

Le Queux William

Her Majesty's Minister



William Le Queux
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«Public Domain»

Le Queux W.

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Chapter One His Excellency

“Then, plainly speaking, the whole thing remains a mystery?”

“Absolutely,” I responded. “All my efforts have unfortunately failed.”

“And you entertain no suspicion of anyone?”

“None whatever.”

“Not of that woman Yolande – or whatever her name is?”

“Certainly not of her,” I answered quickly. “She would assist us, if necessary.”

“Why are you so sure of that? She has only been in Paris a week.”

“Because I happen to know her.”

“You know her!” exclaimed His Excellency, unclasping his thin white hands and leaning across his big writing-table – a habit of his when suddenly interested. “Is she a personal friend of yours?”

I hesitated for a moment; then replied in the affirmative.

“Where did you know her?” he inquired quickly, fixing me with that sharp pair of black eyes that shone behind the zone of soft light shed by the green-shaded reading-lamp upon the table. He was sitting in the shadow, his thin, refined face ashen grey, his hair almost white. The one spot of colour was the fine star of Knight Grand Cross of the Bath glittering on the breast of his braided diplomatic uniform. Lord Barmouth, British Ambassador to the French Republic, had just returned from the President’s reception at the Elysée, and had summoned me for consultation.

“Well,” I responded, “I knew her in Rome, among other places.”

“H’m, I thought as much,” he remarked in a dry, dubious tone. “I don’t like her, Ingram – I don’t like her;” and I knew by the impatient snap of the Ambassador’s fingers that something had displeased him.

“You’ve seen her, then?”

“Yes,” he answered in an ambiguous tone, taking up a quill and making what appeared to be geometrical designs upon his blotting-pad. “She’s good-looking – uncommonly good-looking; but I mistrust her.”

“It is part of our creed to mistrust a pretty woman,” I remarked with a smile; for, as everyone knows, the fair sex plays a prominent part in the diplomacy of Europe. “But what cause have you for suspicion?”

He was silent for a moment; then he said:

“You were not at the ball at the Austrian Embassy the night before last, I believe?”

“No, I was not back from London in time,” I replied. “Was she there?”

“Yes. She was dancing with Hartmann, and they were speaking of you. I was chatting with Olsoufieff, and distinctly overheard your name mentioned.”

“With Hartmann!” I repeated. “That’s curious. He is scarcely a friend of ours.”

“I consider the circumstance suspicious, judged by the light of recent events,” he said. “Remember that the cause of our piece of ill-fortune still remains a mystery, and the stroke of diplomacy that we intended to effect as a coup against our enemies has, by the dastardly betrayal of our secret, placed us in a very unenviable position. This untoward incident has entirely checkmated us.”

“I fully realise our critical position,” I said seriously, “and I have done my utmost to discover the truth. Kaye has been active night and day.”

“Nevertheless, I fear that at Downing Street they will say hard things of us, Ingram;” and Her Majesty’s representative sighed heavily, resting his weary head upon his hand.

The Ambassador’s office was indeed a very thankless one, while my own position as second secretary of the Paris Embassy was a post not to be envied, even though it is popularly supposed to be one of the plums of the diplomatic service. With Paris full of spies endeavouring to discover our secrets and divine our instructions from Downing Street, and the cabinet noir ever at work upon our correspondence, it behoved us to be always on the alert, and to have resort to all manner of ingenious subterfuges in order to combat our persistent enemies.

The war-cloud hangs over Europe always. The mine is laid, and the slightest spark may fire it. The duty of the diplomatist is to intrigue so as to prevent that spark. It is the intrigue that is difficult, for counter-plots are met with everywhere. The power of England is feared; hence her isolation.

Those who live at home at ease think little of the small band of Englishmen in each of the capitals who, living ever upon the edge of a volcano, are straining every nerve to preserve the peace of Europe. How often the stability of empires trembles in the balance the British public little dreams. “The European Situation” is a stock heading in the London newspapers, but fortunately the journalists never know the secrets of our embassies, otherwise the world would very often be scared. Many a time in my own diplomatic career in Rome, in Brussels, and in Vienna, had I remained awake at night, fearing on the morrow a declaration of war; yet the chiefs under whom I have worked – those honest, upright, valiant servants of Queen and country – had skilfully evaded the threatened danger, and Europe remained in ignorance of how terribly near it had been to the clash of arms.

That night, as I sat with the chief, a trusted servant of Her Majesty, in his handsome private room in the Embassy, I knew that war was in the air. The responsibility resting upon him was of a sort to involve the prestige of the Queen’s Empire and the lives of thousands of her valiant sons. An ill-advised despatch, a hasty word, or an injudicious attitude would inevitably mean the disastrous explosion so long feared – the great European war that prophets have been predicting ever since the downfall of the French Empire.

Paris that July night was stifling. To us the tension of the day had been terrible. The catastrophe so long feared seemed now upon us. There was a breathless calm in the air outside, foreboding a storm.

“Has Kaye absolutely nothing to report?” asked His Excellency, at last breaking the silence.

“He returned from Madrid at nine o’clock to-night. His journey there was futile.”

“Ah!” exclaimed His Excellency, whose thin lips closed tightly again.

Through the years that I had served under him in Rome and afterwards in Paris I had never before seen him outwardly betray the slightest apprehension. So skilled was he as a diplomatist that his sangfroid was always perfect. His motto – one that he had often impressed upon me – was that the British lion should always remain fearless of his enemies. But now, for the first time, he was plainly agitated, dreading that war might result.

“Get me out the special cipher-book,” he said hoarsely at last. “I must telephone to Downing Street.”

In obedience I rose, opened with the key upon my chain the big safe, and took out the small morocco-bound volume containing the secret cipher by means of which His Excellency could communicate with Her Majesty’s Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs – a book supplied only to ambassadors themselves; and, because it is kept locked, its contents are never seen even by the staff of an embassy.

His Excellency unlocked it with his own key, took up his quill, and after searching here and there through the pages, commenced writing a bewildering row of letters and numerals intermingled, while in the meantime I had gone to the telephone instrument at the opposite end of the room and “rung up” London, until there came an answering voice from one of the night staff of the Foreign Office.

“Hullo! I’m Ingram, of the Paris Embassy. Who are you?” I asked.

In response came a password by which I knew I was actually speaking with Downing Street.

“Is the Marquess in London, or at Alderhurst, to-night?”

“Alderhurst. He left town this afternoon.”

“Then put me on there for an important despatch.”

“All right,” was the response; and some five minutes later the tiny bell rang, with an inquiry from the private secretary of the great statesman as to what I wanted.

I answered; then, His Excellency having risen and handed me the slip of official paper on which he had printed the cipher figures heavily with his quill, I prefaced the message by the usual formal announcement:

“From Lord Barmouth, Paris, to the Most Noble the Marquess of Malvern, London. July 12th, 1:30 a.m.”

Then in continuation I read slowly and distinctly each letter and numeral, the secretary at Alderhurst afterwards repeating the whole message, so that there should be no possibility of mistake.

Nearly a quarter of an hour elapsed, during which time His Excellency, with his hands behind his back, paced feverishly up and down the room. Of the nature of that despatch I was in utter ignorance, but from his manner it was evident that the problem was one vital to the interests of the British Empire. By night, as well as by day, those responsible for the maintenance of the prestige of England as the first Empire of the world are always active. How little the public knows of the stealthy, treacherous ways of modern diplomacy, of the armies of spies seeking always to plot and counter-plot, of the base subterfuges employed by certain noted foreign diplomatists, or of the steady perseverance of the Queen’s representatives at the Courts of Europe! And how little, I fear, they care!

To most people the diplomatic career is synonymous with an easy occupation in which the wearing of a uniform and the attendance at brilliant functions are the greatest inconveniences. The newspapers flippantly criticise our actions in leading articles, and declare that our diplomacy is utterly worthless beside that of Germany, Russia, or France. Those who write, as well as those who read, never reflect that our chief duty is to foil the provocations offered to us by the Powers who are anxious for war. Every British Ambassador at a foreign Court had been told from the lips of his beloved Sovereign – now, alas! deceased – that he must prevent war. That instruction was to him as sacred as a religion.

“The President talked for twenty minutes to-night with de Wolkenstein,” observed His Excellency, halting suddenly and facing me. “I wonder if they know anything in Vienna?”

“I think not,” I replied. “I met Count Berchtold in the Grand Café purposely this evening, and he made no mention of anything to lead me to believe that the secret was out in that direction.”

“If it is out, then it has been circulated by our friends in the Rue de Lille,” he said, meaning the German Embassy.

“Perhaps,” I responded. “But I hardly think that Count de Hindenburg would care to imperil his position by so doing. He would rather endeavour to assist us in this affair, because the interests of England and Germany are entirely mutual in this matter.”

“I tell you, Ingram,” he cried angrily – “I tell you that this dastardly piece of trickery is some woman’s work!”

As he spoke, the door suddenly opened, and there burst into the room a tall girlish figure in a pretty toilette of turquoise chiffon, wearing an open cape of handsome brocade about her shoulders.

“O father!” she cried merrily, “we’ve had such an awfully good time at the Baroness’s!” Then, next instant, astonished by his words, she drew back in quick surprise.

“What trickery is a woman’s work?” she asked, glancing inquiringly at me.

“Nothing, my dear,” His Excellency hastened to reply, placing his thin hand tenderly upon her shoulder – “nothing, at least, that concerns you.”

“But you are not well!” she cried in alarm. Then, turning to me, said: “Look, Mr Ingram, how pale he is!”

“Your father is rather overburdened by important business,” I replied.

Her face assumed a puzzled expression. Sibyl, the pretty, dark-haired daughter of Lord Barmouth, was acknowledged on all sides to be more than usually beautiful, and was the pet of diplomatic Paris. With her mother she went everywhere in that dazzling vortex of gaiety, in which the diplomatist accredited to France is bound to move. Ah! that glare and glitter, that constant whirl, that never-ceasing music! How weary I was of it all, and how it jarred upon me!

And why? Well, to speak the truth, I myself had an affair of the heart, and my thoughts were always far from those brilliant spectacles in which I was merely an official in a braided uniform.

“What has occurred, Mr Ingram?” asked the Ambassador’s daughter anxiously. “Father is certainly not himself to-night.”

“Another political complication,” I responded; “that is all.”

“Sibyl, my dear,” exclaimed her father, gently taking her hand, “you know that I forbid any inquiries to be made into matters which must be secret, even from you.”

“I came to tell you all about the ball,” she said, pouting. “I was introduced to a most pleasant man named Wolf, and danced with him several times.”

“Wolf!” I cried quickly. “Rodolphe Wolf?”

“That was his name. He was dark, about forty, with a small pointed black beard. Do you know him?”

“Wolf!” I repeated; then, suddenly recovering from the surprise she had caused me by uttering that name, I answered carelessly: “Perhaps it may be the same man I knew slightly some years ago.”

“We had awfully good fun. He is so amusing, but seems quite a stranger in Paris.”

I smiled inwardly. Rodolphe Wolf a stranger in Paris! The thought was amusing.

“And what was your conversation about?” I inquired of her, smiling pleasantly the while.

“You want to know whether he flirted with me, Mr Ingram?” she laughed mischievously. “I know you of old. It really isn’t fair.”

“He said nothing to you about your father, or about the composition of his staff?” I inquired eagerly.

“Nothing.”

“And you did not mention my name?” I asked anxiously.

“No. Why? You talk as though you don’t want him to know you are in Paris.”

“You have exactly guessed my desire,” I replied. “If you meet him again, kindly oblige me by saying nothing.”

“Do not utter a word regarding matters here at the Embassy, Sibyl,” added her father seriously. “You understand?”

“Of course not. I’m a diplomat’s daughter, and can keep a secret when necessary. But tell me, father,” she added, “who is the woman of whom you were speaking when I came in?”

“It is our affair, my dear – entirely our affair,” he said in a hard voice. “It is nothing you need trouble your head over. I’m glad you’ve enjoyed the ball. Say good-night, and leave us.”

“But you look quite ill,” she said with concern in her voice, stroking his heated forehead with her hand. “Cannot I get you something?”

“Nothing, dear.”

She was a charming type of English girl, smart, accomplished, and utterly devoted to her father. That she delighted in mild flirtations here and there in the cosmopolitan circle in which she moved I was well aware, and we were such old friends that I often chaffed her about her fickleness. But that night she had met Rodolphe Wolf, of all men. The fact was strange, to say the least.

“Shall I send Harding to you?” she asked, standing there in the shadow, the diamond star in her well-dressed hair alone catching the light and gleaming with a thousand fires. The star was a parting gift to her by Queen Margherita of Italy, with whom she had been an especial favourite while her father was Ambassador in Rome.

“No,” answered His Excellency. “Please say good-night, dear, and leave us.”

Then he bent, kissed her tenderly on the brow, and dismissed her.

“Well,” she laughed poutingly, “if I am ordered off, I suppose I must go. I’m a striking example of the obedient daughter. Good-night, Mr Ingram.”

