, retrieved his hat and overcoat and followed the woman down the stairs and out on to the pavement. As though the touch of the night air had brought him a keener realisation of where he was, he became for a few moments a changed man. Stiff and straight, he stood looking up and down as though watching for someone. Rosa called to the commissionaire who saluted at once and blew his whistle. The crowds who passed, even to Agrestein's suspicious gaze, seemed of a harmless pleasure-seeking class. The air of sombre mystery which he always associated with his own home cities was absent. The streets were brilliantly lit. There was nothing to be seen of the men and women shrinking back in the dark places. Everyone was out in the open. The supper places were busy, the brasseries full. It was the hour for gaiety.

"I do not understand," he said suspiciously, "why I see nothing of Krakoff, of Jonson or of Hanson. They are skilled, I know, at keeping in the background. They have learnt their lesson and learnt it well, but never before have all three succeeded in remaining entirely hidden. Krakoff was an artist at stumbling along the pavement humming a song without a glance towards me, and yet making himself seen, and the little man Jonson with his hat on one side, swinging his cane, asking his way perhaps of a gendarme or a bystander close to me that I might hear his voice. Or Hanson, shrinking through the crowd with a stealthy glance in my direction, his hand in his overcoat pocket stealing down towards his hip."

"What do you want with all that business?" Rosa asked, passing her arm through his. "Yon know that they are somewhere about. You know that here with me you are as safe as in your bed."

"That," he answered grimly, "is not always the safest place. The time that they got Karptou and Crossens they were in the chamber below. I was in bed just above!"

"The car!" she pointed out. "Come."

The commissionaire received his modest tip and bowed. Unnoticed and unaccosted the two stepped into the small vehicle and drew the rug over their knees. The attendant banged the door. He had not much use for people who drove in crazy hooded cars and offered two francs as pourboire.

“To the villa, Pierre,” Rosa ordered. “You have deposited the bags of monsieur?”

“It is done,” the man answered.

Rosa passed her arm through her companion’s.

“Drive on,” she directed.

They turned into the Promenade des Anglais, passed the Jetée Casino flaring with lights, passed the hotels still festive and the Palais de la Mediterranée floodlit. Their car rattled and swerved as it answered to the steering. Agrestein gave vent to an impatient exclamation.

“What a filthy automobile,” he muttered.

“Why do you not give me a better one?” she demanded. “Do you think I find pleasure in being seen in it? You should hear what they say, those people who think that I have a rich friend.”

He chuckled.

“That is good,” he said. “That shows how clever I am.” They passed the Maison Rouge, the lights from its rose-shaded lamps dimly visible, a small place but with a most alluring suggestion of impropriety. He chuckled again as he turned his head sideways to look at it.

“One of those houses?” he asked.

She nodded.

“That and other things. They say that anything goes on there.”

They reached a dark stretch of road as they swung away from the race course. Her arm stole around him.

“Paul,” she whispered, “it makes me so happy to have you back again. You are brutal with me, you are all the bad things a man can be, you are mean, you give me so little and yet—I love you.”

He relaxed slightly. His arms drew her into his embrace.

“Poor Rosa,” he mocked. “Always dissatisfied.”

Their lips met and for a time she seemed content. She drew back breathless and smoothed his cheeks with her hands.

“Ah, well,” she sighed, “I have you now. It is something.”

They jolted and rattled along the badly laid road but for the moment she made no complaints. She was glorying in the strength of his arms. More than once she had to point to Pierre sitting immovable in front. Presently the car slackened speed. They turned to the left—a newly made road. There was a gaunt unfurnished villa, a patch of pine trees, a strip of waste ground, then they turned in and pulled up before a small house wrapped in darkness. It was a cheaply built, ugly affair with a scrap of ill-tended garden and a garage something little better than a tin shed. She stepped out, latchkey in hand, and he followed her to the threshold. The chauffeur, with a grumpy good-night, drove off. The jeweller from Warsaw lingered on the step looking around him into the uncertain night. It was a lane which seemed to have failed in its object. The land which had been sold was cumbered with a few mushroom-like villas mostly unoccupied. There were building materials left in the ill-made road, a few sickly looking trees cut down, which no one troubled to strip and cart away. He chuckled as he turned and followed her.

“I chose well,” he said as he took off his overcoat. “It is a secluded neighbourhood, this. It is what I like. Who would think of searching in a wilderness like this for me?”

She opened the door of a small salon. It was ill-furnished with a suite which seemed to have been removed wholesale from one of the popular emporiums. There was an inferior rug upon the floor but upon the table there was a goodly sight of bottles—vodka, whisky, brandy. He rubbed his hands with pleasure and threw off his coat.

“I love to sit like this in my shirt sleeves,” he declared. “Pass me the whisky, Rosa. I will drink to you once more in your own home.”

“My home,” she scoffed, pushing the bottle towards him. “Paul, listen to me. Look round you. Look at this ugly room, this miserable villa, this wretched neighbourhood. Look at my clothes, the best I can afford to buy. You treat me badly, miserably. Oh, if people knew!”

He looked at her steadily. He did something which, coming from him, seemed unnatural. He placed upon the table before him the tumblerful of whisky which he had been raising to his lips, which he had not yet tasted. He caught her by the shoulders.

“Listen, you fool,” he cried, “and understand if you can. How do you think I live from day to day? Well, I will tell you. I am not boasting of it. I live in luxury. I live in a palace. Castles were stripped of their finest furniture for my rooms. My bed has been slept in by queens. One hundred men watch me while I sleep. Millions are ready to obey when I give the word. Women? God, how I hate the women who infest the place—stinking of perfume—silks and chiffons, coiffured hair, blazing with jewels but shrieking for more, drunken with drugs or wine—playing at life but without the strength in their feeble bodies to know what it is to feel—you hear, woman?—to feel real passion.”

He paused for a moment. She felt his breath upon her neck.

“Now listen and understand me forever,” he finished, and his arms were drawing round her like a vice. “I love this ugliness. I love your clothes, readymade from the Galeries though they may be. I love your coarse body, You are a woman. You are what was bred in my bones. I hate those sycophants, those soiled butterflies. They haunt my dreams. I feel like wringing their necks when they bring me their kisses. Here, come to me. This is the room I want to love in, this is the palace I want to sleep in. Rosa—”

His kiss scorched her lips. A sort of hysteria seemed to sweep over her. She gripped him like mad, tore at his shirt.

“Paul!”

She was choking. The words would have fallen over one another but she was choking. Her strength for the moment seemed almost equal to his…Then it seemed as though all the world were crashing around them. She saw his eyes rivetted upon that ill-painted deal door. She turned her head and looked. Very slowly, an inch at a time, the door was opening. She flung herself away from him.

“Who is there?” she cried.

The jeweller from Warsaw had risen to his full height. His face was terrible but no sound passed his lips. His hand stole around to his hip pocket but never reached it. He was suddenly gripped from behind. She heard his cry. She too

looked round. The cheap ill-fitting doors of communication from behind had also been pushed open. A little man, whose face seemed to her strangely familiar, had crept out. One arm was round Agrestein's neck, the other seemed to be breaking his wrist. She heard the bones crunch, she heard the roar come from his lips as he swung helplessly round, she heard his cry as he swayed upon his feet. The door in front of him was now wide open. A little procession entered the room. There was a curiously impressive looking man who was a stranger to her. Behind there were two others—also strangers—sinister looking men who seemed poised upon their feet for action. Mr. Cheng, who was in the front, spoke quietly.

"Tie him up and leave him alone, Jonson," he directed. "Madame will be so kind as to raise her hands. It is necessary to be assured that she has no weapon."

The woman sank into a chair. She was beginning to shriek. Cheng raised his hand slightly. In a moment she was in the grasp of one of the men. Something was thrust into her mouth, hands travelled over her, not the amorous hands of the man on the other side of the table bound and helpless, but hands which speedily accomplished their purpose.

"It is fortunate," Mr. Cheng continued, leaning slightly against the wall. "I like weapons only when they are to be used. You recognise me, my enemy?" he added, turning to the man who carried Paul Agrestein's passport in his pocket. "Yes, I see by your face that you do. I am the prospective victim for whom you formed a special little corps—a trio of amiable ruffians to make sure of my destruction. Jonson, who has just trussed you up so magnificently, was one of them. I knew too much of you and your country—yes? You have been a foul murderer. You are a sham despot, a wild beast born in the guise of a man and dealing out to your fellows every sort of inhumanity. If the ghosts of your victims could be here to see you to-night they would fill this room and stretch to the sea. The Princess Oronoff—you remember her parents, you remember your treatment of them? You remember her sister? You remember the millions you stripped them of after you had robbed them of everything else in life? Little Jonson, the man who has just made such a wonderful success of tying you up. He does that on the stage for money, you know, only he knows the secret of escape. Another black spot upon your memory, I think."

The bound man turned towards Rosa. Lines seemed to have bitten their way down his yellow cheeks and to his twisted mouth. His eyes were aflame.

"It is you who have done this!" he shouted. "This is your trap."

"Not on my soul," she shrieked. "Not on my soul, Paul. I knew nothing."

The rope, strong though it was, became taut as a steel hawser with the man's straining. Jonson watched his work with a smile.

"If he stands up," he confided amiably, "he will fall down again. He can stretch at his bonds like that all day and all night but they will not give. Yet when they did that to me—his clumsy man Hanson—I was free in thirty seconds. Just a knack."

"It was too simple a thing," Mr. Cheng went on, "for you to die in the Casino at Nice to-night although you were surrounded by men who carried your death warrant in their hands. These few minutes were necessary. You have been a clever scoundrel to send your dummy into your country home with nurses whilst you year by year took your holiday here. Clever up to a point only. Once too often you

have stolen away from the high places to breathe the air of liberty. Have you anything to say?"

"Name your terms," the writhing man called out in a voice which no one would have recognised as his. "I will live here for the rest of my life. I will go into exile where you will. I will pledge my word never to return to Moscow."

"Is that all?" Cheng asked.

"What more can I say? Rosa, you speak. I will marry this woman. We will live here and I will give you my bond written in my own blood, if you will, that I will never leave this place."

Mr. Cheng sighed.

"If it were not against the laws which hedge me round," he said, "if I had not been born of a royal line to whom certain actions are forbidden, I should kill you with my own hand. As it is—shoot."

Two reports rang out almost simultaneously. The bound man seemed to shrink within the ropes that held him. They saw the shadow of death flicker across his face. No words passed his lips. A few feet away from him the silence of the woman was also like the silence of annihilation.

Chapter XX

Eastwards from the Valley of the Winds itself, hidden in the bosom of the mountains towards which Cheng had gazed so often, the turmoil had ceased. The purple-black masses of clouds lost their density as the rising sun appeared from behind the snow capped peaks. For a moment or two the fading stars paled only to be blotted out altogether by the pearly mists. A dim rosy glow shone upon the farther range of mountains. The morning light came and passed away, came again as the sun gathered power and the slanting rain fell from the drifting clouds through the valleys to the seaboard. It pattered upon the stone pavement of the château whose buttresses seemed part of the jagged sides of the precipice. The girl, who had risen from her couch to meet the sunrise, shivered slightly. For an hour she had watched the agonies of the stormily born day. Now the struggle was over. The rain seemed to be washing the hard mountain side from the grim caress of the mistral. Now softness had come to the trees and the pasture land below…

The joy of an early spring morning lay soon upon the flower gardens and the woods of the Château des Tourettes. The sun was shining from a cloudless sky, the wind was a gentle zephyr-like breeze from the south, the perfume from great beds of violets floated up from the terrasse below. From the worn stone balustrade Hou Hsi leaned over with half closed eyes breathing in the fragrance of the morning. She was wearing a Chinese dress of scarlet silk, richly embroidered. Her lithe, exquisite body was quivering, perhaps with the dreams of the night, perhaps with some subtle response to the song of the birds. The Marquise Shih-fu, her chief lady-in-waiting, came out to join her. She, too, seemed rejuvenated. She was gaily clad in the clothes of the eastern world but in manner and bearing, even the

pitch of her voice, she seemed to have acquired something of the atmosphere of her immediate surroundings.

"My Princess," she exclaimed, "it is indeed a joyful clay for you. Even for us others it is full of distractions. Your maids are chattering like birds whilst they work. Fang Tê-Chen, with the same book of holy prayer clasped in his hands, walks ceaselessly up and down the great hall. Three times he has sent for me in despair. Of course you realise there are many, many ceremonies not possible here."

Hou Hsi was dancing gracefully, with tiny little steps, balancing herself first on one foot and then on the other.

"What do I care?" she laughed, and the sound of her rippling mirth was sweeter even than the song of the birds. "I shall be married just the same. Cheng Ziao Han is coming. He sent his messengers yesterday. He keeps his word."

The woman by her side was gazing seawards. She seemed indifferent to the beauty of the morning. Her eyes were looking beyond the line of the horizon, always beyond.

"Perhaps we shall return," she said softly. "Perhaps we shall breathe once more the air of our own country, hear our own tongue spoken. Hou Hsi, the perfume of those violets is wonderful but it is not the perfume that comes to me now—the perfume of the flowering fruit trees—the magnolia, the lotus."

"We are going back to it all," Hou Hsi murmured ecstatically. "Ziao Han is so silent but he has told me this. We are to rebuild, so far as we can in our lifetime, the beauty of the old world."

"You will have no regrets?" the Marquise smiled.

"None whatever," was the confident reply. "There are some strangely pleasant people amongst these Westerners but they make of life a failure. They have lost their vision. They are happy because they have invented wonderful things, because they have learnt to swing the pendulum of life until they have left themselves no room for living or for reflection. They have made of existence a fever…Nothing will ever change them. Do I not know? I have lived in Paris. I have lived in London. Life is a war for them. The men spend their days in the cities fighting one another—not for glory but for gold. They worship no other god."

"More and more they are to be left alone," Shih-fu declared. "They are not of our world. More and more I have felt that in every city I have visited."

"But Ziao Han does not wish to leave them altogether alone," Hou Hsi reflected. "He has great schemes in his mind. He wants to end war for all time, to establish in the world an everlasting peace."

"Prince Cheng is a dreamer," the Marquise sighed.

"To me," the girl declared, "he seems to be half a god. He lived so long with the priests when he was young he seems to have some inspiration we others lack."

"You will teach him," her companion said fervently, "all that he still has to learn in life."

Hou Hsi smiled. She had never looked more childlike, more innocently beautiful.

"What is there I could teach a man like Ziao Han?" she asked gently.

"There is much," Shih-fu insisted. "You, Hou Hsi, come from even a stronger and a purer strain than his. Think of your own ancestors, my child. From thousands of years back to the days of your great-great-grandmother, the

omnipotent Empress, they worshipped beauty and dwelt in beauty whilst Prince Cheng's ancestors were simply soldiers."

Hou Hsi sighed.

"But my dear protectress," she pointed out, "this is what sometimes makes me lose confidence. But for these Westerners and their thirst for knowledge, but for their gift of probing history and delving into the past, should we ever have known of our own greatness? Even Ziao Han was forced to go out into the world to learn from then, and to bring new life and power to our country he has had to seek their aid."

The long sobbing note of a motor horn was heard in the far distance. Hon Hsi threw up her arms and cried out with joy. The Marquise turned away.

"I shall go to prepare Fang Tê-Chen," she exclaimed. "He is in the chapel now. Your maids are there. You yourself have seen the flowers placed in the chancel and upon the altar. And Hou Hsi," she wound up, with a gleam of humour in her eyes, "after all, these Western notions have crept even into our household. I have seen a snow white wedding cake! The French part of the household is all excited."

Hou Hsi had ceased to listen. Her eyes were watching the curving road. Soon the car came into sight. The great bell of the château, deep and mellow, was wakening strange echoes from the wall of granite opposite. The high gates were thrown open. Hou Hsi, with her scarlet robes floating around her, walked towards them. Cheng, springing from the car, dropped on one knee for a moment as he took her two hands and kissed them. Her arms stole round his neck.

"Mine is the bridal dress of hundreds of years ago," she whispered, as they walked slowly along the paved way. "Part of it belonged to my great-great-grandmother when she was married in the palace at Pekin. Part of it is older still."

"I can match you in no way, sweetheart, except in my love," he told her. "I wear the clothes of this generation of savages but my heart at least is with yours."

The bell ceased. The Priest, in those strange robes which he had never dreamed of wearing in a barbarous country, stood framed by the huge pillars in the great entrance to the castle. He turned as they approached and led the way inside across the courtyard. The chapel swallowed them up.

* * * * *

Later in the afternoon Hou Hsi and Cheng Ziao Han stood hand in hand once more looking across the gardens, across the deep gorge, the smiling stretch of flowering fruit trees and orchards to the sea. Hou Hsi was very pale indeed—white as the night lilies of her country. She was silent but her eyes shone with happiness. Behind them were little bursts of shrill laughter from her attendants still seated at the feast. The heavy perfume of the joss sticks, mingled with the scent of the white jasmine and lilies with which the room was decked, stole out to them through the open windows.

"Ziao Han," she whispered, "a great peace seems to have come to me. I am your bride. Now I am to share in all those great things that are in your mind."

"I have lived my life in secret," he told her. "I am proud and happy from now on to share it. Can you stoop down from heaven a little way to be my helper?"

She looked at him and he was answered.

“My task,” he continued, “our task has only just begun. If you will take your place now by my side, Hou Hsi, it will sweeten all my labours. At first there may be nothing to remind you that you are a great Princess—even an Empress. You will have no Court, there will be no ceremony around you. Those things will come. You will see me perhaps tired, you will have to listen sometimes to sad things danger even may hover around us.”

“I shall be with you,” she whispered.

“We shall have to live for a time as Westerners live,” he went on. “We shall have no palace with gardens and rivers, and mountains to climb within our boundaries. You will have to walk upon the earth which is pressed by the feet of other people, breathe the same air, forget who you are and who I am.”

“I shall be with you,” she repeated.

“My task is not finished,” he warned her. “To-day is the beginning. The world is to know what has happened here at the castle of the precipice. There may be war, Hou Hsi. The time may come when we shall have to part for a time.”

“I shall have belonged to you,” she murmured, “and I shall be happy.”

“You will be happy because you are my bride and because you are destined to become the saviour of your country. You must not forget, dear, that the people of our race once ruled their world as no other nation has ever done. Evil times have come since then, but they are over. Now we move on towards our common fate—indivisible. We carry the same standards. We shall fight for the same cause. Ours will be the great modern crusade, the first war that has been fought for a great cause since the days when the Knights Templar of Europe fought the Saracens. We are going to fight against Western greed, against that foul country which has done its best to strip idealism from life, to tear down beauty from its shrine, to teach men to live like animals. Life will never be easy, dear Hou Hsi.”

“I shall be with you,” she whispered again.

“We shall run risks.”

“I shall be by your side.”

He smiled and to her there was something almost godlike in the spirituality of his face as he drew her closer to him. He clapped his hands. The others all trooped out from the windows. He handed Hou Hsi over to them.

* * * * *

For half-an-hour, Cheng walked with the Priest upon the terrace. They spoke in their own language, they lived for a time in their own world. Then Hou Hsi came shyly out. It was long since she had walked in the streets of Paris or down Bond Street but she was dressed in the clothes of a famous French dressmaker, her small hat was of the latest mode, only the graceful little swing of her walk seemed to give her a foreign appearance. He laughed as he led her down to the waiting car. She whispered to him as they drove away:

“I do as one must in this country. I wear their clothes. In the trunks there I have brought with me my wedding robe and the head-dress which belongs to past centuries. That pleases you?”

Her eyes drooped before his. He pressed his lips to her temple. She crept as close as possible into his arms.

“I am happy,” she sighed.

Chapter XXI

Down in Nice there were threats of a mistral from the Estérels, and already its depressing influence was beginning to make itself felt. Monsieur Déchanel from the Bureau of the Chef de la Sûreté, for example, appeared to be in no pleasant mood as he was shown into Mark's sanctum. He was out of breath and the bowler hat which he placed upon the floor by the side of his chair had left a red ring around his forehead. He had obviously been perspiring freely. There was a cowed look in his usually bright eyes. He seemed to have shrunken in his clothes during the last few days.

"Déchanel," Mark observed, looking across at him critically, "it is as I told you before. You must change your chapelier. Your hats are a size too small for you, or perhaps it is your brain that swells. Compose yourself, I beg of you. Whatever it is that you fear, believe me it is of no account. The world goes very well."

"For you perhaps," the police official replied with something less than his usual deference. "For me the world goes badly. At the head office there is trouble, almost consternation. I am not sure that I did wisely in blotting out the record of all that happened at the Russian hotel. I have been with the chief for hours. The conversation has all the time hinged upon you and Mr. Cheng and your extraordinary enterprises."

"That does not distress me," Mark assured him cheerfully. "I like to be an object of interest—even to the police. Tell me of your anxiety, Monsieur Déchanel. When you have finished, you can wipe your forehead once more and you will see that you have ceased to perspire. The world will seem a more pleasant place. It is so with you, I am sure, as with so many of us—your troubles are imaginary. Tell me with whom they are concerned at the present moment."

"At the present moment," Déchanel answered, leaning forward in his chair, "they are concerned chiefly with a manufacturing jeweller from Warsaw, a very well-known man indeed. Paul Agrestein."

If he had hoped to gain inspiration from any change of expression in his companion's face he was disappointed. Mark did not by the flicker of an eyelid betray any interest in his visitor's announcement.

"Agrestein," he repeated. "Paul Agrestein. It sounds familiar. But why do you come to me? What have I to do with a Warsaw jeweller?"

"Who knows with whom you have to do?" Déchanel rejoined with some heat. "You are a man who keeps his mouth too tightly closed. Even in Paris they are beginning to ask questions about the activities of the International Bureau and its mysterious principals."

"You amuse me, cher ami," Mark observed. "What is there mysterious about me? I am a notable scientist, I am one of the trustees of my father's world-famous inventions and I have insight. I am usually successful in any undertaking I embark upon. Why, however, this flurried visit, this agitation, this bringing to my notice the disappearance of Paul Agrestein?"

“Because Suzanne was in Warsaw making enquiries about him, and Suzanne is one of your spies.”

“But, my good friend, Suzanne was sent to Warsaw to save you from the embarrassment of her presence here.”

“There was a further motive for her presence in Warsaw,” the police official insisted. “She haunted the Hotel d’Angleterre. She was seen day by day upon the flying ground. She is known to have made enquiries from the authorities at the passport office and from the steward on the plane as to Paul Agrestein.”

“You may not be aware,” Mark confided, “that she has an interest in the family. Her first lover, I believe, was an Agrestein.”

“All that is unimportant,” Déchanel declared impatiently. “Listen to me, I beg you. We had orders from the highest of all sources to trace the man who carried the passport of Paul Agrestein and was supposed to have arrived in Nice. We could discover nothing of him here and we worked backwards to the Warsaw end. Paul Agrestein has never left his factory. He was at work there yesterday. He is at work there today.”

“You appear,” Mark complained, “to be taking up a great deal of my time talking about an insignificant matter in which I have no concern.”

“On the contrary,” Déchanel objected, “it is a matter of world-wide importance.”

“So far, then, I presume you have only told me half the story. Get on with it.”

Déchanel leaned forward in his chair and obeyed.

“We have urgent enquiries from headquarters as to the man who travelled on the plane, descended at Cannes and is believed to have visited Nice under the name of Paul Agrestein. The enquiries are of such a nature that all Nice is being combed to discover his whereabouts. It was your spy Suzanne who went to Warsaw to enquire for him. Why? What was your business with Agrestein?”

Mark raised his eyebrows very slightly.

“I am without a doubt mistaken, Déchanel,” he said, “but your mode of interrogation appears to me to be a trifle blunt.”

“This is not a time for niceties,” was the brusque rejoinder. “My post at the Bureau, my reputation, depends upon the solution of this mystery.”

Mark reflected for a moment, then he took up one of his telephones.

“Send Suzanne,” he ordered.

“Ah, now we shall see that I was right,” Déchanel exclaimed. “Suzanne has returned. You sent her to Warsaw to watch for this man Agrestein or the man who travelled under his name.”

“Or the man who travelled under his name,” Mark repeated. “Yes, that is well put. I advise you to wait, my friend. I daresay Suzanne can throw some light upon this matter. She has been at times one of my most accomplished helpers. Women are better than men, you know, Déchanel. They do not get flurried or nervous in a crisis. They do not run about like frightened hens.”

“A woman like Suzanne has nothing to lose except her life,” Déchanel replied sulkily, “and that, I presume, you take care of.”

“I take care of my helpers so long as they merit it,” Mark assented. “Afterwards, of course, they must look out for themselves.”

Suzanne had glided into the room. She smiled at Déchanel and stood by the side of Mark’s desk.

“Eh bien?”

“Our friend Monsieur Déchanel here,” Mark explained, leaning back in his chair, “is anxious to know why you were in Warsaw and what your interest is in a certain Monsieur Paul Agrestein, a manufacturing jeweller of Warsaw.”

“Monsieur Déchanel then still occupies himself with my affairs?” Suzanne observed.

“Monsieur Déchanel has a perfect right to do so if he chooses,” was that gentleman’s curt retort. “You forget, Mademoiselle, my position. I have visited you always in friendly fashion but I am an official of the Sûreté here.”

“Eh bien? You wish to know my interest in Monsieur Paul Agrestein. I thought so well informed a Bureau as yours knew everything. The grandson of Paul Agrestein was my first lover. When we were unfortunately separated the Agrestein family made me an allowance. That allowance has suddenly ceased. I seek out Monsieur Paul to learn the reason. I had no other motive.”

“Falsehoods,” Déchanel exclaimed.

“Rude little man,” Suzanne remarked reprovingly. “I can, if you will, show you the letters from Paul telling me of the allowance. I can show you the letter from the family attorney telling me he had been instructed to send it to me.”

“And it is for that business alone that you were in Warsaw, Mademoiselle?”

“Is it not of sufficient importance?” she replied. “My allowance was something, I can tell you. It was worth having. Monsieur here,” she went on, indicating Mark with a little jerk of her head, “he pays well but it is not often that I can be of use to him. Since the disturbance concerning those young foreign navy men and the affair with the Turkish Commander, he has not chosen to give me work, and I spend a great deal of money, Monsieur Déchanel. I am not a cheap woman, though some of my friends need to be reminded often of the fact.”

The police official groaned. He remembered very well one night when Mademoiselle had emptied his pocketbook.

“These things are beside the point,” he said sharply. “Answer me. Did you succeed in your errand?”

“I saw Monsieur Agrestein,” she acknowledged, “but he was very unkind to me. He assured me that the firm had lost all their money and that there was no more coming to me.”

“Where did you see him?”

“On the flying ground outside Warsaw,” she replied. “I walked with him to the plane. He talked with me till the last moment. A very nice old gentleman but stingy.”

“Our friend Déchanel suggests,” Mark confided, “that the man who travelled by plane from Warsaw, whom you were waiting about for, was not Monsieur Agrestein at all.”

Suzanne shrugged her shoulders.

“It was the name on the ticket sheet of the Air Company. It was the name on the passport which I saw him hand to the conductor. He was not in the least like my Paul but a grandfather—what would you have?”

“That finishes the matter so far as I am concerned,” Mark declared. “Take mademoiselle away with you. You can question her then at your convenience.”

Déchanel picked up his hat and avoided the other's quick glance. It was precisely what he had had in his mind to do.

"If mademoiselle will permit me to offer her a glass of wine," he suggested.

She beamed upon him.

"With much pleasure, monsieur," she consented, "so long as you do not continue to ask me stupid questions."

* * * * *

Suzanne thrust her hand through her companion's arm as soon as the two had passed through the heavy door which shut off the private suites of offices from the main building.

"Oh, la la," she sighed, "every time I leave that room I feel like a bird which has escaped from its cage! Monsieur Déchanel, you are a man and you know no fear. I am a woman and I am afraid of these two young men who are responsible for the International Bureau. I am afraid of Mr. Cheng. I am just as much, if not more afraid of Professor Mark Humberstone."

It occurred to Henri Déchanel that for the sake of his reputation for courage it was as well that mademoiselle—joyous, desirable Mademoiselle Suzanne—had not seen him half-an-hour before. He coughed and straightened his necktie.

"I will tell you something," he confided. "There are others beside myself who are beginning to ask themselves questions concerning this International Bureau."

"Take my advice, mon cher," she enjoined, "ask your questions about something else. Both these men are devils. They have a thousand ears, and a thousand unseen arms with which to strike. They remind me of two great king spiders in an amazing web."

"I am beginning to believe with the authorities in Paris," Déchanel declared, curling his moustache, "that the activities of this Bureau must be looked into more closely. They have been treated leniently up till now because, between ourselves, little one, there have been times when they have been useful to us, but just now—well, serious things are afoot."

"Tell me about them," Suzanne begged.

"But where is this that you are taking me?" he demanded as she threw open a door. "This is not the way out."

"Did you not say that we should drink a glass of wine together?" she reminded him. "Do you pretend not to remember that this is my apartment?"

"A glass of wine—yes—but I meant at a café."

"A café! Who do you think I am to sit in cafés?" Suzanne laughed scornfully. "Besides, are you not better here? You can sit in my salon and wait whilst I change my frock if you must take me out. Then you can drive me to Beaulieu—yes? There is a violinist there at the Réserve who thrills me. I would like to hear him with you."

He coughed uneasily.

"I think," he agreed, "if you would have it so our conversation would go better away from this building."

"The bold Monsieur Déchanel is suddenly shy," she laughed. "He is afraid that I might ask him to help me with my toilette. Well, I shall do as you wish—"

“Not as I wish,” he interrupted, with a world of meaning in his rolling eyes, “but as the fates demand. However—sit down for one moment, Mademoiselle Suzanne. Tell me whether it is true that you went to Warsaw only in order to see Paul Agrestein.”

“Of course it is true,” she answered, “and much good it did me! I am beginning to ask myself whether the man on the flying ship who seemed to be Paul Agrestein may not have been an impostor.”

“Now listen, Suzanne, I ask you a question. Much hangs on it. Who was he?”

She looked at him with wide-opened eyes.

“How should I know?” she replied. “His name on the sheet of passengers was Agrestein. The name on his passport was Agrestein. He admitted when I spoke to him that his name was Paul Agrestein. He answered me like a barbarian. I told him that I had visited him at his workshops and at his bureau without success. I spoke to him of my poverty, of my life with little Paul. I gave him up for an allowance and that allowance I only received for a year.”

“And his answer?”

“What do you suppose was his answer—he a man of some strength though he may be old? He pushed me away, he refused to talk. He mounted the airship and he told the conductor to be sure I did not follow. That is what I got in Warsaw, Henri, my beloved one, for seeking Paul Agrestein.”

“Since the man whom you encountered may not have been Paul Agrestein, what else did you expect?”

“I am probably foolish to doubt that it was he,” she observed, fumbling in a huge box of chocolates by her side. “He must be well known in Warsaw. How could he travel with a false passport?”

She selected a bonbon and bit it between her beautiful white teeth.

“It is often done,” her companion assured her drily. “Come now, listen. We want to know who that man was if he was not Agrestein. Our friend behind that door knows—I am certain of that. A most amazing suggestion has been made to our head office. It is our duty to discover the truth. Will you help us, Mademoiselle Suzanne, or do you mean to remain where you are now—in a very dangerous position, mind you—one of the spies of the International Bureau?”

She patted his hand.

“Écoute, mon cher,” she said, “I have told you how much I fear that man on the other side of the door. I value my life. I love safety and pleasant living and money. All those things come to me for doing what I am told to do and for answering no questions outside. What sort of a fool should I be if I risked everything to pour out my heart like a little ingénue to Monsieur Déchanel, dangerous man as he is with us poor girls?”

“In other words,” he rejoined, twirling his moustache, “you have nothing to tell me.”

“Absolutely nothing. I am your good companion when you wish to frivol, your friend at all times. I have lips which you may kiss when I feel in the humour—which is generally, but which will never open to whisper the secrets of the Bureau, if they have any, in your ears.”

“It may be,” he warned her gloomily, “that the good times are coming to an end. Mr. Cheng is not exactly popular with the authorities. In Paris they have been

talking about him. The man whom we have just left, Mark Humberstone, is one of the greatest scientists in the world, but who knows how he may use these new inventions? If what our people in Paris say is true they have at work night and day a marvellous wireless directed upon a new principle, with the help of which they get news from the East and at the same time block out many other stations. Not only the wireless but the cables have been affected by a perfect holocaust of electricity. All this points to strange things. It points beyond the mere traffic in stolen plans and letters. The brains of Paris are at work upon the affair. Beware, Suzanne, lest you cling too long to a sinking ship."

"The police can do me no harm," she declared, "and as for pay—you know yourself that they pay nothing for information. If I deceive those men, whom secretly I think we both fear, I might lose my life. So you see, Henri, it is not worth while to waste time on poor little Suzanne. If it is secret information about the Bureau for which you search, you must search elsewhere."

Déchanel rose to his feet.

"It has been a bad day for me," he grumbled. "All the same, you are foolish, Suzanne. Bureaux d'Espionage come and go. As a rule those who control them end their days in prison. Police protection is better."

She threw her arms round his neck and led him towards the door.

"You, my beloved Henri," she said, "you will always protect me, of that I feel sure, and I shall always be your loving Suzanne."

Déchanel grunted but his departure was slightly postponed.

Chapter XXII

Catherine came hurriedly into the Bureau where Mark was still seated. She noticed that on her unannounced entrance his hand had crept swiftly towards his hip pocket.

"As bad as that?" she exclaimed with uplifted eyebrows.

He rose to his feet and laughed light-heartedly. The lines had suddenly gone from his face. He sat on the edge of the desk, lit a cigarette and motioned her to take his chair.

"But I cannot sit still," she confided. "That is why I left my own room. I have lost my nerve, Mark. What is it that is going on upstairs? I have never heard such a thunder of dynamos. Even my floor shakes."

"I have not been up for an hour," he told her. "I have had that little pipsqueak Déchanel here."

"In search of Agrestein?"

"That was rather the idea," Mark assented.

"Is he dangerous, do you think?" she asked.

"Not in the least. The only thing is that the authorities are bound to find out that there has been a little trouble some time or other and it doesn't leave us much time to close down. Cheng has all the courage in the world but he is running it rather fine."

She leaned back in the chair.

"Even now," she said quietly, "it is terribly hard to realise what is going on, that from under this roof you and Cheng and a handful of others are planning an upheaval of the world."

"I can't believe it myself sometimes," Mark confessed. "We thought it all out at Beaumont Park even before we perfected our last lot of instruments. In theory then we knew that we could do what we are doing to-day. But, my God, it is à different thing when we go into one of the dark rooms upstairs and watch thousands of men crossing the mountains in China, talk to the General and get his answer back!"

"Do not let us talk about it," she begged. "It is too stupendous. When will Cheng be back?"

"To-night some time. How long we shall be able to stay here, though, I don't know. I have just had a despatch from our own ambassador in London imploring me to go over at once. One of the London newspapers has it splashed all over the front page this morning that there are ten thousand American officers in China and half the American fleet off Vladivostok! Of course that's all ridiculous—about the fleet, I mean, but it is going to lead to trouble. Then everyone knows that General Mayne is there. No one could keep that out of the news."

Catherine rose to her feet. Mark looked at her curiously. "Know what you look like to-night, Catherine?"

"Thoroughly washed out, I suppose."

He shook his head.

"You look like a nun," he said. "There is not a line in your face, but neither is there any expression. Your eyes are just as beautiful as ever but the light seems gone."

"Rubbish!" she smiled. "It is because I am wearing all black and have this little white muslin tie. Sorry you do not like me, because I was half hoping that you might have invited me to that Russian restaurant for dinner. I am not really greedy but I could not go out to lunch. I had to put all those cables into code that Cheng left me before he started off."

"A wonderful idea," he declared with enthusiasm. "Catherine, this is fine. Come up to my sitting-room and I'll shake you a cocktail, then I'll tidy up and we'll get off. My car is round at the Laperle entrance. I was dying to get out of this place for a time. It's just about the hour, you know, when Washington gets busy."

They made their way to Mark's quarters.

"Do you mind, Catherine," he asked her as he mixed the cocktails, "if I don't change? I have a sort of urge to get away."

"So have I," she told him. "Please do not think of doing such a thing."

"Three minutes is all I shall take," he went on. "Plenty of magazines there. Mix another cocktail for when I come out if you like. I'm aching to get into the fresh air. Touch of the mistral in the wind, I think. Things have been happening all day but I feel there's still something coming."

He hurried into the bathroom, plunged his head into cold water, washed, changed his shoes, brushed his hair and reappeared within the three minutes. Catherine was standing almost where he had left her—still and quiet—her hands folded in front of her, her eyes turned to the window.

"Quick!" he cried. "Let's pretend we have only thirty seconds to be out of this place. Never mind the second cocktail. We will have one there."

They hurried out, sped along dimly lit corridors, opened many doors with Mark's master key and came at last to the courtyard on the east side. Mark helped her into the car, sprang into the driver's seat and in a moment or two they were in the heart of the city.

"Gorgeous!" he exclaimed. "Now I have you to myself for a time at any rate. The world can fall to pieces if it likes but we will dine while it's doing it."

He was light-hearted—suddenly gay. Very soon they arrived at their destination. A corner table in a little restaurant they had visited once or twice was vacant.

"This," he declared, "is wonderful. We will drink old Burgundy. Somehow or other you must have more colour in your cheeks. I must hear you laugh. Forget everything, Catherine, but this. Listen!"

She looked at him intently. His eyes caught hers and held them.

"All day long I have had the same pent-up feeling. A moment like this was what I craved. God—it's wonderful! I brought you here, Catherine, to tell you before another second of the evening has passed that I love you."

* * * * *

The buzz of conversation from many diners surged around them. The maître d'hôtel, with the menu in his hand, made diffident approach and, finding his advances disregarded, faded away into the distance. The small string band who had recognised a generous patron was playing softly his favourite tune, the Tango des Roses. The popping of corks, the clatter of plates, all the business connected with the services of many dinners ebbed and flowed around them. It was probably a matter of a minute or so only—Catherine never asked herself, Mark never knew—yet for the rest of their lives it remained for both of them a little fragment of life detached from the legend of the clock, a breathless passage of time when new things seemed born into the world. Mark was content. For him that silence was something he had no will to break, for all that he wished to know was there for him to read. The pallor had gone from Catherine's face, a slow delicate streak of colour had taken its place. She was breathing a little quickly. Her lips seemed to have attained a new fullness and her eyes had lost all their weariness, even the very dimness of them, so exquisitely human, was the dimness of unshed tears. Her whisper, when at last her lips were parted, broke the spell.

"Mark, dear Mark—you really mean it?"

He drew a long breath.

"From the bottom of my heart and to the end of my life, Catherine, I mean it," he said.

She—least impulsive of persons—suddenly stretched out her hand. He held it for a moment... This time the maître d'hôtel's second appearance was overpowering. Their fingers reluctantly unclasped. Mark pushed the menu away.

"The smallest but the best dinner you can serve us—four dishes only—the champagne the patron recommends. And listen, Serge—you can ice it up properly afterwards but open a bottle at once and fill our glasses."

The man had perception and he hurried away.

“Catherine,” Mark continued, “I know I am a clumsy idiot. I have been dying to say this to you for I don’t know how long and yet all this business of controlling those mighty forces and Cheng’s weaving of plots and the whole drama of our day by day life seems almost to have kept one dumb, to have sapped one’s will. Oh, I don’t know how to say it! You understand. To-night I suddenly felt freed of it all when we drove away from that place. I never thought I should do anything so quaint as to say those words sitting in a little restaurant with all these people round, but there you are—I’ve said them. I mean them. And you?”

“I care for you, dear,” she said with a quiver of passion in her tone. “I always have done. It is your English word perhaps—I think I prefer the other. I love you, Mark.”

The champagne, which the patron himself had hastened to bring, foamed in their glasses. They drank their silent toast. Catherine’s fingers were shaking and veritable tears were in her eyes for a moment. She wiped them away with a half apologetic, half happy whisper.

“I have been miserable for so long, Mark,” she told him. “I felt the life being squeezed out of me. I never dreamt that I should be happy again—that this might come. Now we are going to be ordinary human beings. Just fancy though—my first glimpse of Paradise, after all these years, in the Restaurant Russe! Will you do something for me?”

“Will I?”

“Afterwards if we have time drive up to the bend in the road where we stopped on our way to Monte Carlo. Can we do this?”

“Of course we can. We will eat our festival dinner, we will drink our sacramental wine, we will have one dance and then—up to the hills.”

She half closed her eyes.

“If time would only stand still,” she murmured. “Life does not seem to have left me anything else to wish for.”

The world flowed back to them. They passed their compliments to the patron. They drank his excellent wine. Mark insisted upon his drinking their health. Monsieur, whose apprehensions were of the quickest and who like everyone of his race was overflowing with sentiment, made a gallant little speech—a few happy words full of charm and tact. Madame from her desk must join in. She, too, raised her full glass and waved her congratulations. Wine seemed to find its way as though by a miracle to the orchestra. The little restaurant was en fête. It seemed to Mark that he was back again in his college days, before the serious business of life had made almost a sober young man of him, carefree and with the joy of youth in his veins giving himself up fully and entirely to a new sense of happiness. Catherine, too, was transformed. The burden of those grey, miserable years—such a procession of them—marked with tragedies instead of festivals, all the girlhood soured in her blood, seemed to have fallen away. She was suddenly free and joyous. She flung the truth at him impulsively.

“Mark,” she said, “I have never been happy before in my life! I have only imagined what it might be like. It has come. I am happy.”

“And I—absolutely and entirely.”

They danced. They shook hands with the leader of the orchestra. They danced again. When they reached their table, with a glance of apology, Mark demanded his bill.

"Do you mind?"

She laughed.

"If you had not asked for it I should have done. I, too, am impatient…"

There was a brief epic of haste, such pourboires as had never been dreamed of in the Restaurant Russe from Mark's eager fingers. Through the streets of the town, where the mechanical routine of driving for a moment or two brought him back to earth, up into the hills where the pale light of a mist-screened moon was more than sufficient to guide them on their way. Catherine lay back in her place, once more pale, but with her eyes, soft and brilliant now with this new light of happiness, fixed sometimes upon the slowly drifting clouds, sometimes upon Mark. The road was deserted and his great headlights blazed out the way for them. They reached the slight curve of the wall. They came to a standstill. It was the same place. He took her cold little hands into his.

"Listen, Mark," she said. "When we were here the other night, when we stopped, I prayed to myself that you might say something like what you said to-night. Please—"

She took his arm and folded it around her waist. "Please—" she begged, looking up at him.

"Catherine, I love you," he cried passionately. "It was all here the other night, but have I grown temperamental, I wonder? This marvellous business—it choked me somehow. But to-night it was all gone. When we hurried out of that place together I knew that I was going to say what I have kept here. Catherine, I love you."

Her arms were suddenly around his neck clutching at him, drawing his face almost fiercely towards hers. A smile of supreme happiness was on her lips. They stepped off the edge of the mundane world.

* * * * *

They drove home in a state of deep but tranquil happiness. Mark permitted himself a little grimace as the flaming lights from the observatory tower of the Bureau came into sight.

"I would like to dump all that stuff into the sea," he declared.

He was driving at a snail's pace now. She rested her fingers upon his hand which guided the wheel.

"We shall finish the work there together, Mark," she reminded him.

"You bet," he answered firmly. "I am not going to part with you again, Catherine."

"I do not wish to be parted," she assured him, holding his hand tightly. "I have been alone since I was thirteen, Mark. That is long enough for me."

"At half-past two to-morrow," he confided, "you and I will be standing before the American Consul and at a quarter to three, if you ever try to run away from me, the law will step in!"

"What do you mean?" she gasped.

“I mean that you will be Mrs. Mark Humberstone, of course. I shall be your husband. Does that terrify you?”

“Mark! But it is not possible!”

“Isn’t it?” he replied. “They have got to make it possible. We will get the legal side of it done anyway—probably the whole lot.”

“To-morrow!” she repeated incredulously.

He leaned over and kissed her on the lips.

“To-morrow by twenty minutes to three,” he assured her, “sit tight, Catherine!—you will be my wife.”

Chapter XXIII

For some reason or another there was a great crowd that night at the Jetée Casino. When Professor Ventura, the Man Who Stopped the Earth and made human beings dance like mad people, came to the front to acknowledge the applause which always followed his turn, it was necessary for him to make his bow three times before comparative silence reigned. Then, as he was in the act of turning away, an amazing thing happened. From the front row, only a few feet from the stage, a woman rose and leaned forward gripping the rail which separated the stalls from the orchestra—a heavily built woman with over-rouged cheeks and over-becarmined lips, wearing, notwithstanding the heat of the spring evening, a mantle of fur. She stood gazing in blank astonishment at the little man in the neat evening clothes who had just received with imperturbable expression the plaudits of the audience. She leaned forward as though about to spring upon the stage. Her arm shot out in his direction, a pudgy forefinger was pointed straight at him.