And as I held open the door for her to pass out, she added mischievously:

“I’ll leave you to talk together over the shortcomings of my sex;” and laughing gaily she disappeared down the corridor.

Chapter Two

Two Enigmas

“Who is this Wolf?” the Ambassador inquired quickly, as soon as I had closed the door. “I don’t seem to recollect the name.”

“I have a suspicion,” I responded. “When it is established I will explain.”

“An alias – eh?”

“I think so,” I said. “Your daughter should be warned against him. They had better not meet.”

“I will see to that,” he said, and the next instant the telephone-bell rang loudly, announcing the response from Alderhurst.

In a moment we were both at the instrument. Then with the receiver at my ear I inquired who was there.

“Durnford, Alderhurst,” was the response. “Are you Ingram?”

I replied in the affirmative, adding the word without the receipt of which no cipher despatch is ever sent by telephone, lest some trickery should be attempted.

“Take down, then,” came the secretary’s voice from the other side of the Channel. “From the Marquess of Malvern, to His Excellency, Lord Barmouth, Paris. July 12th, 2:10 a.m.,” and then followed a long row of ciphers, each of which I carefully wrote down upon the paper before me, reading it through aloud, in order that he might compare it with his copy.

Then, when the voice from Alderhurst gave the word “End,” I hung up the receiver and gave the paper into His Excellency’s eager hands.

Those puzzling lines of letters and numerals were secret instructions from the ruler of England’s destiny, who had been called from his bed to decide one of the most critical problems of statesmanship. Truly the position of the British Minister for Foreign Affairs is no enviable one. The responsibility is the heaviest weighing upon any one man in the whole world.

His Excellency seated himself quickly at his table, and with the aid of a second book which I handed him from the safe proceeded to decipher the Chief’s despatch. With his pen he placed the equivalent beneath each cipher, and as he did so I saw that his countenance fell. He went pale as death.

“Ah!” he gasped, when he had finished the arrangement and had read the deciphered message through. “It is exactly as I feared. Never in the course of my career as Ambassador has such a serious complication arisen —*never!*”

I was silent. What, indeed, could I say? I well knew that he was not the man to betray the slightest emotion without good reason.

For a moment he sat there, resting his brow upon his hand, staring blankly at the paper I had given him. The nature of his secret instructions I knew not. His utter despair was sufficient to convince me, however, that a catastrophe was inevitable. Only the low ticking of the clock upon the high mantelshelf broke the painful silence. The representative of Her Majesty – one of England’s most skilled and trusted diplomats – sighed heavily, for he knew too well how black was the outlook at that moment – how, indeed, because of our mysterious betrayal, our enemies had triumphed, and how, at the other embassies, that very night the downfall of England’s power was being discussed.

“All this is a woman’s doing, I tell you!” he cried, striking the table fiercely, rising and pacing the room. “We must discover the truth – we must, you hear?”

“I am making every possible effort,” I answered; adding, “I think I have hitherto shown myself worthy of your confidence?”

“Certainly, Ingram,” he hastened to assure me. “Without you here I should not dare to act as I have done. I know that nothing escapes you. Your shrewdness is equal to that of old Sterk, the Chief of Police in Vienna.”

“You are too complimentary,” I said; “I have merely done my duty.”

“But if we could only get at the truth in this affair!”

“At present it is an absolute mystery. Only two persons were aware of the secret. You knew it, and I also knew it. And yet it is out – indeed, the very terms of the agreement are known!”

Suddenly halting, he pushed open the window, and looked out upon the hot, overcast night. Paris was still bright with her myriad electric lights, and the glaring cafés on the boulevards were still as busy as during the hour of the absinthe. The City of Pleasure never sleeps.

He leaned over the balcony, gasping for air; but in an instant I was behind him, saying:

“Someone may be watching outside. Is it really wise for you to be seen?”

“No,” he answered. “You’re right, Ingram;” and he turned back and closed the long windows opening upon the balcony. “A bold front must be maintained through all.” He walked to his table, took up the despatch, and, striking a vesta, ignited it, holding it until it was completely consumed. Then he cast the blackened tinder into the grate, growing in a single instant calm again. “You are right, Ingram,” he repeated rather hoarsely. “Our enemies must not obtain any inkling that we know the truth, if we are to effect a successful counter-plot. In this affair I detect the hand of a woman. Is not that your opinion?”

“I must admit that it is,” I responded. “I believe there is a female spy somewhere.”

“But who is she?” he cried anxiously.

“Ah!” I said, “we have yet to discover her name.”

“It is not Yolande?” he asked dubiously.

“No. Of that I feel quite certain.”

“But you are certain of nothing else?”

“All the rest is, I regret, an absolute mystery.”

There was no disguising the fact that the information which by very mysterious means had leaked out from the Embassy had created the most intense excitement in certain other foreign embassies in Paris. Kaye, the chief of our secret service in the French capital – a shrewd fellow, whose capacity for learning which way the diplomatic wind was blowing was little short of marvellous – had come to me at midnight to report that the Spanish Ambassador was exchanging frequent despatches with Madrid. That statement was sufficient to show the enemy’s hand.

For fully six months France had been scheming to obtain a naval station in the Mediterranean, and the point she coveted was Ceuta, on the Moorish coast, opposite Gibraltar. Knowledge of this caused us to exercise the most delicate diplomacy in order to thwart the conspiracy to aim a blow against England’s naval power in the Mediterranean. A week ago I had been in London, and the Marquess of Malvern himself had given me a crossed despatch to convey to my chief in Paris. This had contained certain instructions in cipher, which, on my return, I had helped to translate into English. Then the despatch was burnt by His Excellency, and we alone knew its contents. From the moment I received it in the Marquess’s private room at the Foreign Office, until the moment when I handed it over to Lord Barmouth in Paris with its five great seals intact, it had never left the pouch of chamois-leather which, when travelling with despatches, I always wore around my waist, next my skin. For spies to have obtained a copy of it was impossible. I had seen it written, and had likewise seen it destroyed. It was not likely either that the British Ambassador had himself exposed his secret instructions in a matter of such delicacy, where the greatest finesse and the most skilful diplomacy were necessary; and equally certain was it that I myself had not uttered a single word.

The secret instructions showed marvellous foresight, as did all the actions of the great statesman in whose hands rested the prestige of England among the Powers. They were briefly to show with great delicacy to the Spanish Ambassador that his Government, having regard to existing relations, had no right to sell Ceuta to any Power, and that if any attempt were made by any other Government to establish a naval station there, England would oppose it to the utmost, even to the extent of hostilities. Yet somehow, by means that formed a most puzzling enigma, these secret instructions had

become instantly known to France; and even before Lord Barmouth could obtain an interview with the Marquis Leon y Castillo, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs had called at the Embassy in the Boulevard de Courcelles, and had apparently arranged a line of action. Thus England had been checkmated, and in all probability the sale of that most important strategic point in the Mediterranean had already been effected.

Kaye had been to Madrid, and his inquiries in the Spanish capital tended to confirm this theory.

Truly we were in evil case. So decisive had been His Excellency's instructions that if he did not now vigorously protest and threaten a cessation of diplomatic negotiations it would exhibit such weakness as the British Government must never show. That motto of Lord Malvern's, "To be strong is to avert war; to be weak is to invite it," is ever foremost in the mind of each representative of Her Majesty at a foreign Court. Yet Lord Barmouth's dilemma was, indeed, a serious one. He had declared the exposure of our secret due to some woman's scheming, and suspected one person – the pretty Yolande de Foville. His suspicion of her caused me a good deal of reflection; and as I walked along the boulevard to my bachelor apartment au troisième, I pondered seriously. What, I wondered, had caused him to think ill of her? If she had danced with Hartmann, this action was surely not enough to condemn her. Yet why, I wondered, had she mentioned myself? And why, indeed, was Rodolphe Wolf, of all men, in Paris?

No, I did not like the aspect of things in the least. The night was absolutely breathless, and the asphalt of the boulevard seemed to reflect back into one's face the heat of the sun that had blazed upon it during the day. I removed my hat, and walked with it in my hand, my brain awl. The spies of France had effected a coup against us, and within twenty-four hours Europe might, I knew, be convulsed by a declaration of war.

Here and there the cafés were still open, but few customers were inside. A pair of drunken roysterers staggered past me singing that catchy song of the less fashionable boulevards:

"Dansons la ronde
Des marmites de Paris,
Ohé! les souris!
Les rongeuses de monde!
Faisons sauter avec nous
Nos michets et nos marlous.
Dansons la ronde!
Paris est à nous!"

With that single exception all was silent. From half-past three till four in the morning is the quietest period that the City of Pleasure experiences. She is dormant only one half-hour in the whole twenty-four.

Yolande was suspected of being a spy! The thought seemed absolutely absurd. She was Belgian, it was true, and there is somehow always a prejudice against Belgian women in Paris, due perhaps to the fact that although they speak French with an accent, they are often perfect linguists. But for Yolande to be actually a spy – why, the thing was ridiculous!

Arrived at my own rooms, I found Mackenzie, my old Scotch manservant, awaiting me.

"Mr Kaye called, sir, half an hour ago," he said. "He could not wait, for he was leaving Paris."

"Leaving Paris?" I echoed, for the ubiquitous chief of the secret service had only come back from Madrid a few hours before.

"Yes, sir. He left you a note;" and my well-trained man drew a letter from his pocket. He always kept my letters upon his person, in order that any callers might not pry into them during my absence.

I tore open the note eagerly, and read the few scribbled lines. Next instant the paper almost fell from my fingers. I held my breath, scarcely believing my own eyes. Yet the writing was plain enough, and was as follows:

“Within the past hour I have ascertained that your friend Yolande de Foville is a secret agent. Keep strict watch upon her. I have left instructions that if she leaves Paris she is to be followed. I go to Berlin at once to make inquiries, and am leaving by the 4:30 train this morning. I have the address you gave, and the particulars concerning her. Shall return as soon as possible.

“K.”

I crushed the note in my hand, and, walking on into my sitting-room, gulped down some brandy. Everything had conspired against me. When I had given Kaye those details concerning my charming little friend three years ago, I had never dreamed that he would register them and afterwards use them in an endeavour to fasten upon her a charge of being a spy. Yet he was actually on his way to Berlin, and any attempt upon my part to hinder him would only be misconstrued into a treasonable endeavour to shield her.

Upon the table before me stood her photograph in a silver frame, looking out at me. I took it up. Those eyes were so innocent that I could not bring myself to believe that any evil lurked in them. Surely she would not attempt to harm me? Such an action was absolutely contrary to any woman's nature.

Yolande! The sound of that name brought back to me a sweet, tender memory of the past. I sighed as the recollection of that bygone day arose within me, and flung myself down into an easy-chair to smoke and to think. In the blue ascending rings from my cigarette her face seemed to smile at me with those red parted lips and merry eyes, clear and azure as a child's. How charming and chic she had once appeared to me in those days when we had first met – in those days before I had known Edith Austin, my absent well-beloved! Her portrait, too, was there – the picture of a woman, sweet, tender, grave-faced, of similar age perhaps, but whose peerless beauty was typically English and devoid of any artificiality. I took it up and touched it reverently with my lips. I loved the original of that photograph with all the strength of my being, hoping always that some day ere long I might ask her to become my wife.

Some there are who hold the theory that to all diplomatists, ambassadors excepted, wives are an unnecessary encumbrance. I admit that there is much to be said in favour of the celibate state as the ideal existence for the secretary or attaché, who is bound, more or less, to make himself agreeable to the many cosmopolitan ladies who make up the diplomatic circle, and sometimes even to flirt with them, when occasion requires. Yet after fifteen years or so beneath the shadows of the various thrones of Europe, a man tires of the life, and longs for the one sweet woman whom he can trust and love. In this I was no exception. I loved Edith Austin with all my heart and all my soul; and she, I felt assured, reciprocated my affection.

It is part of the diplomatist's creed to be on good terms with all and sundry of the feminine butterflies who hover about the embassies, no matter what their age or nationality. Hence it was that five years ago, while stationed at Brussels, I had become attracted by Yolande de Foville. Once, long before I met Edith, I fancied myself in love with her. Her father, Count de Foville, was aide-de-camp to King Leopold, and with her mother she moved in the best society in Paris and Brussels. On several occasions I had been invited for the boar hunting at the great gloomy old château at Houffalize, in the Ardennes forest, where the powerful de Fovilles had been seigneurs through five centuries.

It was a dull, snowbound, dreary place in winter, bare and chill, furnished in ancient style, and situated thirty miles from the nearest railway, in the midst of a flat forest country. It was, therefore, not surprising that on the death of the Count, Yolande and her mother should prefer to leave Belgium and travel in England and Italy, spending the winter at Rome or at Monte Carlo, the spring in Paris, and summer in one or other of the fashionable French watering-places. During three years we had been excellent friends, and after I had been promoted from Brussels to the Embassy in Rome, she

came with her mother and spent the spring in the Eternal City, with the result that our firm friendship became even firmer. I am fain to admit that our flirtation was of the kind called desperate, and that it had ended in love.