“Murderer!” she shrieked. “It was you who killed my man. Police—vite!”

Her thick knee was upon the partition, she seemed to be trying to struggle on to the stage.

“Au secours! He is a murderer, I tell you.”

The next turn was on the point of being announced. The leader of the orchestra swung round in his high chair and tried to push her back into her seat. A man in an adjacent stall sprang up.

“A madwoman!” he shouted. “Take care everyone. She may be armed.”

All the time, the man on the stage stood watching her with unchanging expression. She recovered her breath and once more her shriek rang through the house.

“Assassin! I tell you that’ he is an assassin. Do I not know? Seize him!”

Her fingers suddenly parted from the rail, she fell back into the aisle and lay there doubled up, a queer ungainly mass of fur-covered quivering limbs. She raised her hands and pawed the air. Then her arms fell as though life had suddenly gone from her. She lay perfectly still.

“It is a fit,” someone called out. “Bring water.”

“Madame faints,” someone else exclaimed.

“Dieu me protège si ce n’est pas la mort!” a hysterical woman cried.

There was a great stir amongst the attendants and very little done. A man from the back called out that he was a doctor and tried to make his way down, but the passage was too narrow and the wedge of people too solid. No one cared in the least that the little man with the pince nez and the shrill voice might indeed be taking aid to a dying woman. They meant first to have their look at this delectable and tragic spectacle. Through the door leading from the orchestra Jonson suddenly appeared. He pushed his way to the woman and called to the bystanders to stand back.

“Here is the doctor,” someone announced.

“A glass of water,” Jonson said calmly, taking the tumbler from the hands of a programme girl who, with her clothes nearly torn off her back, had just arrived. “Let her have air, too. Stand back, people.”

He dropped on his knee, felt her pulse, examined her eyelids, undid her coat and felt her heart all in the best professional manner. Then he slipped a pastille from a bottle in his waistcoat pocket into the palm of his hand and passed it into her mouth. He poured water between her teeth. Two of the attendants had now elbowed their way through.

Illustration:
He dropped on his knee, felt her pulse, examined her eyelids, felt her heart all in the best professional manner.

“This woman is known to me,” he confided. “She has had a slight fit but she will be better in the air. You bring her out and I will follow,” he directed. “We can leave the place by the stage door. I will take her to her home.”

The woman groaned but showed no signs of reviving. The attendants carried her off, with Professor Ventura well in the background. The enterprise was safely accomplished. The woman had relapsed into complete unconsciousness when they reached a waiting taxicab. Once they arrived at the Avenue Laperle everything was easy.

* * * * *

Farther down in the great block of buildings which fronted the Avenue Laperle, in the boudoir of Cheng’s Chinese suite, there had been some slight disturbance. Hou Hsi, her eyes languid with love, reluctantly unwound her arms from her husband’s neck.

“My lord is weary of his singing bird?” she asked mockingly.

He replaced the small ivory receiver upon the telephone instrument and rose to his feet.

“You are a sweet opiate for all the hours of all time,” he answered. “But Hou Hsi, great things are astir. Fan Sik Tsun has sent me a prayer that he may depart for Pekin to-night to join the American, Mayne. I must hear what he has to tell me. You will lie here and sleep, dear one, until my return.”

“I am weary,” she sighed, “but if you go I lie here and wait. When you return you shall tell me the story the lightnings bring…”

Almost at the sound of the key in the lock, General Fan Sik Tsun stood on the other side of the threshold. He was already in uniform, a military cloak upon his arm. He bowed low at Cheng's entrance.

"Your Highness," he said, "many times I apologise for breaking in upon the night of nights, but behold the great map is there. It tells its own story. I ask your permission to depart."

"Mark Humberstone is here?" Cheng asked.

"He has this moment arrived," the General replied, pointing to Mark who was standing inside the railings studying the huge chart. He turned his head at the sound of their voices and advanced to meet them.

"You have heard the General's request?" Mr. Cheng said. "He believes that the hour has struck. He wishes to leave at once."

Mark assented briefly.

"I found his message waiting for me when I arrived a few minutes ago. When I heard what he had to say I begged him to send for you at once. Seems to me he'll have to get a move on."

"All day I have been in touch with our Chinese stations," Fan Sik Tsun recounted. "Eastwards from Vladivostok to Moscow the conflagration spreads. The world has become like a smouldering bonfire. Messages are raining in upon us. The panic is spreading across Europe. The press demands the truth. I cannot imagine that they will let us remain here any longer."

Cheng stood quite still. Although his brow was unfurrowed, it was obvious that he was deep in thought.

"Those damn' newspapers," Mark grumbled. "The only thing is that so far as I am concerned I shall have to see our ambassadors in Paris and London before I join Mayne. Otherwise I am ready to pack up."

"This then," Cheng said gravely, "is the end."

"Not the end," Fan Sik Tsun declared. "The beginning. The glorious beginning. There is one machine which is still not dismantled. It is still connected with the instrument which our marvellous young friend brought with him from Beaumont Park. Spread about on that map," he added, pointing to the huge chart, "you have army corps comprising very nearly two million men. Behind the chart is a secret panel. Touch a button there and the wave will reach China. Two million swords will be drawn!"

"And then?" Cheng muttered.

"We touch the button," Fan Sik Tsun repeated, "and Vladivostok will fall to one small cruiser fitted up and manned by Humberstone's men. A converging concentration from the twenty-seven points marked out there," he added, pointing to the map, "should then start at the same moment. Simultaneously I would order the unloading of the whole of the rolling stock on the steamers at Vladivostok and the putting of it on the rails. Then should commence the march of supplies covered by reserve forces. The whole scheme, as my lord knows, General Mayne's scheme, his own scheme and mine which march together even as though they were planned by the same brain, should be brought into work."

"What do you suppose," Cheng asked, "the Russian plan of campaign will be?"

Fan Sik Tsun smiled cryptically.

“We have had an army of spies at work,” he said, “for two years. My lord knows how far reaching their labours have been. They have penetrated even into the councils of Moscow, into the War Cabinet, into the most secret chamber of all—the People’s Supplies Committee. The Russian armies may march but they will not fight.”

“They will not fight because I shall not give them the chance,” Mark interposed. “In a sense there is something tragic about it because the Russians have always been brave soldiers.”

“It is true,” Cheng pronounced, “that the armies of the Grand Duke Michael, the famous ancestor of Catherine Oronoff, performed prodigies, but the Russian armies of today are like those great flocks of sheep which in the old days one could see on the banks of the great rivers. They will go where they are driven and the moment the driving power ceases they flag. They have no patriotism. Those who misrule Russia have murdered it. They have no religion. Again, those who misrule Russia have stripped it out of their hearts and souls. They are animals, and animals never fight if they can creep away…Compare them with the soldiers of our celestial country. Every man goes into battle with flashing eyes, with the thought of his great overlord to inspire him, with the certainty of Paradise in the hereafter if he should fall. The great overlord may be a myth, the figure behind the clouds no more than an inspiration, but the inspiration must be there. A wind of destruction has blown even as though it were the weapon of a destroying angel through the towns and country of Russia. The souls of the people have perished. They might make a brave show but if it came to fighting they would crumble like the dust…I grant your request my General,” Cheng concluded. “This shall be the great moment of the generation.”

Fan Sik Tsun’s face was illuminated with joy.

“To-night, with my lord’s permission,” he announced, “I shall fly to Alexandria and from there I shall cross to General Mayne’s headquarters. Everything is prepared. My staff is already chosen. There were only two causes for delay when I begged for your lordship’s presence here tonight.”

“What were they?” Cheng demanded.

“One was the word.”

“I give it.”

“The second was the slaying of the world’s great enemy.”

“It is accomplished.”

The little man with the brown withered skin, the clear deep-set eyes and the soft voice stood for a moment motionless. He was simply dressed, his uniform indeed might have been found in an emporium of readymade garments in the Avenue de la Victoire, his very lack of height seemed to rob him of distinction. Yet as he stood there, very rigid, his eyes devouring the great chart before which they had been gathered, one remembered that there was not a medal or order which had been issued by the military dictators of his own days or the sovereigns of ages before which had not flashed upon his narrow chest. There was something in the faraway lights of his eyes at that moment curiously suggestive. He had sat on his horse, he had leaned back in his old-fashioned, imperfectly protected automobile, he had climbed to the spurs of mountains through the snow and ice to watch without a tremor on his face battles upon the issue of which hung the destiny of his country,

the destiny of a once still greater power, the destiny of a decaying Empire. No man could claim more than he to have seen in agony and bloodshed the making of the new history of the world…Slowly he moved now towards the platform in front of the chart. His hand crept behind the frame, his thumb was turned downwards. A panel slid back. He pressed a hidden knob. As they stood there they heard the soft vibrant ringing of a bell, drowned in a few moments by the louder vibrations of the sleeping instruments he had awakened. One of those toneless, denationalised shadows of men who seemed to haunt the place came silently up to Cheng. He whispered a few rapid words. Cheng was swift to act, although his expression remained unchanged. He summoned Mark. The two turned together towards the door. They glanced back at the General but it was doubtful whether the latter noticed their going. A strange tumult awakened by the instruments below grew in volume. In his mind those pegs had become divisions. Great hordes of men were creeping across the empty spaces, fording rivers, climbing mountains, marching with eager feet to the everlasting rumble of artillery, supply wagons and the beating of aeroplane engines. The campaign had commenced.

Chapter XXIV

Cowardice, a very awkward and difficult characteristic for a man who had lived the life of Paul Hanson, was at its old tricks again. He felt a sudden sinking of the heart. The spirit of bravado with which he had awaited the coming of Mr. Cheng and Mark Humberstone seemed suddenly to have deserted him. He shuffled in his chair and though his knees felt like water he was conscious of an urgent desire for flight. Yet not a threat had been uttered. To all appearance the two men who had come down to receive his visit were only slightly interested, perhaps a little mildly amused, by his story when he made his last attempt at bluff.

“Well, there it is, Mr. Chinaman,” he wound up, “or whatever your name may be. You run this Bureau, so I am told. Anyway you are responsible for what goes on here. The woman cannot be found anywhere but I know that she was brought into this building unconscious after her outburst at the Casino. She is here now somewhere and the police are looking for her.”

There was a chill silence for a moment, a silence which somehow or other Hanson disliked. Mr. Cheng was lolling against the desk, indifferent yet with a faintly derisive expression upon his face. Mark was seated in an easy chair with his hands clasped behind his head, smoking a cigarette. At that moment Hanson himself would have given the world to have been inhaling tobacco smoke up his nostrils. His yellow stained fingers were twitching with desire, his lips were dry and his throat parched.

“A quaint but significant story,” Mr. Cheng observed calmly. “What I ask myself is why Mr.— did you say your name was Hanson?—why you come to me at this unusual hour instead of taking your very interesting information to the police?”

Hanson made a gesture at rising from his chair but he knew quite well that without a smoke, without a drink, without something to give him a spark of courage he would never be able to reach the door.

"All right," he said, "it is your choice—not mine. I will go."

Mr. Cheng put out that beautiful white hand of his with the big jade ring and waved it gently. Hanson obeyed. He ceased his effort and sank a little farther back in his chair.

"You must not misunderstand me, Mr. Hanson," Cheng continued. "I have no wish to part with you. Please do not think that I am inhospitable but it did occur to me to wonder why you did not carry that very interesting information to the Gendarmerie opposite or to police headquarters. If Professor Ventura brought the woman here, however, the matter is simple. You would doubtless like to interview him?"

"Not I," the man in the chair called out. "I wish to have nothing to do with Jonson, or Professor Ventura, as he calls himself."

"Dear me!" Cheng exclaimed. "I thought that he was a friend and an ally."

Hanson shivered. He looked round the room as though praying for a door to open or anything to happen. What a fool he had been! This smooth-tongued Chinese aristocrat who had slipped through his fingers in London knew everything.

"Three of you there were in Moscow," Mr. Cheng went on reflectively. "Jonson, Krakoff and Hanson. Very fine fellows. You were the bodyguard of a person of consequence in Moscow—yes?"

Hanson made no reply. Mr. Cheng continued.

"Occasionally you had outside commissions. One brought you not long ago to London. There you were not quite so successful as your talents and courage deserved. In other words—you failed. Mr. Jonson returned to the new duties which he had taken on. You—Hanson—and Krakoff also, came down to Nice. I wonder why? Was it to follow me or was it to protect the man who was to arrive?"

Hanson's finger nails were digging into his flesh. He felt that at any moment he might be sick. It was a spasm of cowardice which had seized him. The overheated atmosphere of the room—for Mr. Cheng loved warmth—seemed icy. He felt the chill in his veins.

"Ah, well, why should you give away your secrets?" Mr. Cheng went on tolerantly. "Here am I and there are you, Paul Hanson. Did you come here to-night to make good your failure in London or did you come here with the idea of being allowed to visit your lady friend? That could doubtless be arranged."

Words of a sort came to the panic-stricken man.

"I know nothing of her. I with to know nothing. I came because I thought it was best. I want to get away out of this country. I thought you might help me."

"Blackmail," was the quiet comment. "I am glad you came, Hanson. After all, I would rather you came here, you know, than went to the police."

Mr. Cheng threw away the end of his cigarette and turned towards Mark. It seemed to Hanson that this was his chance. He rose to his feet and made his unsteady way to the door. He tried the handle and pulled. Useless. The door refused to move. He turned the handle every way and shook it at last. Finally he looked round. His tormentor was watching him with a smile.

“A little device of ours,” the latter explained. “When we have a particularly unpleasant visitor and we think there may be trouble, we tread upon a little bell underneath the carpet here—so simple—and the door is locked on the other side. Would you really like to run away from us so soon? I hope not, for you see it is unfortunate but we cannot afford to let you go.”

“I am not going to the police,” the shivering man gasped. “I never thought of going there. It is not my affair. All that I want is to get away.”

Mark rose to his feet. He glanced contemptuously towards the speaker and addressed his colleague.

“He’s a poor little rat,” he said, “but I don’t see that he can do us any harm. I should pack him off about his business.”

“The matter is more serious than that,” Mr. Cheng replied. “You have not heard what happened to-night—only a few hours ago.”

“Anything new?”

“Jonson was giving his usual show at the Casino—that was not a very sane thing to do—and this woman rose in her place, shouting out that he was an assassin. There was a great commotion. She had a fit. Jonson, who is really very clever at dealing with a crisis, got to her first, gave her a glass of water and some medicine and spirited her away before she recovered consciousness.”

“She is here now, then, in the building?”

“Precisely. She is not likely to give any trouble just yet but there she is locked up in Jonson’s room.”

Mark was momentarily perplexed.

“You never told me any details about that night.”

“It was not necessary. What had to happen happened, and Jonson was there by his own special request. He had a reason for that. Anyhow he was there and the woman saw him. So was I. The men who disposed of Mr. Paul Agrestein’s body a mile or so out at sea were to have looked after the lady too when they got back. You know that the lives or deaths of this sort of people,” Mr. Cheng went on, “are a matter of absolute indifference to me, but I try, my dear Mark, sometimes to remember your scruples—and the lady lives, to make herself rather a nuisance, it seems. Of course, it is only a matter of hours. When we reach Paris, for the first time we reveal our whole scheme. After that we are supreme. No one will venture to interfere. History has known many occasions upon which a political assassination of a far more criminal type has been adjudged anything but a crime.”

Mark nodded.

“Meanwhile there is this poor devil here listening hard all the time.”

Cheng returned to his chair without immediate reply. He lit another cigarette and looked thoughtfully across the room.

“It has just occurred to me, Hanson,” he said. “You have had quite a reasonable chance of making up for your failure in London.”

“You are mistaken about that,” the terrified man protested. “It was Krakoff alone who had a commission. You can see for yourself—”

He rose to his feet and turned his pockets inside out. Mark stood over him.

“He is telling the truth,” the latter declared. “He has no weapon.”

"And I can tell you why," Mr. Cheng said with gentle sarcasm. "It was taken from him below. No one of whom we have suspicions is allowed in any of the audience rooms until Jacob or one of the men has been over him. That is true, is it not, Hanson? They took your gun away before they brought you here."

"That is true," the latter admitted. "But I swear before God I did not bring it here to use."

Cheng looked straight into his eyes, and Hanson felt strangely as though he were some sort of wild animal who had blundered into a trap. He said nothing but there was a queer feeling at the back of his head. He tried to look away and failed. The terror had come back. All the time, the door behind him was being slowly opened. Mr. Jonson came noiselessly in, still carrying the master key by which he had gained admittance. He reached the back of the chair. Mr. Cheng nodded and the grip was upon the terrified man's throat before he could move. He gave one cry a gurgling panic stricken effort at speech—then he collapsed. Mr. Cheng looked at him scornfully.

"Take him away, Jonson," he ordered. "It would be a kindly thing to let him die of fright, perhaps, but the moment is scarcely opportune. Take him away."

Jonson dragged the fainting man to his feet. He shook him slightly and a small but wicked-looking knife fell from some concealed place in his coat onto the carpet.

"Take him away," Cheng repeated contemptuously, "and his toy with him. He would never have had the courage to use it."

"Shall I—" Jonson began, and there was without doubt a murderous gleam in his eye.

His master shook his head.

"Keep him quiet until you hear from us again," he enjoined. "Entirely out of compliment to you, my dear Mark," he added, turning away. "My own ideas with regard to vermin are slightly less humane."

Jonson left the room with his charge, a disappointed man.

* * * * *

Mr. Cheng, whose fastidiousness as to his immediate environment was always specially ruffled by the close proximity of the underworld, threw wide open one of the windows looking across the Place.

"Faugh!" he exclaimed. "If I had been our happily departed friend I should have chosen a more savoury bodyguard."

"Miserable rat," Mark agreed. "Better have sent him to rot with his master."

"All the same, I shall owe him a precious memory," Cheng observed. "Did you ever realise, my friend, that this city, which seems to have become a little tired of sheltering us, could ever be called beautiful?"

Mark stood by his side at the open window which faced the long, broken line of the Lesser Alps. The vast panorama of lights from the villas on the hill towards Cimiez on one side and Mont Boron on the other was slowly dwindling. Little blurs of darkness in the far distance were creeping into shape—pine trees, broken country wrapped still in a faint dissolving mist. At the back of the hills the sky, from which the stars were only at that moment beginning to fade, was riven by a long thin streak of silver. The transformation of night into morning with all its

changes of colour was taking place before their eyes, and the slight breeze which found its way into the room came laden with the perfume from baskets of narcissi, violets and carnations, with which the slowly moving market carts were piled.

"It is not Pekin," Cheng sighed, "but it has beauty."

"It is only in this part of the world," Mark observed, "that the cities can fade away so graciously into the country. In America we cover the ground around them for more miles than one can see with wooden buildings and mushroom-looking tenements."

He lit a cigarette and glanced at his companion. Cheng, however had relapsed into thought.

"Do you realise, Mark," he reflected, "that we are very near our crisis?"

"Sure. I'm glad."

"We have had to wade our way through a great deal that has been distasteful. Now we step into the higher places for a time."

Both men turned their heads. The screen door which led into Cheng's private suite had been pushed gently open. Shih-fu was standing upon the threshold. She bowed twice to Mr. Cheng.

"The master will not be angry that I seek him," she begged. "Hou Hsi has sent me. The hour is late. It is the first time she has slept in the city."

"I come at once," was the swift response. "My friend," Cheng added, turning to Mark, "you see I am no longer monarch of my ways. You will excuse?"

"I had something to say to you," Mark replied, "but it can wait."

"Until to-morrow, if you please. My brain is over full to-night with the wonderful result of your labours, and Hou Hsi calls me. Within a few hours we shall build up with words and visions the next chart, the chart of conquest, even if the battle be bloodless. We must speak of the future, Mark."

"To-morrow then," Mark assented. "My news will keep till then."

Cheng looked at him for a moment curiously. There was an expression in his face which puzzled Mark. It was one almost of apprehension. It was as though this grave and dignified young man, who lived always so fearlessly and confidently, had seen before him the shadow of some possible danger. Then they heard Shih-fu's silvery voice from the doorway.

"Hou Hsi weeps, my lord."

The indecision, or whatever it may have been, passed. Mr. Cheng shrugged his shoulders lightly.

"You see," he sighed, as he turned away, "it is a summons which I lack the courage to disobey."

Chapter XXV

Mark had always been a popular visitor at the American Consulate in Nice and Mr. James Haverley, the acting official, promptly deserted a roomful of tourists at the sound of his voice outside. He gripped his hand and led him into his private sanctum.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "I am glad to see you, Mr. Humberstone. About time you came and gave us a call here. Sit down. Will you smoke a cigar or your own paper trash?"

"Paper trash, if you don't mind," Mark replied, producing his cigarette case. "Can I get married this morning?"

"Can you *what*?"

"Get married—bring a young woman in here, borrow a prayer-book, sign some papers and all the rest of it."

"You're not pulling my leg, are you?" the Consul asked incredulously.

"Not I. I am perfectly serious. My time is up here. The International Bureau is closing its doors before long. They are dismantling the observatory to-day. As soon as you can do that little trick for me, sir, I'm off."

"Back to the old country?"

"Not just yet. Will half-past two suit you?"

"Any time you say. Of course, you know that these lightning marriages are altogether a new departure. If you had come to me only a year ago I should have had to tell you that you would have to wait at least a month. However, we need not go into that. A prayer-book, your identification papers and two witnesses are all that are needed nowadays."

"Fine. We will be here at half-past two prompt."

"Can't you tell me a little more about it?" Mr. Haverley invited with a twinkle in his pleasant grey eyes.

"It isn't a long story," Mark confided. "I just happened to find the right girl, we are closing the Bureau in a hurry, and that's about the beginning and the end of it. She has been working with us there since it opened. Her name is Oronoff—Catherine Oronoff."

"Does she belong to the great family of Oronoffs?" Mark nodded.

"Yes. She has hardly ever mentioned it, but she is a Princess. Now, tell me something else, sir. Is there an American lawyer here or do I have to wait till we get to Paris?"

"When are you going to Paris?"

"Any moment."

"I should wait till I got there then…Does she know that she is marrying a multi-millionaire?" the Consul asked curiously.

"I shouldn't think so," was the doubtful reply. "Money is not a thing one talks about, and I do not think she knows any Americans."

"Do you know the young lady's age?"

"Twenty-five."

"Was she born in Russia?"

"Born at one of their country places there. Came away when she was five years old. Lived in Paris most of the time since."

"She must bring identification papers or her passport," Mr. Haverley said, "and so must you. Now, can I have a word with you on my own?"

"Go right ahead," Mark invited. "Why not?"

"I am not surprised to hear that you are giving up the International Bureau," the Consul said gravely. "The whole of Nice is talking about your establishment. I

had a cable this morning from Washington about half a yard long. I should have been compelled to come and see you anyway to-day."

"I don't see what Washington has got to worry about," Mark observed.

"I don't think they quite understand your connection with Cheng," Mr. Haverley confided.

"They don't need to."

"Is Mr. Cheng a philanthropic pacifist?"

"He is an idealist and he is just as keen upon the abolition of war as I am," Mark assured his listener. "But, above all things in the world he is a Chinaman. When Japan made that colossal blunder and tried to seize the Philippines they gave China the first chance she has had for many generations of coming into her own again. Cheng is the one man to help her. There will be some startling news for all the world before long, Mr. Haverley, but we are not talking just at the moment."

"Other people," the Consul remarked drily, "seem to be doing the talking."

"Does it matter much?" Mark asked. "We have powerful friends, you know. The French authorities know all about us."

"Do they?"

"Anyway," Mark concluded, rising to his feet, "I came here to get married, not to talk politics. However, as we have arrived so far, I will tell you this, sir. We have perhaps gone the limit at the Bureau. We have been obliged to. It will work out all right but we have finished down here. Half my instruments have already been despatched and the other half are being packed, and our staff is melting away. We are transferring our energies to another field."

"Perhaps you are wise. I am going to be quite frank with you, Mark. For your age you are an important figure in the world and everyone realises that you are one of the Council of Seven who are likely at any time to offer civilisation a great surprise. At the same time, even in Washington you seem to have created a certain feeling of uneasiness. Everyone knows that you are responsible for the presence of a large number of American ex-service men in the Chinese Army and Flying Corps. It is also believed that you have lent China a great deal of money, most of which has been spent upon munitions of war."

"I shall not deny either of those charges," Mark said, "but even if I were to admit their whole truth, I should ask you to believe that both Cheng and myself are working for one thing only, and that we are out to avoid bloodshed, rather than to encourage it."

"I shall continue to speak frankly," Mr. Haverley went on. "No one doubts your ultimate aims, but there is an idea, not in Washington only, that you have been living with your head too much in the clouds and that Mr. Cheng, a very brilliant man, I understand, is a trifle unscrupulous."

Mark, who had sat down again, was showing signs of impatience.

"Does this gossip really matter?" he asked a little coldly.

"I am no windbag and you know it," was the firm rejoinder. "I am leading up to something. The Soviet have sent over one of their own Council and a posse of detectives to look for their missing leader, Retsky. I am breaking a confidence, Mark, and I shall have to make peace with my conscience afterwards. They are coming straight to Nice to start their enquiries."

Mark folded his arms and leaned back in his chair.

"Well?"

"A few minutes ago, you said that your ally, Prince Cheng, was an idealist. He is also a pacifist. He wants peace for the world. So do you. We all know that this Russian had different ideas. There is no reason why one should not speak frankly about him. He was a man of doubtful character. He was a hindrance, a menace to any great pacifist movement that could be conceived. You see what I am driving at, Mark?"

"I hear what you say."

"Now, you have come here this morning to tell me that you are going to marry the Princess Catherine Oronoff. I knew her before you, Mark. Do you ever talk politics with her?"

"Very seldom. The motto of the Bureau is 'silence.'"

"Catherine Oronoff is the good angel of the whole colony of Russian refugees here," the Consul continued, "and I can assure you of my own knowledge that there are a great many. She attends their meetings every week, talks to them, shares, I believe, to some extent in their wistful patriotism. They still love Russia, these people. The Princess, as you told me just now, is one of the leading figures in your Bureau."

"And then?" Mark asked.

He was looking very grim, this tall young man with the thoughtful, but deeply lined face. The freckles seemed to have disappeared. His eyes were hard.

"Nothing more for the present. I leave it at that, Mark. Go away and think it over. All I will say is this: If you are going to marry the Princess Oronoff, the sooner you do it and take her and yourself away from Nice the better."

Mark rose to his feet. It was a small room in which they had been seated and he seemed for a moment or two to have become dominant, almost threatening, especially as he stood with a frown upon his face looking down at the Consul, a man of small and delicate stature. His momentary anger, however, passed. He held out his hand.

"I am much obliged to you, sir, for the warning," he said. "I will be seeing you, then, at about two-thirty."

"I will be waiting for you, Mark," Mr. Haverley promised.

* * * * *

Mark left the Consulate in a somewhat curious frame of mind. Nothing that he had been told was news to him. He had known from the first that the whole of Catherine's interest outside the Bureau was devoted to visits upon and the furtherance of various schemes to help the refugees from her country. He appreciated, even admired her attitude. He had only within the last few hours looked forward with delight to the time when he might offer his help. The fact that the Russian Government was deeply concerned at the disappearance of its leader was only natural, and he had even heard a hint of the coming of the Soviet envoys. Yet, for some reason or other, the Consul's whole attitude had been marked with a sort of nervous anxiety which, although he was by no means hypersensitive, had left him with a vague sense of uneasiness which he found it difficult to shake off…He called in at the bank where he was received with respect, almost with awe, possibly due to the fact that he was by far its largest depositor. He made an

appointment for later in the day and afterwards strolled to the flower market and watched the string of lorries issuing all the time from the back gates of the Bureau laden with cases of machinery for the steamers down in the port. He even went as far as the Quay and watched the cranes at work loading. At half-past eleven he returned to the Bureau. There seemed to be a sense of emptiness about the place as he made his way down the spacious corridors. He met a few of the employees, who greeted him respectfully, but the main waiting room contained only a few casual callers. His first real thrill of the morning came when he entered Catherine's office and found her seated at her desk with a pile of papers before her. She was alone and she welcomed him with a little laugh which sounded like music. Her eyes seemed still filled with the light of the night before, her hands were outstretched towards him.

"You are late," she complained. "Quick—someone may come in!"

He laid the huge bunch of violets he had been carrying on the desk and held her for a moment in his arms.

"It was getting so hard to work here," she confided, "because I was hoping all the time that you would come. Nothing has changed?"

"Nothing will ever change," he assured her. "Except your name," he added a moment afterwards. "At half-past two this afternoon you will be Catherine Humberstone."

She gripped at his hands again.

"It is not possible," she murmured happily.

"Well, the Consul says so. Where is that fellow Cheng? He will have to be a witness."

"I expect he will be in directly. Sit down and have a cigarette while I finish these letters. Oh!"

The door had opened and Mr. Cheng entered. He made his usual formal bow to Catherine and nodded to Mark. He came across the room to them, light-footed yet deliberate, as usual, in all his movements.

"I was just going to look for you," Mark told him. "Catherine Oronoff and I have a favour to ask."

Catherine's wonderful composure seemed for a moment to have left her. There was a distinct blush upon her cheeks as she glanced across at Mark. Cheng looked from one to the other. Something in the man appeared to be changed. He seemed to have drawn himself aloof.

"What can there be that you and Catherine Oronoff wish to tell me?" he demanded.

"Nothing so very extraordinary," Mark replied. "We've fixed up to get married at half-past two—that's all. We want you to be a witness."

There was something about the brief silence that followed which seemed to Mark more sinister, more disconcerting than any spoken words. The aristocrat of gentle speech and gracious manners seemed to have changed into a cold figure of stone. There was an icy finality about his words.

"The marriage," he pronounced, "is utterly and entirely impossible."

Chapter XXVI

Perhaps for the first time in his life Mark knew what it was to feel the fire of a furious uncontrollable anger leading him on towards madness. He moved a step nearer to Cheng and there was murder in his eyes. It was because the moment seemed so full of deadly possibilities that Catherine, with an effort, sprang from her chair and stood by his side. She caught hold of his arm and held him tightly. Cheng remained motionless. Not a muscle of his body or, it seemed, of his face had moved. Only his eyes were filled with a sudden sadness.

"Mark!" she begged. "Mark! My dear—he cannot mean it! Mr. Cheng," she went on, turning towards him, "how can you say anything so terrible? What have you to do with Mark and me?"

Mark's blind fury was passing. He found he could control his speech.

"Answer that question, Cheng," he demanded. "What right have you to come between us? How dare you stand there and tell us that our marriage is impossible?"

"I am to blame," Mr. Cheng admitted. "I owed you my entire confidence, Mark, and I withheld some part of it."

"There is no situation you could create nor any arguments you could use which would keep Catherine and me apart," Mark insisted passionately. "What have you to do with it, anyway? Who gave you the right to interfere between us? Have you lost your senses, Cheng?"

Mr. Cheng remained aloof, sphinxlike, as it seemed to both of them in those first few minutes—entirely inhuman.

"I will explain," he said. "I should have foreseen this, or the possibility of it. I am sorry."

Mark was rough, almost brutal, in his speech. He felt himself hating the man who had been his close friend for fifteen years. Catherine's embrace had soothed him only so far that he was able to control his actions.

"It would have been better," Cheng continued, "if I had taken you both into my confidence. I am, as you know, a somewhat silent person. Some of the schemes I have built up in my mind I have never spoken of to any living creature. I shall now tell you of one of them which has been with me ever since I spent those two years in Russia."

"You were there so long as that?" Catherine murmured.

"Two years and a month. Always under another name, always on my guard, always in danger of my life. I shall tell you what I believe to be the truth, that no man alive to-day has seen so much of and understands so well the Russian—shall I use the English phrase and say, the Russian 'man in the street'? I do not mean the wealthy tradesman, not the man who has battened upon these changed conditions or who enjoys the robes of authority, but the Russian, that great class starting with the farmer and the industrial worker and ending with the peasant, that is where, if any of the soul of Russia survives, it is to be found. I know what they want. I know what must come to Russia to set her free. It is all planned. It is

all inevitable. It will come, Mark. It will come, Catherine Oronoff. You could not stop it if you would—nor I. We simply have to bow our heads."

Catherine, still clinging to Mark's arm, was listening intently to every word. The man by her side was filled only with bitter impatience.

"Russia can be saved and will be saved," Cheng proceeded, "but in one way only. She will be saved by the return of some form of monarchical government."

Catherine's exclamation was one of sheer amazement. Her eyes were fixed upon Cheng.

"The heads of the army will take the lead when they realise that thanks to the genius of your father, Mark Humberstone, and you who have followed in his footsteps, fighting is no longer of any avail. Soldiering will be an extinct profession. They will go back, those men who were to have become mercenaries, to the soil or to the factories, and the government which has overridden them for these last miserable years and trained them to face an inglorious death will exist no longer. They will have offered to them a gift which they will eagerly accept—government by a limited monarchy such as England possesses. That is part of my scheme—an inevitable part. It is founded upon a deep study of Russian psychology. They demand some form of absolute but not unlicensed autocracy. They will have it. The world at large only smiled and looked upon it as opera bouffe when Alexander the Grand Duke was proclaimed Czar of Russia in Paris some two years ago. I arranged that. It was a simple affair enough then but, although he does not know it, within twelve months Alexander's coronation will be repeated in Moscow. My great mistake has been not to have taken him, or the only woman whom the Russians would accept as their Czarina, into my confidence."

"Does Alexander know anything of this?" Catherine asked.

"Nothing," Mr. Cheng replied. "It was not wise to tell him. He has been removed from all fear of poverty, though, and he believes that the income which is paid to him comes from estates which have never been confiscated. He is living a life of dignity, but in partial seclusion."

"And the woman?" Mark demanded.

"There is only one amongst the noble families of Russia which never, in the old days of tyranny, earned the curses of even a single peasant. They were always beloved. The memory of them is venerated to-day by thousands who were once their serfs and then their dependents. That is the family of Oronoff of which Catherine Oronoff is the head."

"In Christ's name!" Mark muttered profanely.

"It was because of my plans," Cheng concluded, "that I sought out Catherine Oronoff in Paris and through my agents offered her an ample salary and protection here. I deeply regret what has happened, Mark, because you are the last person in the world upon whom I would willingly inflict pain or disappointment, but our great plan for the rebuilding of the world has started and gains momentum every hour. It must go on, like a Juggernaut. There are human beings who must suffer. There are many who will lose their lives before the new world runs smoothly."

Catherine shook her head.

"It is magnificent," she admitted reluctantly, "but it can never be. I have suffered, as every one of my race has suffered, so that I wonder sometimes that I have survived. Now I have found Mark, and I have found my new life."

There was a glow on Mark's face as he drew her closer to him.

"You hear that, Cheng?" he cried with a thrill of triumph in his tone. "I don't need to tell you how I am feeling about it. It would take a stronger power than has ever yet been born into the world to separate us. You have heard Catherine's decision from her own lips. Carry on your scheme, if you like. The scheme is all right—but Alexander will have to find another woman to rule with him."

"I do not ask you, just as I have not asked the Princess, to make any sacrifice or to come to any decision," Cheng reminded him gravely. "The fate which governs us all will take that into her keeping."

"Fate has already decided," was the emphatic rejoinder. "At half-past two this afternoon Catherine will become Mrs. Mark Humberstone. You can go somewhere else to find your Czarina."

"It is unfortunate that you should have made any such plans, Mark," Cheng regretted, "but this marriage is an impossibility."

"Have you appointed yourself my guardian or Catherine's?" Mark demanded with a calmness which surprised himself.

"I am not your guardian," was the suave reply. "I never pretended to be. There is without doubt much affection between you and Catherine Oronoff. That very affection should make you pause. What have you to offer, Mark, to compare with the happiness which Catherine Oronoff will feel when she rules over the great kingdom of her subjects, when she knows that she is beloved by all of them for bringing back happiness and prosperity to her country? What life have you to offer compared with that?"

"The life you are imagining may turn out to be a fairy story. What I offer her is real, and that she knows."

"Mine is no fairy story. It is a prophecy."

"And you the self-appointed prophet?" Mark scoffed.

"Why not?" Cheng asked calmly. "There are many of my race during the last few thousand years who have sent out their message to the world. Many who have lived and died with the flame of inspiration always alight in their souls. We speak of what lies outside our actual knowledge in these modern places, in strange clothes and an atmosphere foul with men's evil lives, but we remain sometimes not of this life although we are in it. The things which I promise you will come to pass. Catherine here is destined to be Czarina of Russia and if she listens to my words that is what she will become."

Mark was standing still with his arm round Catherine's shoulder. He stooped and kissed her forehead.

"Listen, Cheng," he said, "we won't argue. You were always something of a dreamer but you are not going to get away with this. I am not a miracle worker or an illusionist, but here are some plain facts for you. This is the girl whom I am going to marry and if anyone tries to take her away from me he will pay the price. You know yourself what that will be—we have worked together for seven years, I to breathe life into this legacy left me by my father, you, with also I believe a genuine love for peace in your heart, to walk in step with me because at the same time you could restore the fallen fortunes of your country. These are plain words instead of allegories, but I am right so far, am I not?"

"Quite right."

“Very well,” Mark went on. “I am willing to continue that partnership. I am willing to guarantee all that I have promised. I will render powerless any army that confronts you, or any limb of it. The great army we have built up will be for show only, because fighting will not be possible. When that is realised by the world there must be peace. That is the end of our campaign together, is it not?”

“It is our goal.”

“Very well. Now we come to this. I am a practical American, and destiny, fatalism and those shadowy philosophies, which in their way are wonderful, do not come into my scheme of life. You have told me that I shall not marry Catherine Oronoff. Interfere between us successfully and I break our compact. I break my faith with others who have trusted me. I withdraw every American soldier and instructor from your armies, and I stop the supplies which alone could keep them in being. Look the matter in the face, Cheng. I am not underrating you. You are a great schemer and a fine politician, you have insight and genius and you have awakened a spirit in your nation which no one else could ever have called out. Yet you cannot carry out this scheme without me, and out of it I go if you make the slightest movement towards separating Catherine and me. I shall succeed in the ultimate object of my life but I shall succeed in my own way. Is that clear?”

The time had come when Cheng at last showed signs of feeling. He looked at Mark in an almost bewildered fashion. Incredulity was written in his face.

“It seems a foolish question to ask a man with your intellect, Mark Humberstone,” he said, “but are these serious words of yours? Together we stand upon the threshold of recreating the earth and you threaten to withdraw for a woman’s sake, one particular woman, just because fate has decreed that you should lose her.”

“She happens to be my woman,” Mark answered firmly, “and I am not going to lose her.”

Catherine was still clinging to him but it was plain that she, too, was suffering. She would have interposed but Cheng raised his hand.

“But Mark,” he persisted, “do you not understand? I know these Russians. A Czar alone would never strike the right note. There is no other family so beloved throughout the whole of Russia as the Oronoffs. Catherine is the one possible saviour of her country. Russia from next year onward will be climbing step by step. Soon she will be holding out her arms to those miserable exiles whom you find in every city in Europe. She will gather back all her children. Catherine will have brought happiness to millions. You think nothing of this? It is a small thing?”

“It is all a picture of what may happen,” Mark answered. “It savours too much of fantasy. You waste your breath, Cheng. You come of a race who don’t see life as we see it. The woman we care for means everything to us. For me Catherine is the only woman, and I am not giving her up.”

He felt her fingers digging into his arm. He looked down and saw that she was trembling. She met the question in his eyes bravely.

“I am not asking you for myself, Catherine,” he begged, “but tell Cheng that he is wasting his breath.”

“I think he knows it,” Catherine said, looking courageously across at the grave, motionless figure. “I shall keep my word to Mark because I love him and I could love no one else. What you say,” she went on, “sounds wonderful but, after all, it is

a vision and it is a great and wonderful fact in my life that Mark and I love one another. You must find another bride for Alexander."

"I am answered," was the almost inaudible reply.

Again for a moment there was that look of almost childish incredulity in Cheng's face. It was as though he failed to understand the sense of the words to which he had been listening. His silence possessed strange qualities. It was as though he were waiting for something to happen. Mark passed his hand through Catherine's arm.

"We will say au revoir, Cheng," he concluded. "If you take my advice you will remember that east and west can never completely meet. We have gone a long way together. There has been give and take on both sides. I have never uttered a word of reproach to you. I never remember one from you. In a way I suppose you have a finer spirit than either of us. Self sacrifice is part of your creed. I am afraid it is not mine. I am glad it is not Catherine's. Think it over and if you change your mind—half-past two at the American Consulate."

"I will remember," Cheng promised.

"I think," Mark suggested, as Catherine and he, half-an-hour later, sat outside a café at the far end of the Promenade and sipped their cocktails, "that I shall drive you away somewhere into the hills—St. Paul, say—for lunch and then take you straight to the Consulate."

She laughed at him.

"My dear," she exclaimed, "you do not really suppose that I am going to be married in my office frock?"

"You look sweet enough," he told her. "Somehow or other I don't fancy letting you go into that Bureau again."

She shook her head.

"You need not mind that," she assured him. "Nothing will happen to me, I promise you. And then Nadia, my maid, is there—my old nurse really. She would never forgive me if I went off without a word."

"You don't mean to tell me that you have a wedding dress waiting for you?"

"Well, I have a frock I have never worn," she acknowledged, "and a new and quite delightful fur. I hope you will think I look nice. I am certainly not going to be married like this—unless you insist."

"I suppose," he yielded, "that this is the one day in your life on which you must have your own way!"

"Then I also demand another cocktail," she laughed. He summoned a waiter and gave the order.

"My compliments to your barman, Henri. He has the touch—or perhaps anything would taste good to-day. What a morning!"

"Marvellous," Catherine assented.

Before them the Baie des Anges stretched, a glittering expanse of deep blue with tiny little specks of white in the far distance. A pleasant breeze was blowing. The passers-by seemed to Mark curiously human and pleasant. They brought with them an atmosphere of everyday life, DUMB GODS SPEAK of contented and cheerful minds. The tragic interlude at the Bureau was forgotten—by Catherine as well as Mark. It seemed to have slipped out of their lives. They were enfolded in the gorgeous present. Yet the minutes sped away. Their glasses were empty, the

stream of passers-by grew thinner as the hour for déjeuner arrived. Catherine rose lightly to her feet.

"And now?"

"I am going back with you," he said, as he paid his bill with an amazing pourboire and afterwards handed her into the car. "I shall be within a few yards watching your door like a dog."

She laughed—as gaily as though no cloud even for a moment had hovered over this perfect morning.

"You need not worry," she assured him. "Mr. Cheng has gone to pay his farewell visit of ceremony upon the Mayor. I believe he is to lunch there. You know how careful he is on all those matters of etiquette. He would face assassination at any time sooner than not pay a formal call where it was expected."

"Then I shall take the risk of making myself a little more like a bridegroom," Mark decided.

Chapter XXVII

"Everything goes according to plan," Mark announced joyfully as he filled Catherine's glass with the white wine of the country and watched the arrival of the chicken. "We have an hour for lunch, half-an-hour to dawdle and half-an-hour to get to the Consulate."

"Wonderful," she murmured. "I always said that you were a born administrator, Mark. You should turn your chair a few inches and look down in the valley. There is a meadow there where the jonquils are growing wild just like the cowslips in England."

"I can see everything I want to see in the world without turning my head," he told her. "Of course, I am getting balmy, but then it is just one day out of a lifetime—"

"And I never dreamed that it would come," she whispered.

"It wouldn't if I had left you with Cheng much longer. You're not sorry, Catherine?"

"Should I be here if I were?" she asked, smiling across at him, just the one sort of smile he was aching to see upon her lips at that particular moment.

"We will do plenty for your country," he assured her eagerly, "as soon as things are really settling down. You shall buy back any one of your country places that you like and we will re-establish the people on the land. You will be able to do almost as much for Russia as though you were its Czarina."

"Are you really so frightfully rich, Mark?"

"Hatefully. It is not I who am responsible. It is the lawyers who patented every little thing my father invented and then, of course, the Humberstone television—although we have not given the whole of that away—has been a huge success. The money comes rolling in and there is scarcely anyone to share it."

"What on earth shall we do about it all?" she laughed. "Why, I had to make my own frocks and hats until Mr. Cheng came along and engaged me for the Bureau. I

often wondered," she went on, "why he was so firm about my coming. Now I know."

"I am sorry for old Cheng," Mark declared. "Serves him right for having been so secretive. That was the Grand Duke who spoke to you at Monte Carlo, wasn't it?"