And a week ago she had suddenly arrived in Paris at the smart little flat in the Rue de Courcelles, which her mother had possessed for years, but now so seldom occupied. Her arrival was unexpected, and I had only known of it from Giraud, the military attaché at the Belgian Legation, a friend of my Brussels days, whom I met in the Café de Paris one evening after the opera, and who had said suddenly:

“Do you, my dear Ingram, know that a little friend of yours has arrived in Paris?”

“Who?” I inquired eagerly.

“Yolande,” was the response. “You used to be her cavalier in Brussels in the old days. Have you forgotten her?”

His announcement surprised me. Since my friendship with Edith had grown to be a grand passion, I had exchanged no correspondence with Yolande. Indeed, the last I had heard of her was that she and the Countess were at Cairo spending the winter.

To tell the truth I was rather glad that she had not sought me out, for I had no wish to renew her acquaintance, now that I had found a woman in England whom I meant to try to win for my wife. Yet as I looked back at the past through the haze of my cigarette-smoke I was compelled to admit that I had spent some charming hours by her side, dancing at those brilliant balls in Brussels or driving in that pretty wood so beloved of the Bruxellois, the Bois de la Cambre. Many were the incidents that came back to me as I sat there pondering. Nevertheless, in the storehouse of memory I found nothing half sweet enough to tempt me from my love for Edith.

The denunciation of the pretty Yolande as a spy staggered belief; yet the Chief himself, as well as Kaye, was convinced, and the latter was already on his way to the north to prosecute inquiries.

What, I wondered, had really aroused their suspicions? As His Excellency had not seen Kaye since his return from Madrid, they could not have exchanged views. It seemed my duty to call and see her, to renew the acquaintance that I so strongly desired to end, and, indeed, to continue the flirtation of bygone days with a view to discovering the truth. Was it fair? Was it just? I hesitated to call upon her, half fearful lest her charm and natural chic should again attract me towards her. Nevertheless, it was my duty, as servant of my Sovereign, to attempt to discover England's secret enemies.

Chapter Three

Yolande

The remainder of that night I spent in restless agitation, and at the Embassy early next morning showed His Excellency the note that Kaye had left for me.

“You must see her, Ingram,” he said briefly. “You must obtain her secret from her.”

“But I cannot believe that she is a secret agent!” I declared. “We were friends, and she surely would not seek to injure me?”

“Trust nobody, my dear Ingram,” answered the grave-eyed old man. “You know how unreliable women are where diplomacy is concerned. Remember the incident of the Princess Ghelarducci in Rome.”

My lips compressed themselves. He referred to a matter which, for me, was anything but a pleasant recollection. The Princess, after learning our intentions regarding Abyssinia, had openly betrayed us; and I had very foolishly thought her my friend.

“I shall call on her this afternoon,” I answered briefly. “The worst of it is that my action will lead her to think that I desire to renew the acquaintance.”

“H’m, I see,” observed His Excellency quickly, for his shrewdness had detected the truth. “You were once in love with her – eh?”

I nodded.

“Then don’t allow her to think that your love has cooled,” he urged. “Act diplomatically in this matter, and strive to get at the truth.”

“And deceive her?”

“Deception is permissible if she is a spy.”

“But she is not a spy,” I declared quickly.

“That remains to be seen!” he snapped. He then turned on his heel and passed into an adjoining room.

At three o’clock I presented my card at the flat in the Rue de Courcelles, and was admitted to a cosy little salon, where the persiennes were closed to keep out the blazing July sun, and the subdued light was welcome after the glare of the streets. Scarcely, however, had my eyes become accustomed to the semi-darkness, when the door suddenly opened, and I found myself face to face with the woman I had loved a few years ago.

“Gerald! You!” she cried in English, with that pretty accent which had always struck me as so charming.

Our hands clasped. I looked into her face and saw that in the two years which had elapsed she had grown even more beautiful. In a cool white dress of soft, clinging muslin, which, although simply made, bore the unmistakable stamp of a couturière of the first order, she stood before me, my hand in hers, in silence.

“So you have come to me?” she said in a strained voice. “You have come, at last?”

“You did not let me know you were in Paris,” I protested.

“Giraud told you four days ago,” she responded, “and you could not spare a single half-hour for me until to-day!” she added in a tone of reproach. “Besides, I wrote to you from Cairo, and you never replied.”

“Forgive me,” I urged – “forgive me, Yolande. It is really my fault.”

“Because you have forgotten me,” she said huskily. “Here, in Paris, you have so many distractions that memories of our old days in Brussels and at Houffalize have all been swept away. Come, admit that what I say is the truth.”

“I shall admit nothing of the kind, Yolande,” I answered, with diplomatic caution. “I only admit my surprise at finding you here in July. Why, there is nobody here except our unfortunate selves at the embassies. The boulevards are given over to the perspiring British tourist in knickerbockers and the usual week-end trippers who ‘do’ the city in a char-à-banc.”

She laughed for the first time, and seated herself upon a large settee covered with yellow silk, motioning me to a chair near her.

“It is true,” she said. “Paris is not at all pleasant just now. We are only here for frocks. In a week we go to Marienbad. And you – how are you?” and she surveyed me with her head held slightly aside in that piquante manner I knew so well.

“The same,” I laughed – “ever the same.”

“Not the same to me,” she hastened to protest.

“I might make a similar charge against yourself,” I said. “Remember, you did not tell me you were in Paris.”

“Because I thought you would know it quickly enough. I wanted, if possible, to meet you accidentally and surprise you. I went to the ball at the German Embassy, but you were not there.”

“I was in London,” I explained briefly, my thoughts reverting to the allegation against her and the unhesitating action of the wary Kaye in travelling direct to Berlin.

If there was any man in Europe who could clear up a mystery it was the indefatigable chief of the British secret service. He lived in Paris ostensibly as an English lawyer, with offices in the Boulevard des Italiens, next the Café Américain. Hence his sudden journeys hither and thither were believed to be undertaken in the interests of various clients. But although he had an Irish solicitor, O’Brien by name, to attend to the inquiries of any chance clients, the amount of legal business carried on in those offices was really nil. The place was, in fact, the headquarters of the British secret service on the Continent.

“I, too, was in England a year ago,” she said. “We were invited to a house-party up in Scotland. Mother was bored, but I had great fun. An English home seems somehow so much jollier than the houses where one visits in any other country. You know how I love the English!”

“Is that meant as a compliment?” I laughed.

“Of course,” she answered. “But English diplomatists are just as grave as those of any other nation. Your people are always full of all sorts of horrid secrets and things.”

She referred to the old days in Brussels, for she knew well the difficulties under which our diplomacy had been conducted there, owing to the eternal questions involving Egypt and the Congo.

But I laughed lightly. I did not intend that she should suspect the real motive of my call. Evidently she knew nothing of my love for Edith Austin, or she would have referred to it. Fortunately I had been able to keep it a secret from all.

“And you are actually leaving us in a week?”

I observed, for want of something else to say. “I hear that Marienbad is crowded this season.”

“We are going to visit my uncle, Prince Stolberg, who has a villa there.”

Then I asked her of our mutual friends in Brussels, and she in return retailed to me all the latest gossip concerning them. As she sat there in the subdued light, her white dress, relieved by a touch of turquoise at the wrists and waist, she presented a picture graceful, delicate, and altogether charming. I reasoned with myself as she went on chattering. No; it was not surprising that I had once fallen in love with her. She was more French than Belgian, for the days of her girlhood had been passed mostly in France; her Christian name was French, and in manner she possessed all that smartness and chic peculiar to the Parisienne. Mentally I compared her with Edith, but next instant laughed within myself. Such comparison was impossible. Their styles were as different as were their nationalities. Beside Edith, my well-beloved, the beauty of this fair-haired, gesticulating girl paled entirely, and became insipid. The Englishwoman who held me beneath the spell of her soft and truthful eyes was without a peer.

Still, Yolande amused me with her chatter. The reader will forgive me this admission, for in calling there I was only acting a part. I was endeavouring in the interests of my country to find out whether there was any truth in the allegation recently made against her by my friend. Of a sudden a thought crossed my mind, and I asked:

“Have you met many acquaintances since you’ve been in Paris?”

“Only Hartmann and some of the people at the Legation,” she responded. “We are just going to five o’clock with the Princess Olsoufieff this afternoon.”

“There is an old friend of yours just arrived,” I said. “Have you met him?”

“An old friend?” she echoed in surprise. “Man or woman?”

“A man,” I answered. “Rodolphe Wolf.”

“Rodolphe Wolf!” she gasped, starting up, the colour dying from her lips in an instant. “Rodolphe Wolf in Paris – impossible!”

“He was at the Baroness de Chalencon’s last night,” I said quite calmly, watching her face the while.

Her sudden fear and surprise made plain a fact of which I had not before been aware – namely, that there was something more than a casual link between them. Years ago, when in Brussels, I had suspected Wolf of being a secret agent, and the fact that she was closely acquainted with him appeared to prove that my Chief’s suspicion was not unfounded.

She had risen. Her hands were trembling, and although she strove desperately to betray to me no outward sign of agitation, she was compelled to support herself by clutching the small table at her side. Her countenance was blanched to the lips. She presented the appearance of one haunted by some terrible dread.

“Wolf!” she gasped again, as though speaking to herself. Then, turning to me, she stretched forth both her hands, and, looking earnestly into my eyes, cried in wild desperation: “Gerald, save me! For the sake of our love of the old days, save me!”

“From what?” I cried, jumping up and catching her by both hands. “Tell me, Yolande. If I can assist you I certainly will. Why are you so distressed?”

She was silent, with one trembling hand pressed upon her heart, as though to stay its wild, tumultuous beating.

“No,” she said in a hoarse whisper, “it is useless – all useless.”

“But if you are in distress I can surely help you,” I said.

“Alas! you cannot,” she answered in despair. “You do not know – you cannot understand.”

“Why not tell me? Confide in me,” I urged.

“No,” she replied. “I am very foolish – forgive me;” and she tried to smile.

“The news that Wolf is here has upset you,” I said. “Why?”

“He has escaped.”

“From where?”

“From prison.”

I was silent. I knew not what to say. This declaration of hers was strange. It was startling news to me that Rodolphe Wolf had been in prison.

“You have asked me to save you,” I said, reverting to her wild supplication. “I will do so willingly if you only tell me how.”

“It is impossible,” she said in a broken voice, shaking her head mournfully. “By what you have told me I am forewarned.”

A deep sigh escaped her, and I saw that her fingers worked restlessly in the palms of her hands. She was desperate.

“Can I do absolutely nothing?” I asked in a tone of sympathy, placing my hand tenderly upon her shoulder.

“Nothing,” she answered in a hoarse whisper. “I am not fit to talk further. Let us say good-bye.”

“Then you prefer that I should leave you?”

“Yes,” she said, holding out her hand. “Forgive me for this, but I want to go to my own room to think. What you have told me has upset me.”

“Tell me plainly – you fear that man?”

She nodded in the affirmative.

“And you will not allow me either to advise or to assist you?”

“No,” she said hoarsely. “Go, Gerald. Leave me! When we meet again I shall be calmer than I am now.”

Her face was deathly pale; her eyes had a distinct look of terror in them.

“Very well,” I answered when again she had urged me to leave her; “if you insist, I will go. But remember that if I can be of service, Yolande, I am ready at once to render you assistance. Good-bye,” and I pressed her hand in sympathy.

She burst into tears.

“Farewell,” she faltered.

Then I turned, and, bowing, went forth into the glaring sunshine of the boulevard.

She had virtually admitted a close acquaintance with a man upon whom distinct suspicion rested, and her actions had been those of a guilty woman. My thoughts were full of that interview and its painful ending as I walked back towards the Embassy.

Chapter Four

A Curious Story

There was war in the air. At the Embassy we could not conceal from ourselves the seriousness of the situation. From hour to hour we were living in dread lest diplomatic negotiations should be broken off with the French Republic. We had discovered what seemed very much like a conspiracy against England, and as an energetic protest it appeared quite possible that the Marquess of Malvern might order my Chief to leave Paris. This would mean a rupture of diplomatic relations, and in all probability war.

Never in the history of modern Europe had there been a day so critical as that blazing, well-remembered one in mid-July. There were ugly rumours of complications in the Transvaal. The fate of certain nations trembled in the balance. In every capital diplomatists were active, some striving to force war, others endeavouring to prevent it. A diplomatist's life is assuredly no sinecure. The British public, as I have said before, little dreams of the constant anxiety and terrible tension which are parts of the daily life of its faithful servants abroad.

On my return to the Embassy I found that some important despatches had been brought from London by Anderson, the foreign service messenger.

He was sitting in my room smoking a cigarette, and awaiting me in order to obtain the receipt for his despatch-box. A tall, round-faced, merry man of middle age, he was an especial favourite in all the embassies as far as Teheran. A thorough cosmopolitan and man of the world, he had resigned his commission in the Scots Greys to become one of that half-dozen of the greyhounds of Europe known as Queen's messengers.