"Of course it was. He is my cousin. I have known him, although we have not met so very often, all my life. I was present at Versailles two years ago when he was crowned Czar. It seemed to me a very empty ceremony then."

"What is he like?"

"Well, he is fifteen years older than I am," Catherine replied, "and I am afraid that when things were so terribly hopeless and there seemed to be no position he could hold in life he was a little careless. He drank too much and spent too much of his time in this part of the country. I believe that he is quite capable of changing all that, though. As soon as Mr. Cheng thinks that the time has come to give him a hint he will be a different man."

"Cheng is quite the most extraordinary personage I have ever known," Mark reflected. "I don't feel really intimate with him now, although while we were in college we practically lived together. You are not afraid of him, are you, Catherine?"

"I would not dare to say that I was not—just a little," she confessed. "Remember, I have seen a great deal of his life and watched his methods. I have seen him overcome so many difficulties. I was never so surprised in my life as when he brought Hou Hsi down from that Château in the mountains, with her retinue of ladies-in-waiting and priests."

"He is queer about women," Mark observed. "It is not that I have ever heard him speak disrespectfully of them but a woman never seems to mean to him anything except the most insignificant pawn upon the board. He married Hou Hsi because she was the direct descendant of the great Empress whom all China revered, and with her as his wife he could obtain a quicker hold upon the people. He evidently sought you out because you were an Oronoff, the most beloved family in Russia, as he told us himself, and therefore all the more likely to draw the people back to their old sympathies. Apart from you two I have never heard the name of a woman pass his lips, or ever seen him look at one as though she were a human being."

"Whatever happens to us in the future," Catherine meditated, "we are three strange people, Mark. I, since I left school, have had only one thought—Russia. My life has been given to working for poor exiles, trying to help as many as I could and dreaming that some day she might once more become a great country. And you—your whole life has been spent in trying to be faithful to your father's legacy. I heard your name years before I ever dreamed of seeing you. It was you who in some mysterious way were to abolish armaments and bring peace into the world. And there is Prince Cheng who, since the days when he left China as a boy and came to the West, has done nothing but build up his great scheme of bringing China back to her place amongst the nations of the world. It was your father who made his dream possible. I like to think the story is true that from your laboratories at Beaumont Park you sent a message of warning to the Mikado that if he touched any American possession his fleet would perish."

"It is true," Mark acknowledged. "My father was great enough to realise that he could never convince the world unless he gave them definite proof, but it would

have broken his heart had he been alive when the disaster happened. He hated human suffering. They all say that he was never the same man after he realised that he held entirely in his own hands the control over the lives or deaths of millions."

She shivered as she pushed away her coffee cup and took his arm.

"Finished for the day, Mark," she cried. "No more horrors. Here we have found our way into the very garden of life and everything is wonderful."

Illustration:

All the throbbing drama of a world in suspense was swept away.

They walked slowly along the ramparts and back again. They spoke no more of those things which lay beyond their vision. All the throbbing drama of a world in suspense was swept away into the background. She leaned upon his arm and they talked in odd snatches. They breathed in content. They gave themselves up to happiness. Mark had a sudden idea, as they made their way reluctantly back on to the terrace.

"Catherine," he whispered, leaning down. "Why not here—afterwards? We have our dressing-cases with us." He waved his hand towards the hotel.

"People do stay here," he went on. "Many artists I know have lived here for a time."

"I think it would be the most wonderful thing that ever happened," she replied.

They found Madame. Monsieur, too, joined the trio. They all trooped upstairs. There was one little suite—two simple, plainly furnished rooms, spotlessly clean, with beds which Madame could assure the world were as good as any in France—a view unsurpassable, air the finest to be had, unless one mounted to the hills where it was still cold. The bathroom between them was a little crude but there was plenty of water. The rooms were promised next week to a great English artist. Till then they were free. The whole affair was arranged in a few minutes. When they left, the dark-visaged chambermaid was setting out Catherine's toilet things upon the table of the room which she had chosen and Mark's dressing-case and small trunk, which had been fetched in from the car, had been opened out in the adjoining apartment. Madame was busy filling bowls with flowers, dragging out sheets and towels from her lavender chest. Monsieur had made his way down to the cellar where there remained still a few bottles of a famous vintage, and Mark and Catherine, alone together in Mark's wonderful Packard coupé, were flying down the zigzag lanes towards the broad main road which led to Nice.

* * * * *

The Consulate in the Boulevard Victor Hugo was looking very gay indeed that afternoon. Both its flags were floating gently in the breeze and two enormous bowls of flowers graced the small landing table. Mr. Haverley, a little flurried and distinctly nervous, was wearing the black-tailed coat of ceremony and had a flower in his buttonhole. A very beautiful nosegay of white roses tied up with white ribbon were in a vase upon his desk. The two clerks who were to act as witnesses each wore a buttonhole. The only dour face in the room was the face of the Russian maid, Nadia, who sat on a hard chair in a corner waiting.

“A long time,” Mr. Haverley remarked to his head clerk, “since we had anything of this sort. Nearly six months, I see,” he went on, turning over the pages of a thick volume which stood upon the desk. “Very simple, though. Quite different from what it used to be. All over in a few minutes. You see where you sign, both of you?”

The clerk nodded. His companion hurried to the door and threw it open. Catherine, in a very becoming grey frock and chinchilla coat, entered the room, a most entrancing vision. Mark, with his hand upon her arm, led her to the desk behind which Mr. Haverley was standing.

“Punctual to the minute, my dear young people,” the latter said, welcoming them. “I am very happy to see you both. I have two of my clerks here for witnesses in case you found any difficulty, Mark.”

The young man smiled.

“That’s very good of you, sir,” he acknowledged. “As a matter of fact, except for the ring, I had forgotten all about these trivial details.”

“I must warn you,” Mr. Haverley went on, “that this is a very prosaic business. Nothing in the nature of a ceremony or anything of that sort. I shall just read a line or two from this book, ask you two simple questions and the whole thing is pretty well over. No need to rush it, you know. If either of you are nervous, for instance, we can gossip for a few minutes.”

Catherine raised her eyes and he saw that what he had taken for a sudden fit of shyness was the one emotion which is unmistakable. It was absolute and blissful happiness which shone out of her eyes.

“I do not think that I am nervous,” she said. “There is no need to wait for me.”

“Or me,” Mark echoed, producing the ring from his waistcoat pocket.

“Very well, then,” the Consul began, reopening the volume which lay on the desk before him. “I shall read to you—”

He broke off and looked towards the slowly opening door with a frown upon his forehead. One of the waiting clerks leaped up and moved across the room. The man who had entered was tall and exceedingly thin. His fine features were wasted as though with illness. He wore a long grey beard. His clothes had seen better days. He had rather the air of a person who was walking in a dream. When the clerk addressed him brusquely he made no sign of having heard. Mr. Haverley leaned forward with an angry exclamation framed upon his lips. It was never uttered. He remained dumb—staring at the new¬comer. Mark followed suit, but the intrusion meant nothing to him. The man was a stranger. Then he looked across the room and saw a queer thing. Nadia, the Russian maid, was on her knees. Catherine at last caught the sense of something unusual. She, too, turned round. A little cry broke from her lips. Before Mark realised what she was about to do she was on her knees with her hands clasped and her head downcast. The newcomer raised his hand and there was something in the droop of his long wasted fingers entirely ecclesiastical. Mr. Haverley was puzzled.

“You wish to attend—er—the ceremony, sir?” he asked.

The other shook his head.

“There must be no ceremony,” he said.

Mark swung round—six foot three of vigorous, passionate manhood. The angry words died away upon his lips, however. The man who had spoken was as tall as he himself, but a thin, wasted figure, a man apparently of great age.

"You, sir," the stranger continued, "and you others do not know who I am. Permit me to explain. I am the Lord Patriarch and Archbishop of the Greek Church, who escaped from Moscow many years ago by a miracle. Since then I have done what I could to keep my fellow countrymen together. In these later years I have received the help of the Princess Oronoff. Princess, be so kind as to rise to your feet. I am not very strong and it is best for me to say quickly what I have to say."

Catherine obeyed him, clutching at Mark, who passed his arm around her.

"Father," she confided, "this is the man whom I have chosen to be my husband."

"God wills it otherwise, my daughter," he rejoined. "You are the one hope we, the lost creatures of a struggling race, have of ever returning to our own country, setting up once more our own religion and through that religion relighting the torch of spirituality which, alas, the heathen and unbelievers have trodden underfoot. You, Catherine Oronoff, are consecrated. You can wed with no stranger of any foreign race. You are to wed the Czar of all the Russias. You are in the future—I know it, for I have seen it—you are to be the mother of your country."

"I cannot," Catherine faltered. "It is too late, father. I love this man. I can do nothing."

The Archbishop looked at her wearily, pityingly.

"My poor child," he said, "what has your earthly love to do with a matter like this? Never any woman for nearly two thousand years was called upon to make so holy a sacrifice. Your hesitation even would be a sin. Pardon me—for one moment I pause."

Catherine, who was as pale as death, shook her head. It seemed to Mark that her body, which was leaning now towards his for support, was growing colder within his arms.

"You will abandon this marriage, Catherine Oronoff," the Patriarch continued. "It is not for you, almost the last of your great line, to enter upon a sacred ceremony amidst surroundings such as these. You have been mad. The madness must pass. When you are given in marriage, it will be in the Kremlin to Alexander and you will hear the acclaiming cry of millions in your ears. I shall not live to see that day but it will be soon."

It seemed to them all that he swayed unsteadily upon his feet. The Russian maid rose from her knees, hurried to him, placed a chair, into which he sank.

"I am a feeble old man, Catherine Oronoff," he went on. "I rose from my bed when I heard of this terrible thing. When I go back it may be to die, but before I go you must give me your word."

Catherine's arms were like ropes around Mark's neck. She clung to him as though it were his will, his brain, the power of both she needed, as well as his protection.

"I will work for Russia all my days," she pleaded, "and my husband—he is young, but a famous man. He, too, will help. I will do your bidding in all things save one. I will marry no one but the man I have chosen."

For a moment or two the situation seemed dissolved. Mr. Haverley leaned forward.

"Archbishop," he urged, "believe me you have all our sympathy but I suggest to you, sir, that the affair between these two young people has gone too far for interference. They love each other. You cannot ask this young woman to throw away this happiness. After all, you yourself would teach us that marriage is a sacrament and not a bargain. You would do better, sir, if you would wait while I say these few words and afterwards sign the book."

The Archbishop remained silent. Mark's voice, as he turned towards him, was unexpectedly gentle.

"Together, I promise you, sir, that Catherine Oronoff and I will do great things for Russia. We will live there if she wishes, and may I be pardoned if I tell you that I am richer than any one of the Czars who ever ruled over the country. Money, I know, counts for nothing in a spiritual sense, but I can bring the farmers back to their homes, I can build up the homes of the peasants, I can replant and re-establish great tracts of the country. I will work side by side with Catherine Oronoff in her cause, for her country, to bring her happiness, but she must be my wife. There must be no interference between us."

Catherine held out her hands.

"My father," she prayed, "you have heard what he says. We will keep our word."

"This marriage," the Patriarch pronounced slowly, "must not take place."

There was a brief silence. Then Mr. Haverley turned towards Catherine.

"Princess," he asked, "is it your wish that we proceed?"

She felt the sudden clutch of Mark's fingers warming and encouraging her.

"Yes," she answered.

The Consul looked across the room.

"You hear, sir," he said. "It is my duty to continue. Your guardianship over this young woman is merely a spiritual one. You have no power to interfere. If you do not wish to withdraw, then I ask you please to refrain from any further interruption."

Very slowly the intruder rose to his feet. Underneath the frock coat he was wearing was a long black cassock, from whose loose pocket he drew out a small black volume. Catherine's eyes were fastened upon it, and she began to shiver. Nadia, still on her knees, crossed herself.

"Catherine Oronoff," the Archbishop began, "if this is to be the last of the sacraments which my lips utter, I shall leave this world feeling indeed that I am forsaken by the Powers above as well as by my children below, yet it is my duty, and I tell it to you. It is my duty to warn you that unless you abandon this marriage, I, in the name of the Holy Church, must place upon you the ban of excommunication. You know the sentence. Am I to read it? Will you thrust this awful task upon a dying man?"

For the first time, Catherine's arms grew limp. She leaned away from Mark. She covered her face with her hands.

"You must not," she moaned. "You must not."

"Leave this room with me, my daughter, then, and tell this young man that the marriage is impossible. Tell him this or I read."

Catherine swayed irresolutely upon her feet. Mark was standing with folded arms. She made one little movement towards him and stopped. His arms were ready but she shrank back. The Archbishop's voice, incoherent though it was, seemed to be muttering a prayer. Nadia, who had hastened to her mistress' side, led her towards the door.

"Catherine," Mark begged, "you will not leave me—you are not afraid? No man can speak for God—"

"Save only the man whom God has appointed," the Archbishop interposed solemnly.

Mark took one mad step forward. Mr. Haverley, who had left his place, checked him.

"You had better leave her alone, Mark," he advised. "You cannot interfere. An old man near death—you cannot tear her away. You must wait. This thing has come as a shock to her. Let her get over it. It would be better—"

They were at the door. Mark took her cold hand, which was hanging limply down, and raised it to his lips.

"You won't leave me, Catherine!" he implored.

She turned her head. The agony in her face brought tears into his eyes.

"Dear Mark," she pleaded, "forgive me."

Chapter XXVIII

IT was twenty minutes past three when Mark pressed the starting button of his car outside the Consulate in the Boulevard Victor Hugo. It was between eight and nine o'clock that night when, with something of the air of a somnambulist, he strode through the corridors of the fast emptying Bureau and found Cheng alone in his private reception room. The latter laid down the map he had been studying and looked at his friend with some concern.

"I am very sorry," he said.

"To hell with your sorrow!" was the fierce retort.

Cheng shook his head slowly. His eyes were fixed upon Mark, who was scarcely recognisable. His clothes were stained with oil and grease, his hair was wildly dishevelled.

"Nevertheless, I am sorry," he repeated, and there was perhaps as much feeling in his voice as Mark had ever heard there before.

"It was you who went to the Archbishop?" the latter demanded.

"It was I."

"If I had met you an hour ago I should have shot you."

"I do not think so," Cheng said. "You are a strong man, Mark, and you have a strong man's passions and a strong man's anger, but you have also a brain. If I had come between you and Catherine Oronoff—forgive the improbability—as a rival, then we might have fought. It would have been just that we fought. But I did not. Your marriage with Catherine Oronoff would have destroyed one of the props of my scheme—you must not be angry with me if I say our scheme. You will listen

one moment, please?" he went on, as though he saw the fierce words framing themselves upon Mark's lips. "A reborn Russia is necessary if we are to give actual life to the dreams and hopes which we have nourished and cherished together."

Mark sank into a chair.

"I cannot argue," he confessed. "I am weary."

Cheng touched a concealed bell with his foot.

"You have been in the mountains?"

"Over them—beyond. Smashed my brakes on a mountain track near Sisteron and came down it at a hundred kilometres an hour. I have had a madman's drive in search of sanity."

One of Cheng's Chinese house servants was standing by his master's chair. He carried a salver in his hand. Cheng motioned him to set it down, and waved him away. He mixed a whisky and soda and carried it with some sandwiches over to Mark.

"You must eat and drink," he enjoined, "then go to your bath. Your servant is still waiting. To-morrow we will talk. See—it is many years since I have done this. I drink a whisky and soda with you. I ask nothing save that you remember that it was for The Cause."

Mark ate his sandwiches and took a long draught of his whisky and soda. Cheng raised his glass and there was the glint of a queer little smile—half wistful, half inviting—upon his lips. He waited. Mark, as though with an effort, raised his glass again and drank. Mr. Cheng set his down empty.

"I go to my apartment," he said. "We talk no more tonight. To-morrow."

Mark finished his sandwiches. He drank more whisky and soda, then made his way with weary feet to the bathroom. In an hour, he walked through to his sitting-room, in appearance at any rate, a different man. Only a very close observer would have seen those new lines in his face which had not yet disappeared.

"You will dine in, sir?" the servant asked him.

His master waved him away.

"That will be all for the night."

Mark threw himself into an easy chair. His brain was full of grotesque fancies. Once more he was tearing along those mountain roads like a madman, throwing the pebbles into the air, raising clouds of dust, swaying at the corners, skidding to the very point of catastrophe, righting himself automatically as though by a miracle, driving through the grey obscurity of the low hanging mists to emerge and see the carpet of lights below, feeling the stronger winds, as he climbed, upon his cheeks—mad, mad! That was what he had been for an hour—two hours perhaps. The crash against the wall with one wheel, the one that had dislodged the topmost stones hanging over the precipice, was what had finally sobered him. Some labourers came to his help, not one of them doubting but that it was an attempted suicide. He had filled their pockets and started off again, driven on and on until he had found himself once more in familiar places—the Bureau—Cheng—sanity!…

He walked restlessly up and down the room. He stood at the window and watched fragments of black clouds driven across the face of the moon by the rising wind. They travelled on their way across the sky and once more he looked out upon the incoming tide with its white-crested waves and listened to its sullen roar. He walked more rapidly up and down. Movement seemed a necessary part of life to

him. If only he could get tired. If only he could keep his thoughts from wandering to those glorious hours of the morning with Catherine by his side, smiling into his face, teaching him with every look and word the happiness which was so near—almost within his reach. A new charm had come as though to madden him during those last few hours, the charm of a woman subdued by a great emotion. She had cared for him. He knew it. Her eyes, her movements, her lips, that queer new timidity which seemed suddenly to have made her so reliant upon him, and him only. He thought of their luncheon, of their joyous little trip upstairs, their scarcely breathed plans, the fat servant unpacking her simple dressing-case… The room was too small. He must escape somewhere. Then a wild thought came to him, an irresistible, maddening desire to seek self-torture. Nevertheless as swiftly as it had come he yielded to it. This time he was sane enough. He remembered the key, he took his coat from the rack in the hall, he made his way carefully to the garage, took out a smaller car with scarcely a glance towards the semi-wreck with its bent mudguard and thick coating of mud and dust, backed the two-seater out and drove steadily along the Promenade des Anglais, through Cagnes once more, the pain in his heart growing as the madness decreased, up to the right, up along the winding road to the few scanty lights above, round the last corner on to the place of the Colombe d'Or. He stepped down, left the car in the shadow of the wall and crossed the terrace to the parapet. He was close to the table where they had lunched. It seemed to him that he could catch a faint torturing return of the rapture of that hour, could hear her voice, could see that sweet intense light which was shining in her eyes. What a fool! What a mad quest this pilgrimage of agony!

The waiter, a little sleepy but still on duty, came out to him.

"Monsieur will take something?" he enquired.

Monsieur ordered a bottle of wine at random. The man's stifled yawn and forced smile had their effect. He watched him disappear into the house. Then an idea came to him—the maddest idea of all. The bare thought of the Bureau was agonising. The empty places, the room where she had sat, the bed where he had slept last night and dreamed of her. He turned away from the terrace and walked towards the hotel. He took one of the candlesticks, struck a match, lit the candle and climbed the stairs. Only a few hours ago they had climbed them together arm in arm. What madness! He was like a man deliberately torturing himself, courting pain and mocking at himself. He had reached the landing. Here at least he had reached the limits of his endurance. He kept his eyes away from the opposite door. He turned the handle of his own. Everything was as he had left it except that his pyjamas were laid out upon the bed.

Illustration:
Catherine stood there on the threshold for a moment looking at him.

The room was haunted, the place was haunted! Memories tore hard enough at the heartstrings—but this! Very slowly his door had been pushed open and Catherine, in the rose coloured negligée he had caught a glimpse of in her dressing-case, stood there on the threshold for a moment looking at him. She

came quietly in. He held up his hands. It *was* madness! His was the low cry of a wounded man. She came a little nearer.

"Mark," she whispered. "You see I am here."

His arms went suddenly around her. He had stepped out of that valley of torturing dreams, if only for a second. This was reality. It was Catherine who had crept into his arms and whose lips were upraised to his. His eyes devoured her. She, too, had been suffering. Her face was almost gaunt and she was as pale as death. Fear and joy seemed mingled together in her eyes, her heart was beating madly against his.

"Mark," she faltered. "I knew that you would come. Now that you are here I am afraid…"

The fear had gone from her face when at last he drew reluctantly away. There was some expression there which baffled him, but the love was there. Mark was a man again. The madness had all passed. Life was flowing through his veins.

"What does it mean, Catherine?"

"You know—you should know—"

Her fingers were clutching feverishly at his shoulders but her head was downcast.

"It was so sudden," she went on. "Remember that before you came, and all the time since, except when I have been at the Bureau, I have been with the Archbishop. It was almost my life that—just to help to do what I could for all those suffering people and to talk with him sometimes, to hope and to pray night by night that something might change it all—that the old life might come back. I did not realise what had happened to me at first with you, Mark. When I had gone—when I had left you there I knew. It was as though someone had torn the life out of me. We went to the Chapel and he talked to me wonderfully—but his words were the words of another world out of which I had slipped. I did not belong any longer. The sweeter he was the less I seemed to feel. We prayed together, the sacristan lit the candles and we prayed, and the words seemed dead. He took me back to the home he keeps for the people who have no other. The nuns all tried to be kind. I sat there feeling that death was gripping me. When he came and told me what I was to do I did it, Mark, because all these years he and the Church and the hopes of a new world have filled my life. I obeyed. I did not realise how strong this new thing was. They left me alone. I prayed them to leave me alone and I knew that something had happened, that I did not belong any longer, that I could not go back, that I was not afraid even of anything the Church could do, and I stole away. I came here, and the only prayer that has left my lips tonight has been that you would come—and you are here."

Mark looked around the little bedroom. He felt the quivering of her arms, the wild beating of her heart, as she clung to him. His own passion was rising—fiery, tormenting with all its sweetness.

"Catherine," he asked her, "are you really so terrified of what your Archbishop threatened—of excommunication?"

"I was," she confessed. "Now I do not know. To me it was as though a man who had taken the place of God all my life had lifted a curtain and shown me a real hell. There did not seem any choice at first. I just did as he told me—as he willed. It was not until I got away that I realised I was not the same person. I realised, too,

how selfish I had been. I have given you all my love, Mark. You have given me yours. Nothing else matters. I want to make you happy."

"You have made me happier than I ever dreamed I should be again in this world," he told her.

"Well?" she whispered, her lips clinging to his.

For a moment he felt that he was weakening. The waves of torment were breaking over his head.

"Catherine—"

"Mark—my love."

"Will you do what I ask?"

"Anything you choose. Command me."

"Put on your coat," he begged. "We are going to sit down at that table and talk."

She drew slowly away. Her eyes seemed full of wonder. "You do not like any longer our little rooms, Mark?"

"Some day we will spend a month here," he answered.

"Just now I want to talk to you—down there."

"It is not that you are angry with me?" she pleaded.

He stooped down and kissed her very tenderly, kissed her so that a new expression of peace came into her face.

"Catherine," he said, "I shall never be angry with you in my life. I shall love you as long as we live. I shall protect you and try to show you how we can be happy together. You will never lose me, Catherine. Do you hear that? And I never mean to let you go," he continued. "Now that you understand that I want for a time to talk seriously."

She looked down at her bare feet.

"Of course I am terribly cold standing here," she confided. "Wait—just five minutes."

* * * * *

Back on the terrace. She sat by his side and made him put his arm around her. They sent for the waiter and had him open the bottle of wine which Mark had ordered and which was still upon the table. He looked at them as though they were mad, but he obeyed.

"Now for our serious talk," Mark began.

"I am here to do your will," she answered.

"This afternoon you were cruel. You were carried away by this terror, you were moved by your affection for the Archbishop and all that he represented in your life. You forgot yourself. You forgot me."

"It is true," she sighed. "But now—"

"The pendulum swung back," he went on firmly. "Tonight you are so full of remorse that you are too kind. You imagine me as I was—hurt and miserable—and you want to atone. It was your sweetness and generosity which brought you here."

"It was my love for you," she pleaded, with a passionate break in her voice. "It is my own choice. No one else will suffer."

"The Patriarch, who after all is next door to a saint, would suffer," he pointed out. "It might even kill him. You would suffer afterwards. I would suffer because in my greed for happiness and my love for you I had taken more than I should."

“Mark,” she protested with a queer, dubious little smile upon her lips. “You are talking to me all of a sudden as though you were the Archbishop himself—instead of my lover!”

He smiled and patted her hand tenderly.

“Some day soon I shall make it very clear indeed which of the two I am, sweetheart!”

“But surely I may give myself if I desire when I choose! I belong to myself, do I not?”

“Not altogether,” he told her. “You belong to some extent to what you have built up in your past life of self sacrifice, to that weary and tired old man with one foot in the grave, and to the little circle of poor people you have kept together and to the Church you have supported.”

She sighed.

“The Patriarch is one of the saints of the world,” she confessed.

“And you are one of his children. Of course he is narrow—all zealots are. When he talked about excommunicating you, and frightened you to death, he was off the rails. I do not think he will ever do that again, Catherine. You are going to tell him to-morrow that we have agreed to wait for a little time, but you are also going to tell him that you will not marry Alexander, even though he and Cheng believe that it would be the redemption of your country. Alexander can find another wife.”

“You do not mean to give me up, then?” she asked anxiously.

“I certainly do not.”

“You are sure, quite sure that you are happy, that you will forget how hideously selfish I was? If you will not promise me that, I will not let you go away.”

He held her tightly in his arms.

“I promise,” he said firmly.

Very slowly she drew away from him. She still clasped his hands. There was a soft light in her eyes more beautiful than anything he had ever seen.

“Mark, my love,” she whispered. “You mean more to me now than anything else on earth or in heaven. You have made me happier still because of to-night. You are wonderful. I cannot say any more.”

They crossed the courtyard with its dwarf orange trees in gay green tubs. Once more he kissed her on the lips.

“Just to show,” he exclaimed, himself a little breathless as he drew away and stepped into the car, “that I am still loving you, Catherine.”

* * * * *

The moon had shaken herself free of the clouds as he drove serenely down the winding road. He caught glimpses of the meadows on either side of him, of the olive trees with their gnarled trunks dotted about here and there like grim spectres of the night, of the orchards with their fluttering wealth of blossom, of the glimmering sea beyond. Once more the world was a beautiful place.

Chapter XXIX

The Right Honourable James P. Mountain, United States Ambassador to France, received something of a shock when his first secretary, without any previous announcement, ushered Mark Humberstone into his study. He was somewhat of a stickler for etiquette and Mark's flying kit was scarcely the costume in which one paid an ambassadorial visit.

"What's the meaning of this, Harding?" he asked a trifle severely.

"I will explain if you will allow me to, sir," the secretary said. "This is Mr.—I think he is generally called Professor Mark Humberstone."

"What, Humberstone of Beaumont Park?"

"Yes, sir," Mark replied. "I am his son. I have been working down at Nice."

The ambassador rose to his feet and held out his hand.

"Your father was an old friend of mine," he acknowledged. "I have seen you before, too. A spot of trouble down in your part of the world, isn't there?"

"Well, in a sort of way there is," Mark admitted. "I have had to dodge the police all the way from Le Bourget and we reached the back entrance of the Embassy in the nick of time. I sent a wireless to Harding—we were at Harvard together—to meet me at the flying ground if he could. I have just flown up from Nice."

The ambassador's expression changed.

"It is true, then, what I have heard. You have been working at the International Bureau there?" he asked.

Mark nodded.

"Working there like a slave for about two years, sir," he admitted cheerfully.

"And got yourself into trouble, I hear."

"Our time table did not exactly work, sir."

The ambassador waved him to a seat.

"Do you want my help?"

"We certainly do," Mark admitted.

"Who are we?"

"My partner in the work I have been doing. Cheng his name is, Prince Cheng I ought to call him, I suppose, now that we are coming out into the open."

"Prince Cheng, I gather, is not an American born?" the ambassador asked, settling himself down a little more comfortably in his chair.

"He is a Chinese," Mark confided. "A descendant of one of the great Manchu families. Cheng is married to Hou Hsi, the great-great-granddaughter of the famous Empress T'zu Hsi."

"All this is very interesting," Mr. Mountain said, "but if he is in trouble I can do nothing to help Prince Cheng, whatever his antecedents may be. You, as an American citizen, of course, are different. What is it you want from me?"

"I want immunity from arrest until I have had time to explain certain things, or rather until Cheng has."

"What is the charge against you?"

"Retsky, the Soviet dictator, has disappeared from Moscow, as, of course, you know, sir. The Soviet council have appealed to the French police. They believe that he has cone to France. The French police think that he came to Nice. The authorities there believe that we are responsible for whatever may have happened to him."

"Well?"

“What we want,” Mark continued, “is to place certain facts of immense importance to the French nation and to the whole world before the Premier or the President, whichever you think best. When they have grasped them, I think that they will grant us—that is to say Prince Cheng and me—one of those special passports, laissez passers, they used to be called, which would ensure us against any police interference with our movements.”

“Can you prove that you had nothing to do with the disappearance of Retsky?” Mr. Mountain asked.

“That is rather a negative sort of business, isn’t it?” Mark pointed out. “There is no one can charge us with anything direct. Our only trouble is that a woman who was with the man supposed to be Retsky declares that the International Bureau had something to do with his disappearance.”

“And had it?”

Mark hesitated.

“Your Excellency,” he said, “I am going to ask you not to put that question for a short time. You know, don’t you, that I am Administrator of the Council of Seven, who are working on my father’s trust?”

“I do, indeed,” the ambassador replied, “and for that I, and every thinking person in the United States, admire you and wish you well.”

“I only mention this,” Mark went on, “because I think, sir, it does give us a certain right to plead for special consideration. I have already spent millions, I could almost say billions, upon the work my father left me to perform. We have reached the crucial point. We are on the very threshold of taking the whole world into our confidence. We want just time to explain ourselves and then we will answer your questions about this Retsky business or anything else we may have done that needs elucidation.”

There was a knock at the door. Very apologetically, Harding, the first secretary, presented himself once more. He moved over to the ambassador’s desk.

“Your Excellency,” he announced, “General Levissier begs earnestly for a word with you. There are two police cars outside,” he added.

Mr. Mountain rose and walked into the anteroom. He spoke on the telephone for several minutes. Harding leaned towards Mark.

“You have kind of upset the apple-cart here, Mark,” he confided. “Three Soviet officials arrived this morning by air. They have got the ear of police headquarters. I shouldn’t wonder if they hadn’t raided your Bureau by this time!”

“Nothing to raid,” Mark replied. “We cleared out several days ago.”

“That looks bad,” the other observed. “The old man has been worrying about you. The whole of France is worked up about this alliance with Russia, you know.”

“If there is a treaty,” Mark declared, “it is not worth the paper it is written on. Never mind about that, though. All we want is a few days’ time and our freedom, until we can step out into the open.”

Harding shook his head doubtfully.

“The Chief will help you all he can, I am sure,” he said, “but I tell you frankly, Mark, that the Soviet, for the first time in history, is amazingly popular here just now. The newspapers have leading articles about their thousands of aeroplanes and their perfect military equipment. They talk about nothing else in the cafés. Everyone believes that a firm alliance with the Soviet is going to save France. If

anything has happened to Retsky over here, and it got about that you and Prince Cheng were mixed up in it, there is no one could protect you for five minutes. It's rather a pity that whilst you were in the air you didn't go on as far as England."

The ambassador reappeared—an unhappy man.

"Things are very black indeed, Mr. Humberstone," he announced gravely. "Just as well to have you know that you are face to face with serious trouble. There is a woman on her way to Paris, the mistress, apparently, of this man who was supposed to be Retsky, who was present when he was shot. Your partner Cheng was there, too. He was the one who gave the order. She is in charge of a very clever commissioner from the police bureau in Nice—a fellow named Déchanel—but they will never be able to keep her quiet when she gets to Paris. Déchanel is to take her straight to Levissier. They will be here, at the latest, tomorrow morning."

Mark smiled confidently.

"By to-morrow morning," he declared, "all of France that counts won't care whether Retsky is dead or alive. They will be looking out upon a new world."

Mr. Mountain resumed his seat. His expression, however, remained entirely gloomy.

"Of course I must listen, Mr. Humberstone," he continued, "to whatever you may choose to tell me, but I must tell you that I think you are treating the situation a great deal too lightly. For the first time in my recollection—in history, I should think—the Embassy is surrounded by French gendarmes. If your friend Prince Cheng is following you here, they will arrest him and I cannot do a thing about it. It is slightly different with you, of course, but your position is not exactly an enviable one."

"If I had thought, sir," Mark went on, "that I was bringing trouble upon you by coming here, I would have stayed away. A few minutes of your time is all I am asking for now. Let me explain things my own way."

"Go right ahead, then," Mr. Mountain invited.

"You know very well," Mark continued, "that although my father was something of an idealist, he was still the most amazing scientist, not only his generation, but the whole world has ever known."

"That is true enough," Mr. Mountain admitted patiently.

"Of course, if it had not been for him I should never have been worth a snap of the fingers," Mark went on. "But I want you to believe this, sir. He left me the threads, he left me the great original idea and I have succeeded in bringing them together. You must believe me, Mr. Mountain. It was my father's brain that destroyed the whole Japanese Fleet with all their guns and planes and twenty-five thousand men. I can do more than that. I can do things to the world that no one has ever dreamed of. Now, the question is this. You see how much time we have. Very little but quite enough. Bring here into this room now or at any time you will, the two men—soldiers or statesmen—whom France can trust unreservedly. Bring them here and I will convince them that everything we have done—Cheng and I—we have done with one sole idea—the idea of realising my father's ambition and bringing peace to the world. We have run our risks and we may have to pay. We have broken the law. France can do what she likes about it. We are ready to take all that is coming to us. Neither Cheng nor I know what fear is. But listen, sir,

nothing that we have done has been done in vain. We have succeeded. There will be no more war."

The ambassador was genuinely impressed. His eyes were full of admiration as he looked across at the speaker. Mark had seemed, perhaps, in his few but passionate words, veritably inspired. The flame of truth burned in them.

"Very well, Mark," he decided. "For your own sake, as well as for your father's memory, you shall have your chance. Monsieur Châtelain, the Premier of France, and General Levissier, who is Chief of the Police now, but commanded an army corps during the war and proved himself a brilliant soldier, shall be here to-night. I will let you know as soon as the appointments are made. In the meantime don't leave this house, or you will be arrested the moment your feet cross the threshold. Levissier himself told me that, just now, frankly. He declined, too, to give you a laissez passer or any form of permit."

"He will change his mind before to-morrow," Mark declared confidently. "In the meantime, sir, may I ask Harding to send to the flying ground for my bags, and may I have a bath?"

Mr. Mountain rang the bell.

"Harding will do as you ask and hand you over to my own servant," he said. "Make yourself free of the whole place, Mark. You are a very welcome and an honoured visitor, for your own sake as well as for your father's. I cannot say more than that. From now on you must fight your own battle."

Chapter XXX

At the Café Russe, which was somewhere on the other side of the Seine and a little to the right of the long line of cafés frequented by the most independent artistic fraternity in the world, Catherine Oronoff sat at a table alone. She, too, like her late travelling companion, was wearing the clothes in which she had flown up from Nice and her appearance lacked something of its usual trim perfection. There was a cup of coffee before her and she was smoking a cigarette with obvious appreciation. She had chosen a solitary table in a retired corner and the gaunt faced proprietor, making his afternoon promenade through the rooms, only recognised her at the last moment. He hesitated and then turned back.

"Princess," he ventured, bowing low. "I am not mistaken?"

"You are not mistaken, Kreloff," she acknowledged, with a pleasant smile of recognition. "You are Ivan Kreloff, the brother of the Count Andrew Kreloff who died on the same day as my father. I am Catherine Oronoff."

Kreloff sighed.

"These are sad days, Princess, dreary days, indeed. One sees no light anywhere. One gathers no hope. Russia seems to have become a country accursed."

"There may yet be hope for her," Catherine said hopefully. "Retsky, they say, has disappeared."

"One hears strange things about that," the restaurant keeper remarked, glancing around. "The French people are greatly perturbed. There are reports that

Retsky, who was supposed to be ill at his country house near Moscow, was actually visiting the south of France under a false name and was assassinated there."

Catherine Oronoff flicked the ash from her cigarette. "Reports," she observed, "which I believe are perfectly true."

There was a gleam for a moment in the man's lack-lustre, sad brown eyes. He looked over his shoulder and searchingly round the place.

"Here in my own café I fear to discuss such matters," he confided. "Night by night we are visited by spies."

"Spies from where?"

"Some of them are from the French police. That is natural, for we have many Russian habitués who are of the old régime. Just lately, since the rumour of Retsky's disappearance was started, I have fancied that there were one or two strangers here who might well have come from the Russia of to-day. They are not welcome, but they come."

Catherine shrugged her shoulders.

"What does it matter?" she asked. "If there is ever to be any sort of revival in our country it must come after great purification by fire and suffering. War may hasten that revival. If it be true that the Chinese have seized Vladivostok and are sweeping into Russia, I am not sure that it is an evil thing."

Kreloff was silent. He had grave reasons for not caring to continue the discussion.

"You are here for a purpose, Princess?" he enquired.

"I am here to meet a friend."

The man leaned respectfully forward.

"Princess," he ventured, "you will forgive. You are not in distress?"

She shook her head.

"Not in the least, my good Kreloff."

"One makes a living here," he went on apologetically. "A luncheon, a dinner—they are always to be had. In the day's takings they will not appear—and there could be a room, too."

"You have not changed, my friend," she exclaimed, looking up at him gratefully. "If I needed help I would accept your offer, but I have served a generous employer. We have done a great work—he and about a thousand others who have been toiling at his command. For a moment there is a pause. I have enough money, though, to live on and to help others. I am not in want, I can assure you."

"I am forgiven?"

"There was nothing to forgive. You have given me a very pleasant sensation. I had begun to think that such feelings were dead. Look at me," she went on, pulling off her small hat and smoothing her hair. "Do I look very unhappy?"

The admiration shone for a moment out of his eyes. "Princess," he said, "I have never seen you look so young nor, if I may say it, so beautiful."

She laughed.

"That is because I am very nearly happy."

A moment later, Kreloff was called away by his chief maître d'hôtel. Catherine Oronoff sat on in her retired corner. The place was filling up as the hour for the apéritif arrived. She fitted another cigarette into her holder and ordered vermouth.

The waiter who served it, stood respectfully on one side to allow precedence to the man who had followed him down the room—a tall man with a weary light in his eyes and wasted features, yet a comparatively young man and a man of presence. Catherine Oronoff rose to her feet and curtsied slightly. He bent over her fingers and raised them to his lips.

"You, too, join in the farce," he laughed gloomily. "I lent myself to it. It was before this last hideous débâcle. We had some faint gleams of hope. I think the Royalist spirit here encouraged us. Now all that is gone. Nothing is left except to go back and offer to fight for one's country and to do that would simply mean assassination by the people one tried to succour. A queer world, Princess. The fates have not been kind to us. A century ago how good life must have tasted."

She pointed to the place by her side.

"You will honour me?"

"Why, of course," he agreed. "Is not that why I am here?"

He called a waiter and ordered vodka. She watched him with some satisfaction as he sipped it slowly, instead of with the eagerness of the old days—eagerness which spoke of something more than thirst.

"Tell me about yourself," he invited. "I heard from His Grace the Archbishop not long ago that you were his chief and most valuable supporter down in Nice."

"I am not in want," she answered, "which is something for a Russian to be able to say. I have had an important position in the Bureau where I worked and I have been generously paid."

"You are fortunate," he said bitterly. "Most of our women seem to be living on their virtue or rather the loss of it, and our men have become lordly gigolos ministering to these uncouth Western beauties. Tell me why you sent for me, Catherine Oronoff?"

"One moment," she begged. "Tell me what you think of this new unsettlement in Russia and the disappearance of Retsky? Might there not be a chance afterwards?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"For another generation, perhaps," he sighed. "Most of us are too old and tired. I am not sure that even I myself am man enough to make a great fight. Besides, I have lost faith. You may laugh at me, but years ago I did believe that one ruled by the favour of some unknown, unrealised being and that so long as one ruled well and justly there was reward. That has all gone. You are disappointed?" She laid her fingers upon his coat sleeve.

"I have a message for you, Alexander," she told him.

"A message?" he repeated quickly. "From whom is it?"

She hesitated.

"It is from someone whom I hope to meet here very soon. I was to bring you with me. He has important things to say."

He looked at her curiously.

"It is not like you, Catherine Oronoff, to be so mysterious."

"I am acting under the orders of one whom I trust."

"It is enough," he acquiesced.

"If he can get here," she confided, dropping her voice a little, "although that may be difficult, we are to meet Mr. Cheng in a private room here."

"Your Bureau!"

“The Bureau has closed its doors. Mr. Cheng is here in Paris, so is Mark Humberstone. They have very serious things to say to you, Alexander.”

“To me? That sounds strange,” he remarked, knitting his brows.

“It is doubtful,” she went on, “whether Mark Humberstone will be here. There is trouble with the French police concerning a certain matter, and he is sheltering at the American Embassy. Mr. Cheng is in the same trouble but he is cleverer at this sort of thing. I believe that somehow or other he will manage it.”

A short man of cheerful appearance, dressed as a maître d’hôtel, carrying a tray and walking with brisk, light movements, came down the room and paused before their table. With a little bow, he took their empty glasses. As he did so he leaned towards Catherine.

“It is arranged,” he said in a low tone. “It will be number seven, the first door to the right after you have ascended, and Monsieur Kreloff himself awaits you outside.”

Illustration:
He leaned towards Catherine. „It is arranged,” he said in a low tone. „Mr. Krellof awaits you.”

Her lips were opened but a cold gleam in his eyes checked the exclamation which very nearly escaped them. She recovered herself at once and rose to her feet.

“Will you come with me, sir?” she begged.

Alexander acquiesced promptly. Mr. Jonson collected the glasses, turned the cigarette packet upside down to make sure that it was empty and placed that, too, on the tray. He straightened the tablecloth, pushed back a cushion into its place, then he went smiling on his way through the crowded room…

“Garçon—maître d’hôtel!”

Jonson paused. He looked over his shoulder at another somewhat secluded table in a distant wing of the café. It was Suzanne who was seated there, faultlessly Parisian, her beautiful yellow hair fresh from the hands of the coiffeur, her little hat fresh from the stand at the modiste’s where it had reposed for a few hours only, her gown fashioned to do as little as possible to obscure the lines of her slim but voluptuous figure. Her elbows were on the table and she beckoned Mr. Jonson with a long, highly manicured finger. His footsteps seemed to have lost some of their spring as he turned and obeyed the summons.

“It is indeed you?” she asked incredulously. “You are a waiter here?”

“Mademoiselle se trompe,” he muttered. “She wishes something to drink—yes?”

Suzanne laughed at him.

“Imbécile!” she mocked. “Do I not know, too, that the Bureau has closed its doors and that Professor Ventura has no longer an engagement at the Casino de la Jetée? You have soon found another place, my friend.”

“And you?”

She blew out a little cloud of smoke and glanced furtively towards the entrance.

“For me it is not so easy,” she confided. “I need money, a great deal of money, and here in Paris it seems to me that the times have changed. The flâneur of other days has disappeared.”

“There is the other profession,” Mr. Jonson reminded her, “in which Mademoiselle also excelled.”

She looked away from him with a little shiver.

“I have had enough of that,” she declared. “I prefer the easy life. I wish to run no more those risks of life and death. Besides, the Bureau has ceased to exist. There will never be anything else to take its place.”

“For the easy life Mademoiselle is on the wrong side of the Seine.”

“Many people come this way,” she yawned. “They fancy that they see life. Ciel, these tourists! I ask myself now, what has become of our two great men?”

“Ah, who knows?” Jonson queried.

“I came here,” Suzanne continued, “according to the directions of Monsieur Humberstone. Très gentil, Monsieur Humberstone. Chic aussi. Un brave jeune homme.”

“I had not the good fortune to see Monsieur Humberstone when I left,” Jonson confided gloomily. “It was always Mr. Cheng. Some small thing went wrong and for me there was the open door.”

“I make no complaint,” Suzanne said. “I received my démission here and a fee most generous. Perhaps it was because this was a place that Monsieur Humberstone intended to visit that I remain a client. It seems to be, however, hopeless, as you say, my friend. I must try the other side of the Seine.”

She bent forward to watch the entrance. Several times she had cast a furtive glance in that direction.

“If he should come here,” she continued, “I ask that you send me un petit mot. I have an apartment at seventeen Rue d’Hautpol, leading from the Champs Elysées, troisième étage.”