"Well, Anderson," I exclaimed, shaking his hand on entering, "what's the news from Downing Street?"

"Oh, nothing very fresh," he laughed, sinking back in his chair again, and passing me over the receipt for signature. "Old Tuite, of the Treaty Department, has retired on his pension this week. That's about all that's new. The Chief, however, seems busy. I'm loaded with despatches."

"Where for?"

"Vienna and Constantinople. I leave by the Orient express in an hour's time," he answered, with a glance at his watch.

"Then you're getting over a little ground just now?" I laughed.

"A little ground!" he echoed. "Well, I've been two trips to Petersburg this month, twice here to Paris, and once to Vienna. I've only slept one night in London since the 1st."

"You're a bit sick of it, I should think," I observed, looking at the round face lit up by its pair of merry grey eyes. He was an easy-going fellow; his good-humour never seemed ruffled.

"Oh, it agrees with me," he laughed lightly. "I don't care as long as I get the monthly run to Teheran now and then. That's a bit of a change, you know, after these everlasting railways, with their stuffy sleeping-cars and abominable arrangements for giving a man indigestion."

I examined the box to see that the seals affixed in Downing Street were intact, then signed the receipt and handed it back to him.

Of the corps of Queen's messengers – nicknamed "the greyhounds" because of the badge which each wears suspended round his neck and concealed beneath his cravat, a silver greyhound surmounted by the Royal arms – Captain Jack Anderson was the most popular. A welcome guest at every embassy or legation, he was on friendly terms with the whole staff, from the Ambassador himself down to the hall-porter, and he carried the gossip of the embassies to and fro across Europe. From him we all gathered news of our old colleagues in other capitals – of their joys and their sorrows, their difficulties and their junketings. His baggage being by international courtesy free from Customs'

examination, he oft-times carried with him a new frock for an ambassador's wife or daughter – a service which always put him high in the good graces of the feminine portion of the diplomatic circle.

“Kaye seems bobbing about pretty much,” he observed, handing me his cigarette-case. Anderson's cigarettes were well known for their excellence, for he purchased them at a shop in Petersburg, and often distributed a box in one or other of the embassies. “I met him a week ago on board the Calais boat, and two days later I came across him in the buffet down at Bâle. He was, however, as close as an oyster.”

“Of course. It isn't likely that he'd talk very much,” I remarked. “His profession is to know everything, and at the same time to affect ignorance. He went to Berlin last night.”

“We had breakfast together in the early morning at Bâle, and he questioned me closely about a friend of yours.”

“Who?”

“A lady – Mademoiselle de Foville. You remember her in Brussels, don't you?”

“Mademoiselle de Foville!” I echoed. The denunciation of her as a secret agent instantly flashed through my mind.

“Yes, you were extremely friendly with her in Brussels,” he went on. “Don't you recollect that you introduced me to her one evening at an al-fresco concert in the Vauxhall Gardens, where we sat together for quite a long time chatting?”

“I remember distinctly,” I responded. Every detail of that balmy summer night in those gaily illuminated gardens came back to me in that moment. I loved Yolande in those long-past days. “And what did Kaye want to know regarding her?”

“He asked me whether I had ever met her, and I told him that you had once introduced us.”

“Well?”

“Oh, nothing much else. He remarked how very charming she was – a verdict in which we both agreed. Have you seen her lately?”

I hesitated for a moment.

“Yes, she's here, in Paris.”

He bent forward quickly, regarding me curiously.

“That's strange. How long has she been here?” he inquired with a rather puzzled look.

“Only a few days. I did not know that she was here till yesterday,” I replied with affected carelessness.

“Ah, I thought she could not have been here long.”

“Why?”

“Because only a week ago she travelled in the same compartment as myself between Berlin and Cologne.”

“And did you claim acquaintance with her?” I inquired quickly.

“No. She had a companion with her – a pimply-faced, ugly Johnnie, whom I took to be a German. They spoke in German all the time.”

Could it be, I wondered, that Yolande and her companion had travelled with Anderson with some evil intent?

“Didn't you speak to them?”

“The man tried to open a conversation with me, but I pretended to be Italian, without any knowledge of German or English, so he didn't get very far. To affect Italian is generally a sure game, for so few people speak it in comparison with those who know other Continental languages.”

“You wanted to overhear their conversation – eh?”

“I wanted to ascertain what their game was,” answered the Queen's messenger. “They eyed my despatch-box very curiously; and it was to me an extremely suspicious circumstance that although they joined the train at Berlin they did not enter my compartment until an hour later, when the express stopped to change engines.”

“You were alone?”

“Yes, and it was at night,” he answered, adding: “To me it was also a curious circumstance that only three days afterwards Kaye should become so deeply interested in her. I had never seen her from that night in Brussels until we had met in the train, but I’ve a good memory for faces. I can swear I was not mistaken.”

“You speak as though you suspected her,” I said, looking straight into his ruddy countenance, which had grown unusually serious while we had been speaking.

“Well, to tell the truth, I did suspect her,” he responded. “I didn’t half like the look of the man. He was well-dressed, but as you know I’ve always a sharp eye where my fellow-travellers are concerned, and I felt certain that there was something shady about him. They shifted about all night, and were constantly watching to see whether I had gone to sleep. But all their watching was without reward. Jack Anderson never sleeps while he has a crossed despatch upon him;” and he blew a cloud of smoke upward from his lips.

“But surely you don’t think that their intention was to steal your despatches?” I cried.

“They were welcome to the whole collection in the box,” he laughed. “They were only consular reports and necessary evils of that sort. What they wanted was the crossed despatch from Berlin that I had in my belt next my skin.”

“They made no attempt to get at it?”

“Yes, they did. That’s just where my suspicion was proved.”

“How?” I asked breathlessly, bending eagerly towards him.

“Well, as you know, I always carry among my wraps a little cushion covered with black satin. Experience has taught me that that cushion has saved me many an aching head and stiff neck when on long journeys. So I placed it behind my head, and through the night read a novel by the dim, uncertain light. About two o’clock in the morning we ran into Hanover, and I got out to get a drink. When I returned, however, and placed the cushion behind my head, I felt a slight dampness upon it. In an instant suspicion seized me. Some liquid had been sprinkled upon it in my absence. My two fellow-travellers, wrapped in their rugs, were apparently sleeping. At once I resolved to act with caution, and, turning my cheek towards the pillow, smelt it. There was a curious odour, sweet and subtle, like some new perfume. I had suspected chloroform, but it was certainly not that. Yet almost the instant after I had inhaled it a curious and unaccountable drowsiness seized me. Then I knew the truth. They had plotted to render me insensible and afterwards steal the despatch! I struggled against this feeling of weariness, and, rising to my feet, buttoned my overcoat as though I were chilly. This action allowed the cushion to fall away from my head, and, again re-seating myself, I made a feint of being interested in my book; but in reality my head was awl, and in the pocket of my ulster I had my hand upon my revolver, ready to use it should that pimply-faced ruffian attempt violence. The pair commenced to shift about uneasily in their seats, and I could see that their failure had considerably disconcerted them.”

“You gave them no idea that you had discovered their intentions?”

“None whatever. I was anxious to see how they would act after being foiled.”

“Well, what did they do?”

“They exchanged glances of annoyance, but spoke no word. They were silent for over an hour, during which time it occurred to me to move the cushion farther from me, in case the evaporation of the mysterious liquid should cause insensibility. I was determined that your pretty little friend’s companion should be the first to be thus affected. The feeling of drowsiness, however, wore off, and at Cologne the pair, after chatting in German regarding the train to Venlo, bustled about hastily and descended. They had no baggage, and went into the buffet to breakfast.”

“You, of course, continued your journey?”

“Yes, to Ostend and London.”

“It seems as though you had rather a narrow escape,” I observed thoughtfully.

“It was a daring attempt to get at that despatch,” he remarked with some warmth. “Depend upon it, my dear Ingram, that woman is a spy. I know she’s a friend of yours, but I can’t help saying just what I think.”

“But I can’t believe it!” I declared. “Indeed, I won’t believe it!” I added vehemently.

“As you like,” he said coldly, with a slight shrug of his broad shoulders. “I’ve told you the plain truth as to what occurred.”

“She’s wealthy, and of one of the best families in Belgium. There is no necessity whatever for her to be in the pay of any foreign Government,” I protested.

“We have nothing to do with her reasons,” he said. “All we know is that she and her companion tried to drug me in order to get at the despatch.”

“You have no idea, I suppose, of the contents of the despatch in question?” I inquired.

“None, except that when I gave it into the Chief’s own hands in his private room at Downing Street, he appeared to be very much surprised by its contents, and at once wrote a reply, with which I posted back to Berlin by the same night’s mail from Charing Cross.”

“Then it was upon a matter of importance?”

“I judged it to be of extreme importance. Yolande de Foville was evidently well aware that I had the despatch in my belt.”

“You had never before seen this man who accompanied her?”

“Never. But now he has made one attempt it is quite probable he may make another. I’m on the look-out for him again.”

“And the cushion? Have you discovered what they placed upon it?”

“I left it in London with Dr Bond, the analyst, at Somerset House. He’s trying to discover the liquid used. I hope he will be successful, for the stuff was so potent that I have no desire for it again to be sprinkled upon my belongings.”

“They were at least ingenious,” I exclaimed, amazed at this extraordinary story, which seemed to prove so conclusively the truth of Kaye’s denunciation.

Yet I could not believe that Yolande, my charming little friend, in whom I had in the old days reposed so many confidences, and by whose side I had lingered through many idle hours in the Bois or in that almost endless forest around her feudal home, was actually a spy. The suggestion seemed too absurd. Nevertheless, Kaye was not a man to make unfounded charges, nor was Anderson given to relating that which was untrue. Truth to tell, this story of his held me absolutely dumbfounded. I recollected my conversation with her an hour ago, and the strange effect my announcement that Wolf was in Paris had made upon her. She had implored me to save her. Why?

A silence fell between us. I was preoccupied by my own thoughts. But a few moments later the Queen’s messenger again glanced at his watch, and, rising, said:

“I must be off, or I shan’t catch the Orient. Any message for them down at Constantinople?”

“No,” I responded, gripping his strong hand in farewell. “Take care of yourself, and don’t let any of those confounded spies get at you again.”

“Trust me, my dear fellow,” he laughed, and lighting another cigarette he went forth on his long journey to the East as airily as though he were strolling down to get a cocktail at Henry’s.

When he had gone I sat for a long time thinking. A remembrance of the mad love of those days that had gone came back to me, sweet, charming memories of that half-forgotten time when Yolande was my ideal, and when her lips met mine in tender, passionate caresses. Ah! how fondly I had loved her in those days! But with an effort I at last arose, and, casting all those reflections behind me with a sigh, broke the seals of the despatch-box, and, seating myself at the big writing-table, commenced to examine them with a view to ascertaining their contents.

There were several important papers, and very soon I became absorbed in them. Nearly an hour later there came a sudden rap at the door, and one of the English footmen entered, saying:

“There is a man below, sir, who wishes to see you at once on important business. He says he is valet-de-chambre of the Countess de Foville.”

“Of the Countess de Foville!” I echoed, much surprised.

I at once ordered him to be shown upstairs, and a few moments later a tall, thin-faced, clean-shaven Frenchman entered.

“M’sieur Ingram?” he inquired breathlessly in French, evidently in a state of great agitation.

“Yes,” I said. “What is your message?”

“I have been sent by Madame la Comtesse to ask you to be good enough to come to her at once. A most distressing incident has occurred.”

“What has occurred?” I demanded quickly.

“Ah, m’sieur, it is terrible!” he cried with much Gallic gesticulation. “Poor Mademoiselle Yolande! She is asking to see you. She says she must speak with you, m’sieur.”

“With me?”

“Yes, m’sieur. Do not let us lose a single instant, or it may be too late. Ah! my poor young mistress! Poor mademoiselle! it is terrible – terrible!”

Chapter Five

La Comtesse

The Countess, a handsome, well-preserved woman of middle age, slightly inclined to embonpoint, met me on the threshold, and in silence grasped my hand. From the window she had apparently watched me alight from the fiacre, and had rushed forth to meet me.

That something unusual had occurred was plain from the paleness of her countenance and the look of despair in her eyes. We had been excellent friends in Brussels in bygone days, for she had favoured my suit and had constantly invited me to her pretty home in the Boulevard de Waterloo or to the great old château in the Ardennes. A glance was sufficient to show me that she had grown considerably older, and that her face, although it still bore distinct traces of a faded beauty, was now worn and haggard. She was essentially a grande dame of the old régime, now fast disappearing from our ken, but at no time could she be considered a great hostess. She was somewhat intransigent, a woman of strong prejudices, usually well justified, and incapable of pretence or shams. But the law of kindness was ever on her tongue, and she contented herself with giving those of whom she disapproved a wide berth. She was dressed plainly in black, with a single wisp of lace at the throat – a costume unusual for her. In Brussels her handsome toilettes, obtained from Paris, had always been admired. Although matronly, like the majority of Belgian women, she was extremely chic, with an almost girlish waist, and at whatever hour one called one always found her dressed with extreme taste and elegance. I must, however, admit that her appearance surprised me. Her hair had grown greyer, and she seemed as though utterly negligent of her personal appearance.

“Madame!” I exclaimed in alarm as our hands met, “tell me what has occurred.”

“Ah, m’sieur,” she cried in French, “I am in despair, and have sent for you! You can help me – if you will.”

“In what manner?” I inquired breathlessly.

“Yolande!” she gasped, in a choking voice.

“Yolande!” I echoed. “What has happened to her? Your man will tell me nothing.”

“He has orders to say nothing,” she explained, leading the way into the elegant salon. “Now tell me,” she said, looking at me very earnestly, “I am in sheer desperation, as you may see, or I would not presume to question you. Will you forgive me if I do?”

“Most certainly,” I responded.

“Then before we go further I will put my question to you,” she said in a strange voice. “Do you love Yolande?”

Such direct inquiry certainly took me by complete surprise. I stood looking at her for a few seconds absolutely open-mouthed.

“Why ask me that?” I inquired, puzzled. “Tell me what has happened to her.”

“I can tell you nothing until you have answered my question,” she replied quite calmly. I saw from her countenance that she was desperate.

“I think, madame, that when we were together in Brussels my actions must have betrayed to you – a woman – the state of my heart towards your daughter,” I said. “I do not seek to deny that at that time I loved her more fondly than I could ever love again, and – ”

“Then you do not love her still?” she cried, interrupting me.

“Allow me to conclude,” I went on, speaking quite calmly, for I saw in this curious question of hers some mysterious motive. “I loved her while in Brussels, and for two years hoped to make her my wife.”

“And then you grew tired of her?” the Countess asked, in a tone that was almost a sneer in itself. “It is always the same with you diplomatists. The women of every capital amuse you, but on your promotion you bow your adieux and seek fresh fields to conquer.”

“I think you misjudge me,” I protested, rather annoyed at her words. “I loved Yolande. When I admit this, I also admit that, like other men whose calling it is to lounge in the principal salons of Europe, I had not escaped the fascination exercised by other eyes than hers. But to me she was all the world. Surely, madame, you remember the days at Houffalize? You cannot disguise from yourself that I really loved her then?”

“But all that is of the past,” she said seriously, her white hands clasped before her. “Briefly, you no longer entertain any love for her. Is not that so?”

I hesitated. My position was a difficult one. I was a diplomatist, and could speak untruths artistically when occasion required, but she had cornered me.

“Madame has guessed the truth,” I answered at last.

“Ah!” she cried hoarsely, “I thought as much. You have found some other woman whom you prefer?”

I nodded assent. It was useless to lead her to believe what was not the truth. Yolande was of course charming in many ways; but when I thought of Edith I saw that comparison was impossible.

“And you have no further thought of her?” she asked.

“As far as marriage is concerned, no,” I responded. “Nevertheless, I still regard her as an intimate friend. I was here only two or three hours ago chatting with her.”

“You!” she cried, glaring at me strangely. “You were here – to-day?”

“Yes,” I replied. “I thought she would certainly tell you of my visit.”

“She told me nothing. I was quite unaware of it. I was out, and the servants told me that a gentlemen had called in my absence.”

“I gave a card,” I replied. “It is no doubt in the hall.”

“No, it is not. It has been destroyed.”

“Why?” I asked.

“For some mysterious reason known to Yolande.” Then, turning quickly again to me, she placed her hand upon my arm in deep earnestness, saying: “Tell me, is your love for her absolutely and entirely dead – so dead that you would not care to perform her a service?”

Anderson’s strange and startling story flashed through my mind. I made no reply.

“Remember the affection you once bore her,” she urged. “I am a woman, m’sieur, and I presume to remind you of it.”

I needed no reminder. The recollection of those sweet idyllic days was still fresh as ever in my memory. Ah! in those brief sunny hours I had fondly believed that our love would last always. It is ever the same. Youth is ever foolish.

“I should have loved her now,” I answered at last, “were it not for one fact.”

There was a mystery which had ended our love, and I saw now an opportunity of clearing it up. “To what fact do you refer?”

“To the reason of our parting.”

“The reason!” echoed the Countess. “I have no idea whatever of the reason. What was it?”

I held my breath. Would it be just to tell her the truth? I wondered. I reflected for a moment, then in a calm voice answered:

“Because I discovered that her heart was not wholly mine.”

She regarded me with undisguised amazement.

“Do you mean that Yolande had another lover?”

“No!” I cried with sudden resolve. “This conversation is not fair to her. It is all finished. She has forgotten, and we are both happy.”

“Happy!” cried the Countess hoarsely. “You are, alas! mistaken. Poor Yolande has been the most unhappy girl in all the world. She has never ceased to think of you.”

“Then I regret, madame,” I responded.

“If you really regret,” she answered, “then your love for her is not altogether dead.”

She spoke the truth. At this point I may as well confide to you, my reader, the fact that I still regarded my charming little friend of those careless days of buoyant youth with a feeling very nearly akin to love. I recollected the painful circumstances which led to our parting. My memory drifted back to that well-remembered, breathless summer’s evening when, while walking with her along the white highway near her home, I charged her with friendliness towards a man whose reputation in Brussels was none of the best; of her tearful protests, of my all-consuming jealousy, of her subsequent dignity, and of our parting. After that I had applied to the Foreign Office to be transferred, and a month later found myself in Rome.

Perhaps, after all, my jealousy might have been utterly unfounded. Sometimes I had thought I had treated her harshly, for, truth to tell, I had never obtained absolute proof that this man was more than a mere acquaintance. Indeed, I think it was this fact, or just a slight twinge of conscience, that caused a suspicion of the old love I once bore her to remain within me. It was not just to Edith – that I knew; yet notwithstanding the denunciations of both Kaye and Anderson, I could not altogether crush her from my heart. To wholly forget the woman for whom one has entertained the grand passion is often most difficult, sometimes, indeed, impossible of accomplishment. Visions of some sweet face with its pouting and ready lips will arise, constantly keeping the past ever present, and recalling a day one would fain forget. Thus it was with me – just as it has been with thousands of others.

“No,” I admitted truthfully and honestly at last, “my love for Yolande is perhaps not altogether dead.”

“Then you will render me a service?” she cried quickly. “Say that you will – for her sake! – for the sake of the great love you once bore her!”

“Of what nature is this service you desire?” I asked, determined to act with caution, for the startling stories I had heard had aroused within me considerable suspicion.

“I desire your silence regarding an absolute secret,” she answered in a hoarse half-whisper.

“What secret?”

“A secret concerning Yolande,” she responded. “Will you, for her sake, render us assistance, and at the same time preserve absolute secrecy as to what you may see or learn here to-day?”

“I will promise if you wish, madame, that no word shall pass my lips,” I said. “But as to assistance, I cannot promise until I am aware of the nature of the service demanded of me.”

“Of course,” she exclaimed, with a faint attempt at a smile. My words had apparently reassured her, for she instantly became calmer, as though relying upon me for help. “Then as you give me your promise upon your honour to say nothing, you shall know the truth. Come with me.”

She led the way down the long corridor, and turning to the left suddenly opened the door of a large and handsome bed-chamber, the wooden sun-blinds of which were closed to keep out the crimson glow of the sunset. The room was a fine one with big crystal mirrors and a shining toilette-service in silver, but upon the bed with its yellow silk hangings lay a female form fully dressed, but white-faced and motionless. In the dim half-light I could just distinguish the features as those of Yolande.

“What has occurred?” I cried in a hoarse whisper, dashing towards the bedside and bending down to look upon the face that had once held me in fascination.

“We do not know,” answered the trembling woman at my side. “It is all a mystery.”

I stretched forth my hand and touched her cheek. It was icy cold.

In those few moments my eyes had become accustomed to the dim light of the darkened room, and I detected the change that had taken place in the girl’s countenance. Her eyes were closed, her lips blanched, her fair hair, escaped from its pins, fell in a sheen of gold upon the lace-edged pillow.

I held my breath. The awful truth was distinctly apparent. I placed my hand upon her heart, the bodice of her dress being already unloosened. Then a few seconds later I drew back, standing rigid and aghast.

“Why, she’s dead!” I gasped.

“Yes,” the Countess said, covering her face with her hands and bursting into tears. “My poor Yolande! she is dead —*dead!*”

The discovery appalled me. Only a couple of hours before we had chatted together, and she seemed in the best of health and spirits, just as in the old days, until I had made the announcement of Wolf’s presence in Paris. The effect of that statement upon her had apparently been electrical. Why, I knew not. Had she not implored me to save her? This in itself was sufficient to show that she held him in deadly fear.

Again I bent in order to make further examination, but saw the unmistakable mark of death upon her countenance. The lower jaw had dropped, the cheeks were cold, and the silver hand-mirror which I had snatched from the table and held at her mouth was unclouded. There was no movement — no life. Yolande, my well-beloved of those long-past days, was dead.

I stood there at the bedside like a man in a dream. So swiftly had she been struck down that the terrible truth seemed impossible of realisation.

The Countess, standing beside me, sobbed bitterly. Truly the scene in that darkened chamber was a strange and impressive one. Never before in my whole life had I been in the presence of the dead.

“Yolande — Yolande!” I called, touching her cheek in an effort to awaken her, for I could not believe that she was actually dead.

But there was no response. Those blanched lips and the coldness of those cheeks told their own tale. She had passed to that land which lies beyond the range of human vision.

How long I stood there I cannot tell. My thoughts were inexpressibly sad ones, and the discovery had utterly upset me, so that I scarcely knew what I said or did. The blow of thus finding her lifeless crushed me. The affair was mysterious, to say the least of it. Of a sudden, however, the sobs of the grief-stricken Countess aroused me to a sense of my responsibility, and taking her hand I led her from the bedside into an adjoining room.

“How has this terrible catastrophe occurred?” I demanded of her breathlessly. “Only two hours ago she was well and happy.”

“You mean when you saw her?” she said. “What was the object of your call?”

“To see her,” I responded.

“And yet you parted ill friends in Brussels?” she observed in a tone of distinct suspicion. “You had some motive in calling. What was it?”

I hesitated. I could not tell her that I suspected her daughter to be a spy.

“In order to assure her of my continued good friendship.”

She smiled, rather superciliously I thought.

“But how did the terrible affair occur?”

“We have no idea,” answered the Countess brokenly. “She was found lying upon the floor of the salon within a quarter of an hour of the departure of her visitor, who proved to be yourself. Jean, the valet-de-chambre, on entering, discovered her lying there, quite dead.”

“Astounding!” I gasped. “She was in perfect health when I left her.”

She shook her head sorrowfully, and her voice, choking with grief, declared:

“My child has been killed — murdered!”

“Murdered! Impossible!” I cried.

“But she has,” she declared. “I am absolutely positive of it!”

Chapter Six

A Piece of Plain Paper

“What medical examination has been made?” I demanded.

“None,” responded the Countess. “My poor child is dead, and no doctor can render her assistance. Medical aid is unavailing.”

“But do you mean to say that on making this discovery you did not think it necessary to send for a doctor?” I cried incredulously.

“I did not send for one – I sent for you,” was her response.

“But we must call a doctor at once,” I urged. “If you have suspicion of foul play we should surely know if there is any wound, or any injury to account for death.”

“I did not consider it necessary. No doctor can return her to me,” she wailed. “I sent for you because I believed that you would render me assistance in this terrible affair.”

“Most certainly I will,” I replied. “But in our own interests we must send for a medical man, and if it is found to be actually a case of foul play, for the police. I’ll send a line to Doctor Deane, an Englishman whom I know, who is generally called in to see anybody at the Embassy who chances to be ill. He is a good fellow, and his discretion may be relied upon.”

So saying, I scribbled a line on the back of a card, and told the man to take a cab down to the Rue du Havre, where the doctor occupied rooms over a hosier’s shop a stone’s throw from the bustling Gare St. Lazare.

A very curious mystery was evidently connected with this startling discovery, and I was anxious that my friend, Dick Deane, one of my old chums of Rugby days, should assist me in clearing it up.

The Countess de Foville, whose calmness had been so remarkable while speaking with me before we entered the death-chamber, had now given way to a flood of emotion. She sank back into her chair, and, burying her face in her hands, cried bitterly.

I tried to obtain some further information from her, but all that escaped her was:

“My poor Yolande! My poor daughter!” Finding that my endeavours to console her were futile, I went forth and made inquiries of the three frightened maidservants regarding what had occurred.

One of them, a dark-eyed Frenchwoman in frilled cap, whom I had seen on my previous visit, said, in answer to my questions:

“Jean discovered the poor mademoiselle in the petit salon about a quarter of an hour after m’sieur had left. She was lying upon her face near the window, quite rigid. He shouted; we all rushed in, and on examining her found that she was already dead.”

“But was there no sign of a struggle?” I inquired, leading the way to the room indicated.

“The room was just as m’sieur sees it now,” she answered, with a wave of her hand.