“And Monsieur Cheng?” Jonson asked, watching her intently. “Will he do if Monsieur Humberstone does not come?”

She half closed her eyes, indulging in a feline little shiver.

“Talk to me no more of that man,” she enjoined. “I never wish to hear of him again. Monsieur Humberstone, now that one is free from the Bureau, if one could drink a glass of wine with him and talk, or drive in the Bois perhaps, or a little visit to my flat, that might be agreeable.”

Jonson had also been casting occasional glances towards the door and he showed at that moment that he had not forgotten his gift of swift motion. His farewell bow was made and he had disappeared in the more crowded part of the cafe some time before the two men who had just passed through the swing doors had found their way to Suzanne’s table. They were dour-looking men, strangely dressed for the place. They had an official bearing and the similarity of their apparel almost suggested a uniform. They sank into the vacant chairs at the table without pausing to ask Suzanne’s permission.

“There is news?” one of them asked.

Suzanne glanced nervously about.

“There is news,” she assented.

Chapter XXXI

Cheng came swiftly forward from the dimly lit recesses of the salon privé on the top floor of the Café Russe to greet his two visitors. There were cigarettes, wine and glasses upon the round table in the middle of the room—nothing else. Alexander held out his hand.

"I am glad to see you again, Prince Cheng," he said. "You and your friend, Mr. Humberstone, whom I met recently in Monte Carlo, are the most talked-about men in Europe these days."

"We have been engaged on a great task," Cheng confided. "That task approaches completion. It is a matter of great regret to me that there has been just a slight slip in our time table. We are compelled to bring our plans to fruition more quickly than we should have wished. Princess, will you take that chair, please. If you, sir, will sit there you will allow me to stand. First, may I serve you with some wine?"

Alexander suffered his glass to be filled, but he was frankly bewildered. He helped himself to a cigarette, however, from the open box upon the table.

"I am paying you this visit at the instigation of the Princess," he observed, "but I am asking myself where, in this scheme of yours, Prince Cheng, I can possibly find a place. Work such as you two have been doing for the good of the world would have been agreeable to me at any time, but I have unfortunately failed to find it. I cannot bring myself to follow any ordinary occupation like some of my heroic fellow country people. I am just a refugee."

"You remain," Cheng pointed out calmly, "a great figurehead. The ceremony which took place at Versailles was not perhaps quite such an empty one as you feel. I brought you here to tell you that we mean to give life and substance to that ceremony. Please prepare yourself, sir, for a rather astounding statement at such short notice. It is part of our scheme for the world's peace that you become in actual fact the ruler of Russia."

Alexander sat like a man turned to stone. Cheng waited for him to speak, but silence still prevailed.

"Alas," the latter went on, "I do not wonder that you are dumbfounded. I have no time to explain to you the position, as I should have wished. We mistimed a certain event and we had to act sooner than we had anticipated. I refer, of course, to the disappearance of Retsky."

"You were concerned in that?" Alexander asked.

"The International Bureau was responsible," Cheng admitted suavely. "There are other strong men in Russia with warped and villainous ideas, but Retsky was in possession, and all the reins of government lay in his hands. He, too, controlled the army. Understand," Cheng begged, leaning towards his visitor, "that the scheme which Mark Humberstone and I thought out at Harvard University and which we have spent our lives, since we were there together, towards maturing, was not at the time largely concerned with Russia. That, in its developments, becomes just one part of it. We have worked—Humberstone to realise the legacy left him by his father—with the sole idea of promoting universal peace. I have joined with him because I, too, have the same ambition, but side by side with that

I confess that I have worked also for the regeneration of my own country. But please understand this, sir. The gratification of my patriotism, the remodelling of your country, are only side issues, just steps towards our final goal which is the abolition of warfare, the establishment of universal peace."

"Is that possible?" Alexander asked, with the air of a man who is listening to fairy stories.

"It is accomplished," Cheng told him. "Already I go so far as to tell you that we have achieved success. We ask you now whether you are willing to place yourself in our hands, to do just as we advise and follow out our schemes. If you will do this, we will place you upon the throne of Russia, but under a different and less autocratic form of government."

"But," Alexander gasped, "the Russian army—the Russian people?"

"I will deal with the army first," Cheng said. "I will only ask you to recall the most amazing episode in the world's history of warfare—the destruction of the Japanese Fleet in the Pacific. Well, the Humberstone discoveries did that. In the same way, only with even greater completeness, we can make the Russian army powerless. One quarter of the Chinese army now in the field could march at any time we chose into Moscow, if necessary, practically without opposition."

"You are talking of miracles!" the listening man cried.

"Miracles which we have already proved," Cheng continued. "I have told you how much I regret the short space of time which at the moment is all I have to spare. Faith is something in life. If you accept this great gift which we offer, you must have faith, for, frankly, I am in danger at the present moment and I have risked my life to come here to meet you. All that you have to decide is—will you accept the Suzerainty of Russia, marry the Princess Sophie of Greece, who has signified her consent to become your Czarina, and rule the country according to the statutes which will be placed in the hands of the Houses of Assembly?"

Alexander rose to his feet. He seemed to have grown inches taller. There was a new dignity in his presence. Only his voice was choked.

"You throw open the gates of Paradise and ask me whether I will enter," he exclaimed. "I cannot pretend to understand, but I will prove my faith. I will ask no questions. If there are risks I will take them. If they were a hundred to one against me I would take them. The chance of honourable death fighting to restore Russia would be the happiest chance that could ever come my way."

"It is well spoken," Cheng concluded.

* * * * *

Downstairs, Jonson had been kept very busy indeed at Suzanne's table. Empty glasses had five or six times been removed and replaced by full ones. Neither of the two dour-looking visitors appeared, however, to be in any worse condition. Suzanne herself had only toyed with her first glass of champagne. Presently she whispered in the ear of her nearer companion. A moment or two later she was left alone. She called Jonson over.

"Listen," she asked. "Why did you come to this particular café?"

"I answered an advertisement," he replied. "It was the first I saw in the *Petit Parisien*."

"You knew the proprietor before?"

“I had never seen him.”

“You are a fool or a wise man, Jonson!”

“I think,” he confessed, “that I am a fool or I should not have been in such straits.”

“You are poor or rich?”

“There is no one poorer,” he said. “There was money to come to me from the Bureau but it has never arrived.”

She was silent for a moment. She had grown older. She was no longer the bird of paradise, the decked-out courtesan seeking for men’s favours. She was a calculating, shrewd woman, weighing up possibilities, dissecting suspicions.

“You would like to earn twenty-five thousand francs?” she asked.

He leaned closer over the table.

“I would sell my twin brother for half that amount,” he assured her.

“Mr. Cheng is here in this place?”

Jonson’s face was suddenly blank. He hesitated. “I am afraid of Mr. Cheng,” he confessed.

“You need not be,” she went on, with a trifle more eagerness in her tone. “Mr. Cheng will never do harm to anyone else—after to-night. Where is he, Jonson?”

“Who will pay me the twenty-five thousand francs?”

Suzanne reached for her bag and opened it. From a thick wad of notes she counted out ten.

Illustration:
„You can have those. If you play us false,
I shall say that you stole them.”

“There are ten mille,” she said. “You can have those on account. If you play us false, I shall say that you stole them. If you show us where Mr. Cheng is—you need do no more than point out the door—you shall have the remainder before I leave the café.”

Jonson’s forehead was furrowed with thought. His eyes seemed to have retreated farther into his head. His fingers were working nervously.

“Who were those men?” he asked.

“They are of the Russian police,” she confided. “They have come to find the murderer of the man who came to Nice as Paul Agrestein. Make up your mind quickly. There will be no such chance as this again.”

Jonson had the appearance of a man tortured with doubt. Suzanne reopened the bag. The wad of notes was plainly visible.

“Very well,” he declared. “Mr. Cheng is dining here in a private room.”

“The next room is vacant?” she asked breathlessly.

“Yes.”

“Order dinner there. Take it, but not in my name. Come and fetch us—very soon. You need not wait for dinner to be ready. Soon after they have returned—come. You announce the dinner. You take us to the room. That is all.”

“I will not serve your dinner,” Jonson insisted. “I will not go inside the room. If Cheng saw me he would know.”

She drew out her vanity case and looked at herself thoughtfully.

“That is quite simple,” she agreed. “You can send anyone you like afterwards, provided you leave us with the key of the next room. You can go now. Bring more drinks for these two. Return and tell us that the salon is ready in five minutes.”

“You will not like the apartment,” he warned her. “It is up almost in the attic. For the last two flights there is no lift. Better wait until Mr. Cheng comes down.”

“We can mount two flights of stairs, my friend,” she said. “Take care of those ten mille and remember there are fifteen more to come.”

Mr. Jonson took his leave. Suzanne’s two companions returned. They had washed their hands, brushed their hair and presented a more civilised appearance.

“It is arranged?” one of them asked Suzanne.

“It is arranged,” she answered.

They exchanged glances. The hands of both of them within the next few seconds stole down towards their hip pockets. Their drinks arrived, brought by an under waiter.

“To ourselves—to the avengers of Retsky!” one of them murmured.

They drained their glasses. Their heads were very close together. They talked for several minutes. Then Jonson came slowly across the room.

“Mademoiselle,” he announced, with a bow, “your private room is prepared. If you will come this way—”

They followed him in a little procession across the room and out into the hall. He ushered them into a lift and very slowly they mounted some four flights. From the closed doors along the first two or three corridors there floated out the sound of music. On one, a door was open, and they heard the sound of feminine laughter.

“A gay place, this,” one of the men commented.

“There are many people dining to-night,” Jonson said. “Every room is taken except on the top floor. Madame and Messieurs will have still to mount,” he added, as he brought the lift to a standstill.

They made no complaint. There was a very grim expression indeed upon the faces of the two men. Suzanne, a little nervous, clung to the arm of one of them. They climbed two flights of stairs. When they arrived on the top corridor, the place was almost in darkness. Mr. Jonson raised his hand and motioned them to follow him. When they had gone three or four yards he pointed to a door, from underneath which came a chink of light.

“It is a very famous person who dines there,” he confided. “A little farther on is your room and then number seven.”

One of the men stumbled against the wall and nearly fell.

“Curse this corridor!” he muttered.

“It is only a yard farther,” Jonson told him. “You can see—there is a switch there. I will turn on the other lights. Keep close to the wall and you will walk more safely.”

They did as he begged. Presently he stopped and reached for a switch. The place was suddenly in complete darkness.

“This way,” he whispered. “I will turn the lights on in the room. Quick.”

They took a step forward, and it was their last on earth. Only Suzanne was a little difficult. The others plunged into the black void without hesitation. Suzanne

struggled to recover her balance but one might have imagined that Jonson had been used to trouble of that sort. He stooped down, seized her ankles with one hand and her clutching fingers with the other. Her shriek was stifled almost before it left her lips.

Chapter XXXII

There was already an air of tension in the library of the American Embassy into which Cheng and Mark Humberstone were ushered at ten o'clock that evening. Mr. Mountain, who was seated at his desk, was realising to the full the gravity of the situation into which he had been drawn. In a high-backed chair on his right was seated Monsieur Châtelain, the leading statesman of France, a short, rather stout, but wholesome-looking man of early middle age, with iron grey beard and keen flashing eyes underneath his heavy brows. On the ambassador's left General Levissier was similarly placed. He was apparently a somewhat older man but though his hair and moustache were grey, he had the carriage and air of a soldier in the prime of life. He had come straight from a reception at one of the foreign embassies and was wearing full uniform and a brilliant array of medals. The ambassador rose to his feet as the two younger men entered the room.

"Monsieur Châtelain," he said, "and General Levissier, permit me to present Prince Cheng and Professor Mark Humberstone, whose name you will associate no doubt with that of his illustrious father."

There was no attempt at cordiality on the part of the two Frenchmen. They both rose to their feet and indulged in a stiff bow. Cheng smiled courteously as he took the' chair to which Mr. Mountain pointed. Mark contented himself with a more formal gesture.

"I'm afraid you look upon us as rather troublesome visitors to your country, Monsieur Châtelain," he observed.

"Some of the activities connected with your International Bureau certainly require explanation," the Premier pronounced. "Those, I am afraid, you will have to explain before a different Tribunal. Since we have met here, however, and Prince Cheng is also present, it would interest me to hear your explanation of the fact that there are large numbers of American officers at the present moment in China drilling and instructing Chinese troops. I am even given to understand that a staff college exists there, in which the instructors are American, for the benefit of Chinese officers."

"You have been perfectly well informed, sir," Cheng acknowledged. "The only things to be noted are that naturally no American officer was able to accept a position with us who had not already resigned his position in the American army."

"Accepting that as a fact," General Levissier said, "what is the meaning of this great Chinese force that has been brought together and supplied with guns and munitions, apparently by the United States? Is it your intention, may I ask, to make war against Russia?"

“It is our intention,” Prince Cheng admitted, “to create a force with which we may threaten Russia, but my friend here, Mr. Humberstone, will tell you we are working together with one great aim, and that is to stop war—to bring peace into the world.”

General Levissier curled his moustache.

“You choose strange methods,” he said, “with which to attempt an impossible task.”

“You may change your mind presently,” Mr. Cheng rejoined unperturbed. “You will be one of the first to agree, I think, that France, with America hopelessly and immovably neutral, with Great Britain wavering, with Italy a bribed but wholly untrustworthy ally, and Poland a very long way away, has felt a little helpless before the bugbear of her nights and days—Germany.”

“France,” Monsieur Châtelain said stiffly, “must do everything to protect herself.”

“Who would blame her?” Cheng demanded, his tone as silky as ever, but with that look of extreme youth gone from his face. “The only thing is that she has chosen ill. The hope of Russia for an ally is the greatest illusion which a nation of statesmen ever hugged to their shivering bosoms.”

“Russia has an army of a million prepared to take the field,” General Levissier pointed out emphatically. “She has two thousand aeroplanes already built. The whole world knows that the Russians are fine soldiers. Where is the illusion if France thinks that she might make a great ally?”

“The illusion is this,” Cheng pronounced gravely. “Russia has gone through a purgatorial period which has cleansed neither her body nor her soul. She has emerged from the fires an altered race. She was once a warlike nation. She is so no longer.”

There was a moment’s silence. Monsieur Châtelain was unmoved. General Levissier was angry.

“You have been wandering about Russia lately, I presume, Prince, to be so accurately informed as to her present condition and the military stamina of her soldiers.”

“Not I alone,” was the speedy reply. “That would be a waste of time. But we have had over a thousand spies working there during the last four years. Some of them have met with the usual fate of spies but quite enough of them have survived and sent in their reports to enable us to come to logical conclusions.”

“A thousand spies!” Châtelain repeated incredulously.

“I am within the figures,” Cheng assured him. “I know something about the science of espionage, for I myself have directed it on a world-wide scale, and I have seen great things accomplished with its aid.”

“The International Bureau at Nice,” Châtelain murmured.

Mr. Cheng bowed amiably.

“Let me tell you what the reports of our spies, coupled with my own observations, have taught us. First and foremost it is this. The spirit of Russia has gone. It is a race now of the sawdust type of man. When the new rulers of Russia, the predecessors of Retsky, stood up to their knees in blood and indulged in an orgy of slaughter, when they burned the churches in the towns and villages, destroyed the ikons which meant so much to the peasants, stamped out of them

and out of the children at the schools and the young men growing up all sense of reverence, all sense of religion, they did an evil work for their country. They are proud of it, these men, that religion is no longer part of the life of the Russian peasant. Yet by killing it, I tell you that whatever his belief may have been, they have killed his soul. The Russians will never fight again as they fought for the Czar, for their country and for that something which meant dim things to them as they knelt before the cross…They have become broken reeds, Monsieur Châtelain."

The French Minister moved uneasily in his place. There was a heavy frown upon his forehead.

"You are a young man," he pronounced, "with much confidence and a great flow of words."

Cheng glanced towards him and for a moment there was a fleeting expression of immeasurable contempt in his face. It passed like a flicker. He was himself again—courteous and reasonable.

"If you decide upon trusting to Russia to bring you peace of mind, sir," he said, "when the time comes you will find out that my words are true."

"We have sent military envoys to Russia." General Levissier declared. "Those men have reported to us as regards the state of the Russian armies and the character of their soldiers. We were content to negotiate for their alliance. Now there has come this avalanche for which your country, Prince, seems to be responsible. Can you wonder that we feel a just, a righteous indignation with you?"

Cheng shook his head in puzzled fashion.

"Alas," he confessed, "I do not see any cause for that indignation. In marching against the common foe of China and the whole civilised world—the Russians—we had no enmity in our hearts towards the French."

"Yet you attack our ally!" Châtelain expostulated.

"There has been no declaration of war as yet nor is it likely that there will be. As to your alliance with Russia, we have not considered it a formal or an established thing," Cheng said gravely. "We have looked upon it largely as newspaper talk. Russia of the old days was a magnificent ally indeed. But for the foul poison of Communism working under the old name of Nihilism, which crept like an evil poison amongst the troops, Russia would have saved the world from the disaster of that great war. To-day Russia could save no one from anything. They lose their one strong man and see the state of confusion in which they are! The machinery of the State, such as it was, has stopped. The War Department is in a condition of hopeless disorder. The forces which are being moved tardily now towards the eastern frontier are moving with scanty commissariat and few heavy guns. They are marching to certain death. The great armies of Russia are a myth. There may be a million men on paper but they will never be drawn together."

Levissier's face was dark with anger. He was evidently fighting hard to control himself.

"I will call your attention, Prince Cheng," he said, "to one statement which you have just made. You remarked that Russia has lost her one strong man. How have they lost him? By whose hand was he removed?"

“By mine,” Cheng admitted. “I claim the sole credit for that beneficent action. My friend Humberstone is opposed to the taking of life, so he was not concerned. It is I alone who am responsible.”

Chapter XXXIII

CHENG’S admission, calmly spoken though it was, exercised for a few moments a paralysing influence in the little room. Monsieur Châtelain was the first to recover.

Fie rose impulsively to his feet. The veins of his forehead were standing out in ominous fashion. He was shaking with anger.

“I imagine,” he said, “that this discussion need go no farther. I should recommend you, Prince Cheng, to seek the shelter of your embassy as quickly as possible. You will discover that the taking of life in this country is not so lightly regarded as you seem to assume.”

“Monsieur le Ministre,” Cheng argued gently, “I beg that you will not be rash. There lived no man on the face of the earth who deserved death as this man deserved it. For years he has ruled with neither wisdom nor justice but as a wholesale murderer. He met with his just fate. He was shot in my presence and his body disposed of in fifty fathoms of water. I came here, however, with my friend Mark Humberstone not to discuss the death of one worthless man, but to offer you as representative of France, security and peace for your country during the rest of your days.”

Châtelain hesitated on his way to the door. He had the air of a man still suffering from shock and yet compelled to listen.

“You seek for peace in a strange manner,” he said sternly.

“It is not the first time in history,” Cheng went on calmly, “that a tyrant who stood in the way of progress has been removed. You had a treaty of alliance, sir, with this misgoverned country Russia, and in due time you would have discovered, as our spies have already discovered, that her armies, her super-equipment, her aeroplanes that were to have darkened the skies, were something of a myth. They would have fought, as they have done up till now in such small skirmishes as have taken place, as a soulless Robot-made army must always fight—without enthusiasm, without courage, without perseverance. These armies in a month’s time will have disappeared from existence, discipline will have come to an end and the peasants will trudge off to their homes. A few hundreds may be shot by their officers but that will never stop the rout, the wholesale desertions. The Russian fighting man of to-day has nothing to fight for—no domestic life, nothing beyond the skies to dream of, no inspiration. They will be easy victims. We have to-day in China a perfectly disciplined and equipped army of a million men. With a very small portion of these we shall march to Moscow.”

“A small portion?” General Levissier exclaimed.

“It will be sufficient,” Cheng told them. “It will be our purpose to give that country a new and wholesome constitution, to make her once more a sane and

healthy nation who has only suffered from a too violent reaction from ages of despotism."

"And how," Monsieur Châtelain demanded, "do you propose to accomplish this miracle?"

Cheng pointed to where Mark was seated.

"There is the man who will answer that question," he concluded. "I have reached the end of what I have to say for the moment."

The French Minister resumed his seat.

"We will hear what Mr. Humberstone has to say," he agreed. "If your scheme, however, is to bring peace to the world with a Chinese army of one million or five millions, I am of the opinion that we waste our time."

Mark rose to his feet. He was a very impressive figure, standing at the end of the table, holding his spectacles in his hand, with a confident smile upon his lips.

"Monsieur Châtelain is quite right," he said. "No army of any size could bring peace to the world. There is something else that can, though, and that is to take away from armies the power of fighting. My father conceived the idea many years ago, as a result of which the Japanese Fleet lies at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. He left me the legacy of finishing his work. I say so I hope reverently, I hope without any boastfulness. I did not have the first struggle with the greatest element in the world—my father harnessed that—but I have succeeded in carrying on and developing it even further and more fully than I thought possible when I started."

The General leaned a little forward in his chair. Monsieur Châtelain was not at first greatly impressed. Mark's simple method of speech scarcely paved the way for what he had to say.

"Of course," Mark went on, "every scientist has realised how little we understand the greatest uncontrolled element in the world we live in. It will shorten matters and make it simpler if I tell you what we can do. You must remember this. In land warfare, just the same as at sea, practically every movement of troops, every weapon that is fired, every vehicle and gun carriage that goes into battle of any sort, from armoured tanks to aeroplanes, is controlled by electricity. Once or twice discoveries have been made on the lines I have been working at for ten years but they have always fallen short of the vital thing. A fortnight ago, with the help of television such as no one except those who have visited the Bureau at Nice have ever seen, Prince Cheng and I have watched Chinese armies marching, we have spoken to them in Pekin, General Fan Sik Tsun has given orders to his staff and we destroyed a Russian aeroplane flying along the track of the Trans-Siberian railway. You will realise now what I am going to tell you. The means which I am using—the instruments which I have discovered controlling wireless electricity—are independent of distance. They have an accumulative force through repercussions. At twelve thousand miles we can do exactly what you can do in Cherbourg Harbour from one battleship to another."

"C'est incroyable!" the General muttered.

"Mais c'est la verité," Mark rejoined quickly. "I am not idiot enough," he continued, "to come here and expect you to believe my word, but two months ago, under a bond of secrecy, we received a visit from Monsieur Monteux, President of the Academy of Science, also Professor Ames of the National Observatory in

Washington. These are two of the greatest scientists in the world. I hand you herewith their signed testimony as to what they saw on two consecutive nights from the observatory of the Bureau. You will like, perhaps, to read them later on. You will find that they confirm in every particular what I have told you."