I glanced around, but as far as I could distinguish it was exactly as I had left it.

“There was no mark of violence – nothing to show that mademoiselle had been the victim of foul play?”

“Nothing, m’sieur.”

Could it have been a case of suicide? I wondered. Yolande’s words before I had taken leave of her were desponding, and almost led me to believe that she had taken her life rather than face the man Wolf who had so suddenly arrived in Paris – the man who exercised upon her some mysterious influence, the nature of which I could not guess.

“It was not more than fifteen minutes after I had left, you say?” I inquired.

“No, m’sieur, not more.”

“Mademoiselle had no other visitor?”

“No, m’sieur. Of that we are all certain.”

“And the Countess, where was she during the time I was here?”

“She was out driving. She did not return till about five minutes after we had made the terrible discovery.”

“And how did madame act?”

“She ordered us to carry poor mademoiselle to her room. Poor madame! She bore the blow with wonderful fortitude.”

That remark caused me to prick up my ears.

“I don't quite understand,” I said. “Did she not give way to tears?”

“No, m'sieur; she shed no tears, but sat erect, motionless as a statue. She appeared unable to realise that poor mademoiselle was actually dead. At last she rang, and sent Jean to you.”

“You are absolutely certain that mademoiselle had no visit or after I left?”

“Absolutely.”

“It would, moreover, not be possible for anyone to enter or leave without your knowledge?” I suggested.

“M'sieur understands me perfectly. Mademoiselle must have fallen to the floor lifeless immediately after I had let you out. She made no sound, and had Jean not entered with her letters, which the concierge had brought, my poor young mistress might be lying there now.”

The average Frenchwoman of the lower class is always dramatic wherever a domestic calamity is concerned, and this worthy *bonne* was no exception. She punctuated all her remarks with references to the sacred personages of the Roman Catholic religion.

“You haven't searched the room, I suppose?”

“No, m'sieur. Madame gave orders that nothing was to be touched.”

This reply was eminently satisfactory. I glanced again around the place, now dim in the falling twilight, and ordered her to throw back the sun-shutters.

The woman went to the window and opened them, admitting a flood of mellow light, the last crimson of the glorious afterglow. Up from the boulevard came the dull roar of the traffic, mingling with the sound of distant bells ringing the Ave Maria. The *bonne* – an Alsatian, from her accent – crossed herself from force of habit, and retreated towards the door.

“You may go,” I said. “I will remain here until the doctor arrives.”

“Bien, m'sieur,” answered the woman, disappearing and closing the door after her.

My object in dismissing her was to make a thorough search of the apartment, in order to discover whether any of Yolande's private possessions were there. She had been denounced by Kaye and Anderson as a spy, and it occurred to me that I might possibly discover the truth. But she was dead. The painful fact seemed absolutely incredible.

The room was not a large one, but well furnished, with considerable taste and elegance. There was the broad, silk-covered couch, upon which Yolande had sat in the full possession of health and spirits only a couple of hours before; the skin rug, upon which her tiny foot had been stretched so coquettishly; the small table, by which she had stood supporting herself after I had made the fatal announcement that Wolf was in Paris.

As I stood there the whole of that strangely dramatic scene occurred to me. Yet she was dead – dead! She had died with her secret in her heart.

At any moment Dick Deane might arrive, but I desired to be the first to make an examination of the room, and with that object crossed to the little *escritoire* of inlaid olive-wood, one of those rather gimcrack pieces of furniture manufactured along the Ligurian coast for unsuspecting winter visitors. It was the only piece of incongruous furniture in the room, all the rest being genuine Louis Quatorze.

One or two letters bearing conspicuous coats-of-arms were lying there, but all were notes of a private nature from one or other of her friends. One was an invitation to Vichy from the Baronne Deland, wife of the great Paris financier; another, signed “Rose,” spoke of the gaiety of Cairo and the dances at Shepheard's during the past winter; while a third, also in French, and bearing no signature,

made an appointment to meet her in the English tea-shop in the Rue Royale on the following day at five o'clock.

That note, written upon plain paper of business appearance, had apparently been left by hand. Who, I wondered, was the person who had made that appointment? To me the writing seemed disguised, and probably, owing to the thickness of the up-strokes, had been penned by a male hand. There was a mistake in the orthography, too, the word "plaisir" being written "plisir." This showed plainly that no Frenchman had written it.

I placed the letter in my pocket, and, encouraged by it, continued my investigations.

In the tiny letter-rack was a note which the unfortunate girl had written immediately before being struck down. It was addressed to "Baronne Maillac, Château des Grands Sablons, Seine et Marne." The little *escritoire* contained four small drawers; the contents of each I carefully scrutinised. They were, however, mostly private letters of a social character – some from persons whom I knew well in Society. Suddenly, from the bottom of one of the smaller drawers, I drew forth several sheets of plain octavo paper of a pale yellow shade. There were, perhaps, half-a-dozen sheets, carefully wrapped in a sheet of plain blue foolscap. I opened them, and, holding one up to the light, examined the water-mark.

Next instant the truth was plain. That paper was the official paper used in French Government offices for written reports. How came it in her possession, if the accusation against her were untrue?

I held it in my hand, glaring at it in bewilderment. Sheet by sheet I examined it, but there was no writing upon it. Apparently it was her reserve store of paper, to be used as wanted. In the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs everything is methodical, especially the preparation of the dossiers. A certain dossier had once fallen into Kaye's hands, and it contained sheets of exactly similar paper to that which I held in my hand.

Eagerly I continued my search, striving to discover some writing which might lead me to a knowledge of the truth, but I found nothing. I had completed an examination of the whole of the contents of the drawers, when it occurred to me that there might be some other drawer concealed there. Years ago I had been offered an *escritoire* of this pattern in Genoa, and the sun-tanned fellow who endeavoured to induce me to purchase it had shown behind the centre drawer in the table a cunningly contrived cavity where private correspondence might be concealed.

Therefore I drew out the drawer, sounded the interior at the back, and, finding it hollow, searched about for the spring by which it might be opened. At last I found it, and next moment drew forth a bundle of letters. They were bound with a blue ribbon that time had faded. I glanced at the superscription of the uppermost, and a thrill of sympathy went through me.

Those carefully preserved letters were my own – letters full of love and tenderness, which I had written in the days that were dead. I stood holding them in my hand, my heart full of the past.

In this narrative, my reader, it is my intention to conceal nothing, but to relate to you the whole, undisguised truth, even though this chapter of England's secret history presents a seemingly improbable combination of strange facts and circumstances. Therefore I will not hide from you the truth that in those moments, as I drew forth one of the letters I had written long ago and read it through, sweet and tender memories crowded upon me, and in my eyes stood blinding tears. I may be forgiven for this, I think, when it is remembered how fondly I had once loved Yolande, before that fatal day when jealousy had consumed me, and I had turned my back upon her as a woman false and worthless.

Letter after letter I read, each bringing back to me sad memories of those days, when in the calm sunset hour we had wandered by the riverside hand in hand like children, each supremely content in each other's love, fondly believing that our mad passion would last always. In all the world she had been, to me, incomparable. The centre of admiration at those brilliant balls at the Royal Palace at Brussels, the most admired of all the trim and comely girls who rode at morning in the Bois, the merriest of those who picnicked in the forest round about the ancient *château*, the sweetest, the most

tender, and the most pure of all the women I knew – Yolande in those days had been mine. There, in my hand, I held the letter which I had written from Scotland when on leave for the shooting, asking if she loved me sufficiently to become my wife. To that letter I well remembered her reply – indeed, I knew it verbatim; a tender letter, full of honest love and straightforward admission – a letter such as only a pure and good woman could have penned. Yes, she wrote that she loved me dearly, and would be my wife.

And yet it was all of the past. All had ended.

I sighed bitterly – how bitterly, mere words cannot describe. You, reader, be you man or woman, can you fully realise how deeply I felt at that moment, how utterly desolate the world then seemed to me?

Those letters I slowly replaced in the cavity and closed it. Then, as I turned away, my eyes fell upon the photographs standing upon a small whatnot close by the *escritoire*. They were of persons whom I did not know – all strangers, save one. This was a cabinet portrait in a heavy silver frame, and as I took it up to scrutinise it more closely a cry involuntarily escaped my lips.

The picture was a three-quarter length representation of a black-bearded, keen-eyed man, standing with his hands thrust idly in his pockets, and smoking a cigarette. There was no mistaking those features. It was the photograph of the man the discovery of whose presence in Paris had produced such an extraordinary effect upon her – Rodolphe Wolf.

Chapter Seven

By a Thread

I was still standing by the window, holding the photograph in my hand, and gazing upon it in wonder, when Dick Deane was shown in.

“What’s the matter, old chap? Are you the man in possession here?” he asked breezily, gripping me by the hand.

He was a fair, merry-faced fellow of thirty-five, rather good-looking, smartly dressed in black frock-coat of professional cut, and wearing a pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez. He had been born in Paris, and had spent the greater part of his life there, except during the years when he was at school with me before going to Edinburgh, where he took his degree. Then he had returned to Paris, taken his French degree, and had soon risen to be one of the fashionable doctors in the French capital. He was an especial favourite in the salons, and, like every good-looking doctor, a favourite with the ladies.

“I’m not in possession,” I answered. “A very serious affair has happened here, and we want your assistance.”

In an instant he became grave, for I suppose my tone showed him that I was in no humour for joking.

“What’s the nature of the affair?” he asked.

“Death,” I replied seriously. “A lady here – a friend of mine – has died mysteriously.”

“A mystery – eh?” he exclaimed, instantly interested. “Tell me about it.”

“This place,” I replied, “belongs to the Countess de Foville, a lady whom I knew well when I was at the Brussels Embassy, and it is her daughter Yolande who has been found dead in this room this evening.”

“Yolande de Foville!” he repeated, with knit brows. “She was a friend of yours once, if I mistake not?” he added, looking me straight in the face.

“Yes, Dick, she was,” I responded. “I told you of her long ago.”

“You loved her once?”

“Yes,” I answered with difficulty, “I loved her once.”

“And how did the unfortunate affair occur?” he asked, folding his arms and leaning back against a chair. “Tell me the whole story.”

“I called here this afternoon, and spent half an hour or so with her,” I said. “Then I left and returned straight to the Embassy – ”

“You left her here?” he inquired, interrupting. “Yes, in this very room. But it seems that a quarter of an hour later one of the servants entered and discovered her lying upon the door, dead.”

“Curious!” he ejaculated. “Has a medical man seen her?”

“No. The Countess sent for me as being one of her daughter’s most intimate friends, and I, in turn, sent for you.”

“Where is the poor young lady?”

“In her room at the end of the corridor,” I answered hoarsely.

“Is there any suspicion of murder?”

“Apparently none whatever. She had no visitor after I left.”

“And no suspicion of suicide?” he asked, with a sharp look. “Did you part friends?”

“Perfectly so,” I responded. “As to suicide, she had no reason, as far as anyone knows, to make an attempt upon her life.”

He gave vent to an expression which sounded to me much like a grunt of dissatisfaction.

“Now, be perfectly frank with me, Gerald,” he said, suddenly turning to me and placing his hand upon my shoulder. “You loved her very dearly once – was that not so?”

I nodded.

"I well remember it," he went on. "I quite recollect how, on one occasion, you came over to London, and while dining together at Jimmy's you told me of your infatuation, and showed me her photograph. Do you remember the night when you told me of your engagement to her?"

"Perfectly."

"And as time went on you suddenly dropped her – for what reason I know not. We are pals, but I have never attempted to pry into your affairs. If she really loved you, it must have been a hard blow for her when she heard that you had forsaken her for Edith Austin."

"You reproach me," I said. "But you do not know the whole truth, my dear fellow. I discovered that Yolande possessed a second lover."

He nodded slowly, with pursed lips.

"And that was the reason of your parting?"

"Yes."

"The sole reason?"

"The sole reason."

"And you have no suspicion that she may have committed suicide because of her love for you? Such things are not uncommon, remember, with girls of a certain temperament."

"If she has committed suicide, it is not on my account," I responded in a hard voice.

"I did not express that opinion," he hastened to protest. "Before we discuss the matter further it will be best for me to see her. Death may have been due to natural causes, for aught we know."

I stood motionless. His suggestion that my sweetheart of the old days had committed suicide because I had forsaken her was a startling one. Surely that could not be so?

"Come," my friend said, "let us lose no time. Which is the room?"

I led him along the corridor, and opened the door of the chamber in which she was lying so cold and still. The light of the afterglow fell full upon her, tipping her auburn hair with crimson and illuminating her face with a warm radiance that gave her back the appearance of life. But it was only for a few moments. The slanting ray was lost, and the pallor of that beautiful countenance became marked against the gold of her wondrous hair.

In silence I stood at the foot of the bed watching my friend, who was now busy with his examination. He opened her eyes and closed them again, felt her heart, raised her arms, and examined her mouth, uttering no word. His serious face wore a look as though he were infinitely puzzled.

One after the other he examined the palms of her hands long and carefully, then, bending until his eyes were close to her face, he examined her lips, brow, and the whole surface of her cheeks. Upon her neck, below the left ear, was a mark to which he returned time after time, as though not satisfied as to its cause. Upon her lower lip, too, was a slight yellow discoloration, which he examined several times, comparing it with the mark upon the neck. He was unable to account for either.

"Curious!" he ejaculated. "Very curious indeed!"

"What is curious?" I inquired eagerly.

"Those marks," he answered, indicating them with his finger. "They are very puzzling. I've never seen such marks before."

"Do they point to foul play?" I inquired, feeling suspicious that she had by some mysterious means fallen the victim of an assassin.

"Well, no," he responded, after some hesitation; "that is not my opinion."

"Then what is your opinion?"

"At present I have none. I can have none until I make a thorough examination. There are certainly no outward marks of violence."

"We need not inform the police, I suppose?"

"Not at present," he replied, his eyes still fixed upon the blanched face of the woman who had once been all the world to me.

I raised her dead hand, and upon it imprinted a last fervent kiss. It was cold and clammy to my lips. In that hour all my old love for her had returned, and my heart had become filled with an intense bitterness and desolation. I had thought that all my love for her was dead, and that Edith Austin, the calm, sweet woman far away in an English county, who wrote to me daily from her quiet home deep in the woodlands, had taken her place. But our meeting and its tragic sequel had, I admit, aroused within me a deep sympathy, which had, within an hour, developed into that great and tender love of old. With men this return to the old love is of no infrequent occurrence, but with women it seldom happens. Perhaps this is because man is more fickle and more easily influenced by woman's voice, woman's glances, and woman's tears.

The reader will probably accuse me of injustice and of fickleness of heart. Well, I cannot deny it; indeed, I seek to deny nothing in this narrative of strange facts and diplomatic wiles, but would only ask of those who read to withhold their verdict until they have ascertained the truth yet to be revealed, and have read to the conclusion, this strange chapter of the secret history of a nation.

My friend the doctor was holding one hand, while I imprinted a last kiss upon the other. A lump was in my throat, my eyes were filled with tears, my thoughts were all of the past, my anguish of heart unspeakable. That small chill hand with the cold, glittering ring – one that I had given her in Brussels long ago – seemed to be the only reality in all that hideous phantasmagoria of events.

“Do not despair,” murmured the kind voice of my old friend, standing opposite me on the other side of the bed. “You loved her once, but it is all over – surely it is!”

“No, Dick!” I answered brokenly. “I thought I did not love her. I have held her from me these three years – until now.”

“Ah!” he sighed, “I understand. Man always longs for the unattainable.”

“Yes, always,” I responded.

In that moment the memory of the day when we had parted arose gaunt and ghost-like. I had wronged her; I felt confident that I had. All came back to me now – that cruel, scandalous denunciation I had uttered in the heat of my mad jealousy – the false tale which had struck her dumb by its circumstantial accuracy. Ah! how bitter it all was, now that punishment was upon me! I remembered how, in the hour of my worldly triumph and of her highest hope – at the very moment when she had spoken words of greater affection to me than she had ever used before – I had made the charge against her, and she had fallen back with her young heart crushed within her. My ring was there, still glittering mockingly upon her dead hand. By the unfounded charge I had made against her I had sinned. My sin at that moment arose from its grave, and barred the way for ever to all hope – to all happiness.

The summer twilight was stealing on apace, and in the silence of the room there sounded the roar of life from the boulevard below. Men were crying *Le Soir* with strident voices, and all Paris was on its way to dine, and afterwards to enjoy itself in idleness upon the terraces of the cafés or at those al-fresco variety performances in the Avenue des Champs Elysées, where the entrance fee includes a consommation.

Deane still held my old love's hand, bending in the dim light until his eyes were close to it, watching intently. But I took no notice, for my eyes were fixed upon that face that had held me in such fascination, and had been so admired at those brilliant receptions given by King Leopold and the Countess of Flanders. The doctor stretched forth his hand, and of a sudden switched on the electric light. The next instant I was startled by his loud ejaculation of surprise.

“Thank God!” he cried. “She's not dead, after all!”

“Not dead!” I gasped, unable fully to realise his meaning.

“No,” he answered breathlessly. “But we must not lose a single instant.” And I saw that with a lancet he had made an incision in her delicate wrist, and there was blood there. “She is in a state of catalepsy, and we must do all in our power to bring her round.”

“But do you think you can?” I cried.

“I hope so.”

“Do your best, Dick,” I implored. “Save her, for my sake.”

“Rely upon me,” he answered calmly, adding: “Run along to Number 18 in the boulevard – the corner house on the right – and bring Doctor Trépard at once. He lives au troisième. Tell him that I sent you, and that the matter is one of life or death.” He scribbled some words on a card, and, giving it me, added: “Tell him to bring this. Meanwhile, I will commence artificial respiration. Go!”

“But do you think she will really recover?” I demanded.

“I can’t tell. We have already lost so much time. I had no idea of the truth. It has surprised me just as it has surprised you. This moment is not one for words, but for actions. Don’t lose an instant.”

Thus urged, I snatched up my hat and tore along the boulevard like a madman. Without difficulty I found Trépard’s appartement, and on being admitted found him a grave-faced, rather stout old Frenchman, who, on the instant I mentioned Dick’s name and gave him the card with the words upon it, naming some drugs he required, went into an adjoining room, and fetched a phial of tiny red pillules, which he held up to the light. Then he put on his hat, and descended with me to the street. A fiacre was passing, which we took, and five minutes later we were standing together in the room where Yolande was lying.

“This is a most curious case, my dear Trépard,” began Dick, speaking in French – “a case of coma, which I have mistaken for death;” and, continuing, he briefly explained how the patient had been found in a state so closely resembling death that he himself had been deceived.

The old Frenchman placed his hand upon her heart, and, withdrawing it, said:

“She’s breathing now.”

“Breathing!” I echoed. “Then she is recovering!”

“Yes, old fellow,” Dick replied, “she is recovering – at least we hope we shall save her.” Then, turning to his colleague, he raised her hand and pointed to the finger-nails, asking: “Do you notice anything there?”

The other, adjusting his pince-nez, bent and examined, them one by one.

“Yes,” he answered at last. “A slight purple discoloration at the base of the nails.”

“And upon the lower lip does anything strike you as peculiar?”

“A yellow mark,” he answered, after carefully inspecting the spot indicated.

“And there?” Deane asked, touching the mark upon the neck.

“Very strange!” ejaculated the elder man. “It is a most unusual case.”

“Yes. Have you brought the hydrated peroxide of iron?”

For answer the Frenchman produced the tiny tube, saying:

“Then you suspect poison?”

“Most certainly,” he replied; and, taking a glass, he placed a single pillule in it, dissolving it in water, which he afterwards forced between the grey lips of my unconscious love. Afterwards he glanced at his watch, observing: “We must give another in fifteen minutes.”

Then, drawing a chair to the bedside, he seated himself, holding her wrist and watching her countenance for any change that might take place there.

“Have you no idea of the nature of the poison?” I inquired eagerly.

“None,” he responded. “Ask me no questions now. When we have brought her round will be time enough. It should be sufficient for you to know that she is not dead. Why not leave us for the present? Go and break the good news to the Countess.”

“You wish to be alone?”

“Yes. This is a serious matter. Leave us undisturbed, and on no pretext allow her mother to enter here.”

Thus urged, and feeling reassured by their statement that she still lived and that the pulsations of her heart were already quite perceptible, I left the room, noiselessly closing the door after me, and sought the Countess in the small blue boudoir to which she had returned plunged in grief and dark despair.

She was seated in a chair, motionless and statuesque, staring straight before her. The blow had utterly crushed her, for she was entirely devoted to her only daughter now that her husband was dead. I well knew how deep was her affection for Yolande, and how tender was her maternal love.

The room was in semi-darkness, for she had not risen to turn on the light. As I entered I did so with her permission, saying quietly:

“Madame, I come to you with a message.”

“From whom?” she asked in a hard mechanical voice.

“From my friend Deane, the English doctor whom I have summoned. Yolande still lives!”

“She lives!” she cried, springing to her feet in an instant. “You are deceiving me!”

“I am not, madame,” I reassured her, smiling. “Your daughter is still breathing, and is increasing in strength perceptibly. The doctors say that she will probably recover.”

“Thank God!” she gasped, her thin white hands clasped before her. “I pray that He may give her back to me. I will go to her.”

But I held her back, explaining that both the medical men had expressed a wish to remain there alone.

“But what caused that appearance so akin to death?” she asked quickly.

“At present they cannot tell,” I responded. “Some deleterious substance is suspected, but until she has returned to consciousness and can give us some details of her sudden attack we can determine nothing.”

“But she will recover, m’sieur?” the Countess asked. “Are you certain?”

“The chances are in her favour, the doctors say. They have given her a drug to counteract the effect of the poison.”

“Poison! Was she poisoned?” gasped the Countess.

“Poison is suspected,” I answered quietly. “But calm yourself, madame. The truth will be discovered in due course.”

“I care nothing so long as Yolande is given back to me!” the distressed woman cried. “Was it your English friend who discovered the truth?”

“Yes,” I replied. “He is one of the cleverest men in Paris.”

“And to him my poor Yolande will owe her life?”

“Yes, to him.”

“And to you also, m’sieur? You have done your utmost for us, and I thank you warmly for it all.”

“Madame,” I said earnestly, “I have done only what a man should do. You sought my assistance, and I have given it, because – ”

“Because of what?” she inquired sharply the instant I paused.

“Because I once loved her,” I responded with perfect frankness.

A sigh escaped her, and her hand sought my arm.

“I was young once, m’sieur,” she said in that calm, refined voice which had long ago always sounded so much to me like that of my own dead mother. “I understand your feeling – I understand perfectly. It is only my poor daughter who does not understand. She knows that you have forsaken her – that is all.”

It was upon my tongue to lay bare to her the secret of my heart’s longings, yet I hesitated. I remembered that calm, serious, sweet-faced woman on the other side of the English Channel, far from the glare and glitter of life as I knew it – the fevered life which the diplomat in Paris is forced to lead. I remembered my troth to Edith, and my conscience pricked me.

“Could it be possible,” I reflected, “that Yolande was really in the pay of a Government hostile to England?” Kaye was already nearing Berlin with the intention of searching out her actions and exposing her as a spy, while Anderson had already denounced her as having been a party to an attempt to secure the secret which he had carried from Berlin to Downing Street.

With a mother's solicitude the Countess could for some time only speak of Yolande's mysterious attack; but at last, in order to prosecute my inquiries further, I observed, during a lull in the conversation:

“At the Baroness de Chalencon's last night a friend of yours inquired about you, madame.”

“A friend? Who?”

“A man named Wolf – Rodolphe Wolf.”

The next instant I saw that the mention of that name affected the mother no less markedly than it had affected the daughter. Her face blanched; her eyes opened wide in fear, and her glance became in a moment suspicious. With marvellous self-possession she, however, pretended ignorance.

“Wolf?” she repeated. “I do not remember the name. Possibly he is some person we have met while travelling.”

“Yolande knew him, I believe, in Brussels,” I remarked. “He appeared to be acquainted with you.”

“My daughter's friends are not always mine,” she remarked coldly, with that cleverness which only a woman of the world can possess, and at once returned to the discussion of Yolande and the probability of her recovery.

This puzzled me. I felt somehow convinced that she knew the truth. She had some distinct object in endeavouring to seal my lips. What it was, however, I could not determine.

She was expressing a fervent hope that her daughter would recover, and pacing the room, impatient to go to her bedside, when, of a sudden, Dick opened the door, and, putting his head inside, addressed me, saying:

“Can I speak with you a moment, Ingram?” She dashed to the door in eagerness, but after a word of introduction from myself, he informed her that Yolande had not sufficiently recovered to be disturbed.

“Perfect quiet is absolutely necessary, madame,” he urged. “Your daughter, I am pleased to tell you, will live; but she must be kept absolutely quiet. I cannot allow you to approach her on any pretext whatsoever.”

“She will not die, will she?” the woman implored distractedly.

“No,” he replied, in a voice somewhat strained, I thought, “she will not die. Of that you may rest assured.”

Then turning to me, he beckoned, and I followed him out of the room.

Chapter Eight

The Old Love

“I don’t like that woman, old fellow,” were the first words Dick uttered when we were alone in the room in which Yolande had been found.

“Why not?” I asked, rather surprised. “The Countess de Foville is always charming.”

He shrugged his shoulders, saying:

“One sometimes has strange and unaccountable prejudices, you know. This is one of mine.”

“And Yolande,” I asked, “what of her?”

“She’s better. But it was fortunate I made the discovery just when I did, or she would no doubt have passed away. I never saw an appearance so closely resembling death in all my experience; in fact, I’d have staked my professional reputation that there was no spark of life.”

“But what was the cause of it all?” I demanded. “You surely know the reason?”

“No, we cannot yet tell,” he answered. “The marks puzzle us. That mark on her lower lip is the most peculiar and unaccountable. At present we can say nothing.”