"But how have you kept these amazing discoveries to yourself?" Monsieur Châtelain demanded.

"Because I have no wish to make any other use of them," Mark explained earnestly, "than to carry out my father's legacy, of which as you know I am one of the trustees. The secret of my discoveries is deposited in Washington in the same manner as my father's first papers. I shall only tell you that in a few weeks' time, a hundred miles behind the small expeditionary force which is all that it will be necessary to send to Moscow, there will be a few of a new type of armoured car which will open up and each one of which will contain one of the instruments which I have now perfected. With the means of these and television, we could render useless any machinery relying in any way upon electricity within any distance. We can draw the nerves out of an army of a million men as easily as you could pump lead into a battleship crossing your bows. It is hard to realise, perhaps, all in a moment," Mark went on, after a moment's hesitation, "but what nation in their senses would build fighting planes, battleships, forts or any weapons intended for offence or defence with a sure knowledge that these can be destroyed by means of my machines, from practically the other side of the world? The building of armaments must automatically stop, and with that must come the greatest boon which has ever yet been given to the world—the end of warfare. I will pass you these documents, General," Mark concluded, handing them over. "I will take the originals away, but you can have them copied and you can ring up and make an appointment with either of those men and they will tell you again what they saw. Professor Ames offered me five million dollars before he left the Observatory, for a few simple facts concerning the television. Nothing doing, of course. Not all the money in the world will buy one of those patents."

"But surely," Mr. Mountain broke in, "in time—some time or other—somebody will go to work and discover your secrets."

"Not in our day, I think," Mark replied. "It may come, of course, but for a year after my father got hold of the one strange principle which is at the basis of the whole thing he could do nothing but sit and marvel, he did not even apply it after he knew it. Always afterwards he used to say that it was a million to one chance against anyone else stumbling up against what he did."

"That is Monteux's signature," the Premier observed, with a queer little tremble in his voice. "I would know it anywhere. Young man," he added, "it seems to me that your Council of Seven are going to rule the world."

"They will never want to do that," Mark assured him. "They will, of course, control the destinies of the world, but the only use they will make of their power will be to establish peace on the earth. My father used to say that in a few hundred years' time these discoveries of ours will be valueless, for after three hundred years of peace the nation who wanted war would be a nation of lunatics."

"One more practical question," the General begged, his voice unsteady with excitement. "You two young men leave us to-day. What happens in Siberia and Far Russia?"

“Every particle of information we have,” Mark replied, “indicates the Russian desire for peace. An expeditionary force will move forward and from some hundred miles in the rear I shall, if necessary, with my corps of helpers, paralyse the whole of the electrical equipment of Russia and destroy as many aeroplanes as are necessary to bring them to an armistice. Prince Cheng and I will then proceed to Moscow and establish there, with the help of many Russians of the best type who are living now in obscurity, a new and moderate form of government. Remember that all this information will come to you automatically. Wherever we are we shall be in communication with you day by day.”

“The other question,” the General continued. “Supposing within the next month some unfriendly nation—let me take the Germans as an example—should make a sudden move against us, you and Prince Cheng would be in Russia, the Council of Seven are widely separated. War might come before you had time to move.”

Mark smiled.

“Naturally, General,” he explained, “you have not yet fully appreciated the powers that we control. Supposing that happened this week, or next, I could guarantee to throw the German army into utter disorder within a radius of a hundred miles anywhere, and if it were necessary I could destroy the whole electrical equipment throughout Germany at the same time, so that commercially as well as from a military point of view she would become inert. That is what I could do with an hour or two notice. But I will tell you this. I am on the brink of one more discovery. To-day I said that I needed a latitude of one hundred miles. In twelve months’ time automatically, by use of an instrument which I am perfecting, I will undertake to direct my disintegrating coils and concentrate them within the radius of a single mile. There is, in short, no limit to our possible control of these disintegrating forces. You will find certain verification of that last statement in the report of your own great scientist.”

The sense of strain was too intense to pass easily away, but soon the new situation seemed to assume reality. A world free from war or the fear of war, barracks turned into factories, oceans empty of battleships. Mr. Mountain rang for the butler and ordered wine.

“This,” he declared, “is probably the most important meeting that has ever been held in any house, under any roof. You two,” he added, “are history-makers indeed.”

“Mine was a small share,” Cheng admitted, “for all the time I had two ambitions. One was to bring peace upon the world. That idea was born in me during my early boyhood in the monastery where I was brought up. When Humberstone and I became friends at Harvard, that desire for peace became like a silent passion in my life but, unlike Mark here, I had another purpose, another goal before me. You know now what it was. I desired to re-establish my country, to bring home to the children of my race a knowledge and appreciation of their past greatness and to lift her back again to where she once stood in culture and wisdom. To that, now that the clash and tumult of warfare is passing into history, I shall give my whole future life.”

The wine had arrived, the glasses were filled. All five men rose to their feet. They all hesitated. The inadequacy of words assailed them. General Levissier’s voice broke as he lifted his glass.

“I used to think,” he said solemnly, “that the day when General Foch walked into the dining saloon of his train and found there the German Secretary of State and the German Commander-in-Chief waiting to offer their subjection, to plead for an armistice, that the greatest day in France’s history had arrived. I have changed my mind. That scene, dramatic though it was, was, alas, the scene of a sham peace. We five are here to celebrate a greater occasion. We can raise our glasses and drink to the happy and glorious days to come, when the last bullet shall have been spent and every nation in the world shall have laid down its arms.”

Five empty glasses were replaced upon the table. The strain seemed broken. Everyone began talking. The ambassador tapped on the table.

“General,” he said, “and Monsieur le Ministre, I must remind you of one thing. This house is surrounded by gendarmes waiting to arrest Prince Cheng the moment he leaves the place, or Mr. Mark Humberstone. May I send for my secretary, General, and will you get into touch with headquarters?”

“Send for your secretary by all means,” the General replied. “You can let them know at headquarters that they may expect a visit from me within half-an-hour.”

“Levissier and I will both sign absolute safe conducts at once,” the Premier declared, seating himself at the table and drawing some paper towards him.

“And more important still,” the General remarked, “there are some men here, emissaries of the Soviet police, dangerous fellows; who have not yet reported to us. They must be deported straight away or placed under arrest. One thing I can promise both of you,” he added, turning to Mark and Prince Cheng. “Give us an hour and you shall walk as safely through the streets of Paris as though you were in your own home town.”

There was a good deal of telephoning, a brief absence on the part of the General, much writing and signing of papers. The ambassador turned to Mark.

“You will have your things unpacked and stay here, Humberstone,” he begged.

The young man shook his head.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he regretted. “I cannot do that. I am going to make a still further demand upon you, though.”

“My dear fellow,” Mountain assured him, “there is no service in the world which I would not gladly render you. Out with it.”

“I have a suite waiting for me at the Meurice,” Mark confided, “and—well, to tell you the whole truth, sir, I want you to come along with me as soon as we are passed out and meet my wife.”

“Do you mean to tell me that you are married?” the ambassador exclaimed.

“Not yet, but I shall be, thanks to you in, I hope, half-an-hour’s time. I have all the papers that are necessary. We are going to take advantage of the new regulations.”

The ambassador rang the bell and ordered his car.

“I,” Prince Cheng observed with a grave smile, “am already an invited guest. The Princess Hou Hsi, my wife, is with Catherine Oronoff at Meurice’s.”

“You will give me a moment or two, if you please,” General Levissier begged, rising to his feet. “I shall precede your Excellencies’ car in my own. A mounted escort of gendarmes is on its way here. A soon as I have satisfied myself that everything is perfectly and entirely safe we will leave.”

“If it is going to be a party,” Mr. Mountain proposed, “what about my wife, Humberstone? She is a very old friend of yours.”

“If she will honour me we shall be delighted,” was the prompt -response. “Our only other guests will be the Princess Sophie of Greece and the Grand Duke Alexander of Russia, unless—” he added with a glance at Monsieur Châtelain.

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure,” the Minister declared, “than to be permitted to sign your papers and make my bow to your wife.”

“This promises to be the most amazing end to the most amazing evening of my life,” Mr. Mountain pronounced.

There was a moment just after dawn when the same thought came to Catherine. Life, after that weary succession of grey days, seemed almost too marvellous, her happiness unsupportable. She slipped out of bed and stood before the high open window of the salon adjoining, looking out across the Place towards the Champs Elysées. The stars were paling in a misty sky. One by one the lights faded out. The buildings were becoming less like ghostly shapes, and into the heart of the city the odd passers-by grew into a thin little stream. At each side of the square she could see a gendarme on guard. There were others in front of the entrance. France was protecting the man to whom the world was to owe so much—her man…

The full sweetness of life flowed in her veins as she listened to his approaching footsteps. Her little gesture invited his caress. He drew her towards him.

“You believe now that you are going to be happy?”

“Always, now that I belong to you.”

Her upturned lips clung to his. They listened together to the chiming of the hour. He closed the window and led her back into the room.

“In four hours,” he reminded her, “we start for China.”

Chapter XXXIV

“These are the hours,” Hou Hsi said softly, “when I love to be alone with my lord and to reflect, just to think of all that lies behind us.”

He smiled in lazy but not whole-hearted acquiescence. Hou Hsi was stretched upon a huge divan on the broad verandah in front of the exquisitely remodelled pavilion hidden away in one of the secret corners of the world-famous gardens. The outline of the Summer Palace itself was dimly visible through the trees. Cheng was lying on cushions by her side.

“There were ugly moments in the past,” he meditated. “Strange, lurid intervals when one needed all one’s faith. Yet the past is accomplished—safely and gloriously accomplished. It is the present which enslaves, the future which smiles upon us.”

“All day long,” she told him, “you have been living in the world of dreams.”

“All day long,” he agreed, “I have wandered about our glorious domain, Hou Hsi, and it seems to me that, now the moment has arrived when the birds are silent and the winds have ceased to rustle amongst the leaves, I still hear the air trembling with the magic of Mark’s work in the observatory.”

“All has gone well in Moscow?” she asked.

“So our messages tell us. Mark will be here himself presently with the whole story.”

“You lean towards the West to-night,” she whispered, her head sinking back amidst the pile of cushions. “I think that I like you so, Ziao Han. My heart is full of pride when I see you stern, hear your words of command, hear the people call their welcome in shouts that reach the skies. But I love you, too, when you recline in the Emperor’s place close to my side with that black silk robe over your Western costume, and your voice is softer and your eyes no longer raised to the skies—they look into mine. They shine, perhaps, because they see there what makes you happy?”

“I see you marvellous in the present, Hou Hsi,” he answered. “I see you the fairest, dearest possession a man could hold, and I see you the future mother of my sons, the beneficent ruler over this awakening world.”

There was a brief silence. Hou Hsi was clinging to his hands. A faint breeze was stirring in the flowering shrubs outside bringing their perfume into the open pagoda where they sat. Below was a lake the colour of jade—silent except for the occasional flight of birds. Around them, one by one, lanterns were shining like glow worms amongst the trees. From the Temple on the island came the faint chiming of a silver bell.

“Back to earth, Hou Hsi,” he whispered. “I hear the purring of Mark’s motor. We must be sure that the news is good—and then dinner.”

He touched a bell. Jonson, in the perfect but somewhat modified attire of the major dome of an Asiatic palace, made his appearance.

“It is Mr. Mark Humberstone and the Princess who arrive, my lord,” he announced.

“The servants may enter,” Hou Hsi said, turning her head slightly.

The place changed as though by magic. Lights shone out from the ceiling and from hidden corners. Along the path which led through a row of tall, silent palms, an archway of roses and hanging bunches of white lotus flowers, a troop of servants in native dress made their noiseless appearance. A dinner table was wheeled in. A grave faced butler stood over a tray on which one of the men, with lightning touches, was reproducing the ritual of the West. There was the chink of ice. They both turned their heads as Mark and Catherine passed through the wide-flung curtains and approached. Mark wore the white evening garb of the East, Catherine a gown of shimmering blue, with a marvellous Chinese shawl thrown round her shoulders. There was a chorus of joyous greetings. Cocktails and strange Chinese delicacies were handed round.

“So the great day has safely passed.”

“Gloriously,” Mark declared with enthusiasm. “Never has my transmission been more perfect. The echo of Moscow and Russian throats is still in my ears. Your Majesty missed a most amazing spectacle.”

Cheng clapped his hands and gave orders to Jonson.

“For to-night,” he announced, “we will abandon all ceremony, and only the servants need attend whose presence is necessary. Mark, you shall tell us all that you saw and heard as we dine.”

The cocktails were handed round once more and four very happy people seated themselves at the round table beautifully decked with orchids and scarlet tiger lilies.

"Gratify our curiosity, my friend, if you please," Cheng begged.

"Well, the great thing," Mark recounted, "is that both ceremonies have been safely and marvellously accomplished. Early this morning in the Cathedral, Alexander and the Princess Sophie were married, and at twelve o'clock the coronation of both as Czar and Czarina of the new Russia took place—the religious part in the Cathedral and afterwards in the Council Hall of the Kremlin."

"The Patriarch himself officiated," Catherine interposed.

"He did," Mark observed with a smile, "and I don't mind telling you that I liked the look of him much better than I did the last time we met. Afterwards, the Czar and Czarina drove through the city, and my!—the people nearly went crazy with their shouting and clapping. Miles of streets were guarded by Russian troops and alternate relays of Chinese."

"And the peace was not once broken?" Cheng asked.

"Not once," Mark assured them. "As a matter of fact, never within the memory of man, so everyone declared, has Moscow been roused to such scenes of jubilation. Even whilst the ceremonies were going on, the Palace and the Kremlin were surrounded by dense masses of the cheering populace singing national hymns. Time after time, Alexander and Sophie have had to come out on the balconies and show themselves."

"And the Czarina—the Princess Sophie she was when I met her—she does not mind, she is not afraid?" Hou Hsi asked. "I should not be afraid but I should not like to show myself—like that."

"Never flinched, either of them," Mark declared. "The Czarina was gracious and smiling all the time, perfectly at her ease. Looked as though she had never heard of a bomb or anything of that sort all her life. Alexander, too—well, he was a different man, wasn't he, Catherine, to that night when I first saw him at the Sporting Club?"

"Perfectly dignified, perfectly happy he seemed," Catherine acquiesced.

"To-morrow," Mark went on, "there will be a great banquet and I can tell you the Ambassadors and Ministers from all over the world, especially from those countries which rather stood off at first, are scrambling across Europe to get there in time."

"General Fan Sik Tsun is representing China," Cheng observed. "We appointed Yuan Shi Kai Ambassador yesterday but he will not leave until next week."

"The day after to-morrow is to be a great day," Mark continued. "Alexander will sign then the statute of electoral reform, summoning every one of the great Russian provinces to choose their representatives to the Houses of Assembly. Half the members of the Upper House have already been named by General Fan Sik Tsun when he was acting as Regent. They are mostly members of the old aristocracy, but with the new enlightenment."

"That was the class," Cheng remarked, "most hated and feared by the Soviet."

"The other half," Mark went on, "is to be elected by the Lower House. I had direct communication with Fan Sik Tsun for a few minutes. He assured me that throughout the whole country it is recognised that a benevolent, far-seeing and

humane system of Government has been offered to the people and will be carried out by the forthcoming régime. The toast everywhere, from Petrograd to Odessa, is to the New Russia."

With the deepening of the blue twilight, lights gleamed out from unexpected places, from the roof of the pagoda itself and from swinging lamps. The perfume of the exotics and the flowering shrubs floated into the room with every movement of the breeze. Mark, as the coffee was served, drew a slip of paper from his pocket.

"This is a message," he said, "which came just before I closed up the connections."

"It is the message which Mark did not wish to read," Catherine laughed. "I told him that was false modesty."

"Anyhow, here it is," Mark continued.

> *Alexander and Sophie send affectionate greetings to Hou Hsi, Empress of China, and her illustrious Consort. To Cheng himself and to Mark Humberstone, the wholehearted homage due to two men, still happily young, whom future ages will proclaim to be the greatest makers of world history since the birth of the nations.*

"I earned that laudation too easily," Cheng remarked deprecatingly. "It is Mark's genius which has brought peace into the world."

Mark rose to his feet, his glass filled.

"I myself," he said, "have simply finished the task conceived by another and greater mind. Shall we drink once to my father, in whose brain this great invention was born?"

They raised their glasses and drank silently. Hou Hsi threw a little kiss from the tips of her delicate white fingers to the first star which had just appeared.

"I, too, I drink to the great Professor Humberstone, because it is he who has brought this happiness to Cheng whom I love so well."

* * * * *

Mark and Catherine, the lights of whose pavilion gleamed close at hand through a grove of flowering lime trees, slipped presently away. Jonson, who seemed with the responsibility of his high office to have acquired a new dignity of speech and manner, made respectful approach.

"I would ask to be permitted to remind your Majesty and you, my lord, that to-night comes to an end your period of joyful rest," he announced. "The Minister of Ceremonies has indicated that to-morrow there is a feast to the nobles, followed by a great reception at the Imperial Palace. On the following night there is a diplomatic dinner, followed again by a reception at which dancing is to be introduced. On the third, fourth and fifth nights are receptions to the chiefs of the various Chinese army corps who have returned from the front, and the day afterwards is the people's national holiday."

Cheng sighed.

"Her Majesty and I are prepared to carry out the programme arranged for us," he said.

“I take the liberty, Your Highness, of reminding you,” Jonson continued, “that this is your last evening of solitude for some time. The days of ever troublous anxieties are past. I, who have been your guardian in the past and am responsible for the present, assure you of that. You are surrounded by a ring of steel, but more important than that, I would assure you that not one breath of complaint or of anything save happiness and content has been heard from one end of the city to the other. I beg of you, therefore, to repose in peace.”

Hou Hsi clapped her hands.

“Underneath that dignified Lord Chamberlain,” she laughed, “I hear my Mr. Jonson speaking. He wants us to know, Ziao Han, my lord, that to-night we are alone. The night is ours unshared, undisturbed. It is strange how I felt that some such joy as this was coming.”

Cheng struck a small silver gong by his side. Presently servants streamed into the pavilion—silent but sure footed. The dining table, with the four great chairs of state, was removed as though by magic. From somewhere on the lake came the strains of fantastic but tuneful music. Cheng gave his hand to Hou Hsi. Jonson faded away.

* * * * *

Chance had sent the royal lovers a moonless night with nothing but a few faintly burning stars visible behind the vale of deep violet sky. Around them the walls of the half-opened pagoda seemed to have melted away and in their place loomed hedges of darkness. The breeze had dropped. An almost ghostly silence seemed to reign over the far stretching domain of the Palace. Only the perfumes of the drooping flowers from the quaintly shaped roof and from the shrubs which stretched to the lake remained to remind them of their surroundings. Hou Hsi lay in her husband’s arms and was very happy. She sat up suddenly.

“You think of me sometimes as I am, beloved?” she asked. “I am half—oh, more than half—Chinese girl, but all that is behind in my soul and brain is not all Chinese. A little of me is American, a little French, a little English. Which does my lord like best? So shall I fashion my life.”

“The whole,” he whispered. “It is you, dear one, who have changed my whole idea of womankind and love. Every part of you, every thought, every word I love as my religion.”

“Your religion?” she repeated, faintly wondering.

“My religion and yours,” he went on. “The religion of all the countless millions of the East. I think that with enlightenment has come the comforting thought that Buddha, Confucius, even Christ, are after all but the shadowy representations of an eternal and infinite truth. So many years the gods our ancestors worshipped have ceased to speak. I like to think that in those days of meditation, when the schemes which changed the world were fashioned, it was the fancied whisper of those gods—too long silent—which first shaped the dreams to which something not wholly of this world has given substance. Fancies, perhaps, dear Hou Hsi, but why should we believe that facts alone can build and glorify life?”

Her arms stole around him.

“Perhaps those people are right, Ziao Han,” she murmured, “who declare that you have worn through these amazing years the mantle of a prophet.”

She lay in his arms, her fingers upon his cheek, while for a few moments he pondered.

"It would always give me happiness to believe," he said "that a part of the inspiration which drives us on through life comes from the unknown and I do believe that we people who have been born with the mystical beliefs of the East come a little nearer to the fuller understanding of life. Yet, dear Hou Hsi, there are some of these Western customs, although alien to our world, which you make seem very precious to me."

Then his lips met hers and with a low sigh of content she crept a little closer into his protecting embrace.

* * * * *

With their arms linked closely together, Mark and Catherine made their way along the pathway of velvety turf which led through the grove of lime trees to the pavilion which was their temporary home. Soon they neared its fantastic front, fairy-like with the lanterns hanging from the balcony, and white robed servants moving about within. Mark, with sudden passion, drew her into her arms. Her lips met his eagerly but he felt the tears damp upon her soft cheeks.

"Catherine," he whispered, "your heart has ached a little to-night that you are not sitting at the banquet in the Kremlin amongst your own people, that you could not be listening to their songs in the street. Do not think that I blame you, sweetheart. It is so natural."

Her arms tightened around his neck.

"Mark," she protested, "you are mad to think it possible."

"Life will go on there," he continued, with just a trace of doubt still in his voice, "and it might so easily have been you reigning over your people, spending your life amongst them, instead of Sophie. As it is, with me you must move from corner to corner of the world. Our work must go on for many years. We must make all that we have won secure for all time. We must visit many countries but live in none."

There was reassurance absolute and complete in her joyous laugh.

"Oh, Mark, my sweetheart, my husband," she cried softly, "how foolish you are! There is no country for me save the country where you and I are together—no life for me without you. Those lights that are beckoning us through the trees there are beckoning me to heaven. The ships we ride on through the air or across the seas will bring me heaven—with you. I am happy because many of my people have found salvation through you and because they once more belong to a free and dignified nation. My heart is full of gratitude, but even that gratitude is part of my love."

He felt the mad beating of her heart as her arms tightened around his neck. It seemed to him that there was magic in the grove.

"Moments like these, Mark, cannot come all the time," she went on passionately. "Nothing but the truth has passed my lips. My country—my people—it is you who have restored them to life. Nothing, nothing counts with me but you. My love is changeless. You believe?"

"I believe," he assured her.

"It is enough."

She disengaged herself slowly from his arms. She moved towards the opening amongst the trees through which the lights of the gently swinging lanterns seemed to be beckoning them. She held out her hand.

"Come, Mark," she begged.