“Then why did you call me out?”

“Because I want to consult you,” he replied. “The fact is, that in this affair there is a strong element of mystery which I don’t like at all. And, moreover, the few seconds during which I’ve seen the Countess have plainly impressed upon me the belief that either she has had something to do with it, or else that she knows the truth.”

I nodded. This was exactly my own theory. “Do you think Yolande has been the victim of foul play?” I inquired a moment later.

“That’s my suspicion,” he responded. “But only she herself can tell us the truth.”

“You really think, then, that a dastardly attempt has been made upon her life?” I cried incredulously.

“Personally, I think there can be no doubt.”

“But by whom? No one called here after my departure.”

“It is that mystery which we must elucidate,” he said. “All I fear is, however, that she may render us no assistance.”

“Why?”

“Because it is a mystery, and in all probability she will endeavour to preserve the secret. She must not see the Countess before we question her.”

“Is she yet conscious?” I asked in eagerness.

“Yes; but at present we must put no question to her.”

“Thank Heaven!” I gasped. Then I added, fervently grasping my friend’s hand: “You cannot realise, Dick, what great consolation this is to me!”

“I know, my dear fellow – I know,” he answered sympathetically. “But may I speak to you as a friend? You won’t be offended at anything I am about to say, will you?”

“Offended? – certainly not. Our friendship is too firm for that, Dick. What is it you wish to say?”

I saw that he was uneasy, and was surprised at his sudden gravity.

“Well,” he said, after a moment’s hesitation, “you’ll forgive me for saying so, but I don’t think that in this affair you’ve told me exactly the truth.”

“What do you mean?” I inquired quickly.

“I mean that when you parted from her this afternoon you were not altogether good friends.”

“You are mistaken,” I assured him. “We were as good friends as ever before.”

“No high words passed between you?”

“None.”

“And nothing that you told her caused her any sudden grief? Are you quite certain of this?” he asked, looking at me very fixedly through his glasses.

“I made one observation which certainly caused her surprise,” I admitted. “Nothing else.”

“Was it only surprise?” he asked very calmly.

“Surprise mingled with fear.”

“Ah!” he ejaculated, as though obtaining some intelligence by this admission of mine. “And may I not know the nature of the information you gave her?”

“No, Dick,” I responded. “It is a secret – her secret.”

He was silent.

“You refuse to tell me?” he said disappointedly.

“I am unable,” I replied.

“And if I judge rightly, it is this secret which has parted you?”

“No, it is not,” I answered. “That’s the most curious part of the whole affair. The very existence of the secret has brought us together again.”

“You mean that you have forsaken Edith and returned to her?” he observed, raising his brows slightly in surprise.

“No; don’t put it in that way,” I implored. “I have not yet forsaken Edith.”

He smiled, just a trifle superciliously, I thought.

“And the Countess is also in possession of this mysterious secret – eh?”

“Of that I am not at all certain,” I replied.

He sniffed in distinct suspicion that what I had told him was not the truth. At the same instant, however, the Countess entered and demanded to know the condition of her child.

“She is much better, madame,” he answered. “Perfect quiet is, however, necessary, and constant observation of the temperature. To-morrow, or the day after, you may, I think, see her.”

“Not till then!” she cried. “I cannot wait so long.”

“But it is necessary. Your daughter’s life hangs upon a single thread.”

She was silenced, for she saw that argument was useless.

A few minutes later Jean entered with a message from Trépard asking Dick and myself to consult with him. We therefore left the Countess again, and passed along the corridor to the room in which my love of long ago was lying. As we entered she lifted her hand slowly to me in sign of recognition, and in an instant I was at her side.

“Yolande!” I cried, taking her hand, so different now that death had been defeated by life. “Yolande! my darling,” I burst forth involuntarily, “you have come back to me!”

A sweet, glad smile spread over her beautiful face, leaving an expression of calm and perfect contentment, as in a low, uncertain voice, as though of one speaking afar off, she asked:

“Gerald, is it actually you?”

“Yes,” I said, “of course it is. These two gentlemen are doctors,” I added. “This is my old friend Deane; and the other is Doctor Trépard, of whom I daresay you have heard.”

She nodded to them both in acknowledgment of their kind expressions; then in a few low words inquired what had happened to her. She seemed in utter ignorance of it all.

“You were found lying on the floor of the little salon soon after I left, and they thought you were dead,” I explained. “Cannot you tell us how it occurred?”

A puzzled expression settled upon her face, as though she were trying to remember.

“I recollect nothing,” she declared.

“But you surely remember how you were attacked?” I urged.

“Attacked!” she echoed in surprise. “No one attacked me.”

“I did not mean that,” I answered, rather puzzled at her quick protest. “I meant that you were probably aware of the symptoms which preceded your unconsciousness.”

“I felt a strange dizziness and a curious tightness in the throat and chest. That is all I remember. All became blank until I opened my eyes again and found myself lying here, with these two gentlemen standing at my side. The duration of my unconsciousness did not appear to me longer than a few minutes.”

“Then mademoiselle has no idea of the cause of her strange illness?” inquired Deane in French. “None whatever, m’sieur.”

“Tell us one fact,” he urged. “During the time which elapsed between your parting with M’sieur Ingram and your sudden unconsciousness, did anyone enter the room?”

“No one; of that I am absolutely certain.”

“How were you occupied during that time?”

“I was writing a letter.”

“And before you rose did you feel the curious giddiness?”

“No, not until after I stood up. I tried to shout and attract help, but could not. Then I reached to press the bell, but stumbled forward, and the next instant I was lost in what seemed to be a dense fog.”

“Curious!” ejaculated Trépard, who stood by with folded arms, eagerly listening to every word – “very curious!”

“Did you feel any strange sensation on the left side of your neck beneath the ear, or upon your lower lip?” inquired Deane earnestly.

She reflected for a moment, then said:

“Now that I remember, there was a curious numbness of my lip.”

“Followed immediately by unconsciousness?”

“Yes, almost immediately.”

The doctors exchanged glances, which showed that the mark upon the lip was the chief enigma of the situation.

Trépard glanced at his watch, dissolved yet another pillule of hydrated peroxide of iron, and handed her the draught to swallow. The antidote had acted almost like magic.

“You are absolutely certain that no person entered the room after Ingram had left?” repeated Deane, as though not yet satisfied.

“Absolutely.”

Dick Deane turned his eyes full upon me, and I divined his thoughts. He was reflecting upon the conversation held between us before we entered that room. He was endeavouring to worm from her some clue to her secret.

“My mother knows that I am recovering?” she went on. “If she does not, please tell her. She has been so distressed of late that this must have been the crowning blow to her.”

“I have told madame your mother everything,” I said. “Do not be uneasy on her account.”

“Ah,” she sighed, “how I regret that we came to Paris! I regret it all, Gerald, save that you and I have met again;” and she stretched out her hand until it came into contact with my coat-button, with which she toyed like a child.

“And this meeting has really given you satisfaction?” I whispered to her, heedless of the presence of the others.

“Not only satisfaction,” she answered, so softly that I alone could catch her words, and looking into my face with that expression of passionate affection which can never be simulated; “it has given back to me a desire for happiness, for life, for love.”

There were tears in those wonderful blue eyes, and her small hand trembled within my grasp. My heart at that moment was too full for mere words. True, I loved her with a mad fondness that I had never before entertained for any woman; yet, nevertheless, a hideous shadow arose between us, shutting her off from me for ever – the shadow of her secret – the secret that she, my well-beloved, was actually a spy.

Chapter Nine

At the Elysée

Having reassured myself of Yolande's recovery, I was compelled to rush off, slip into uniform, and attend a dinner at the Elysée. The function was a brilliant affair, as are all the official junketings of the French President. At the right of the head of the Republic, who was distinguishable by his crimson sash, sat the Countess Tornelli, with the wife of the United States Ambassador on his left. The President's wife – who wore a superb gown of corn-coloured miroir velvet, richly embroidered and inlaid with Venetian lace, a veritable triumph of the Rue de la Paix – had on her right the Papal Nuncio, Monsignor Lerenzelli, the doyen of the Diplomatic Corps, while on her left was my Chief, Lord Barmouth.

The seat next me was allotted to his daughter Sibyl, who looked charming in rose chiffon. During dinner she chatted merrily, describing a charity bazaar which she had attended that afternoon accompanied by her mother. On the other side of her sat Count Berchtold, the secretary of the Austrian Embassy, who was, I shrewdly suspected, one of her most devoted admirers. She was charming – a typical, smart English girl; and I think that I was proved to be an exception among men by reason of the fact that I did not flirt with her. Indeed, we were excellent friends, and my long acquaintance with her gave me a prescriptive right to a kind of brotherly solicitude for her welfare. Times without number I had chaffed her about her little affairs of the heart, and as many times she had turned my criticisms against myself by her witty repartee. She could be exceedingly sarcastic when occasion required; but there had always been a perfect understanding between us, and no remark was ever distorted into an insult.

Dinner was followed by a brilliant reception. The great Salon des Fêtes, which only a year before was hung with funeral wreaths, owing to the death of the previous President, resounded with that peculiar hum made up of all the intonations of conversation and discreet laughter rolled together against the sustained buzzing of the orchestra a short distance away. The scene was one of glittering magnificence. Everyone knew everyone else. Through the crowd of uniforms – which always give an official reception at the Elysée the appearance of a bal travesti – I passed Monsieur Casimir Perrier, former President of the Republic; Monsieur Paul Deschanel, the lion of the hour; Monsieur Benjamin-Constant, always a prominent figure; Prince Roland Bonaparte, smiling and bowing; the Duchess d'Auerstadt, with her magnificent jewels; and Damat, the dapper Grand Chancellor of the Legion of Honour. All diplomatic Paris was there, chattering, laughing, whispering, and plotting. Around me sounded a veritable babel of tongues, but no part of the function interested me.

From time to time I saluted a man I knew, or bent over a woman's hand; but my thoughts were of the one woman who had so suddenly and so forcibly returned into my life. The representatives of the Powers of Europe were all present, and as they passed me by, each in his bright uniform, his orders flashing on his breast and a woman on his arm, I asked myself which of them was actually the employer of my well-beloved.

The startling events of the day had upset me. Had it been possible I would have left and returned to my rooms for a quiet smoke and for calm reflection. But my duty required my presence there; hence I remained, strolling slowly around the great crowded salon with its myriad lights and profuse floral decorations, until I suddenly encountered the wizen-faced, toothless old Baronne de Chalencon, whose salon was one of the most popular in Paris, and with whom I was on excellent terms.

"Ah! my dear M'sieur Ingram!" she cried, holding forth her thin, bony hand laden with jewels. "You look tired. Why? No one here to-night who interests you – eh?"

"No one save yourself, Baronne," I responded, bending over her hand.

“Flatterer!” she laughed. “If I were forty years younger I might accept that as a compliment. But at my age – well, it is really cruel of you.”

“Intelligence is more interesting to a diplomat than a pretty face,” I responded quickly. “And there is certainly no more intelligent woman in all Paris than the Baronne de Chalencon.”

She bowed stiffly, and her wrinkled face, which bore visible traces of *poudre orchidée* and touches of the hare’s-foot, puckered up into a simpering smile.

“Well, and what else?” she asked. “These speeches you have apparently prepared for some pretty woman you expected to meet here to-night, but, since she has not kept the appointment, you are practising them upon me.”

“No,” I said, “I really protest against that, Baronne. A woman is never too old for a man to pay her compliments.”

We had strolled into a cool ante-room, and were sitting together upon one of the many seats placed beneath clumps of palms and flowers, the only light being from a hundred tiny electric lamps hung overhead in the trees. The perfect arrangement of those ante-rooms of the *Salle des Fêtes* on the nights of the official receptions is always noteworthy, and after the heat, music, and babel of tongues in the grand salon it was cool, quiet, and refreshing there.

By holding her regular salon, where everybody who was anybody made it a point to be seen, the Baronne had acquired in Paris a unique position. Her fine house in the Avenue des Champs Elysées was the centre of a smart and fashionable set, and she herself made a point of being versed in all the latest gossip and scandal of the French capital. She scandalised nobody, nor did she seek to throw mud at her enemies. She merely repeated what was whispered to her; hence a chat with her was always interesting to one who, like myself, was paid to keep his ears open and report from time to time the direction of the political wind.

Tournier, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, and his wife were her most intimate friends; hence she was frequently aware of facts which were of considerable importance to us. Indeed, once or twice her friendliness for myself had caused her to drop hints which had been of the greatest use to Lord Barmouth in the conduct of his difficult diplomacy at that time when the boulevard journals were screaming against England and the filthy prints were caricaturing Her Majesty, with intent to insult. Even the *Figaro*— the moderate organ of the French Foreign Office – had lost its self-control in the storm of abuse following the Fashoda incident, and had libelled and maligned “les English.” I therefore seized the opportunity for a chat with the wizen-faced old lady, who seemed in a particularly good-humour, and deftly turned the conversation into the political channel.

“Now, tell me, Baronne,” I said, after we had been chatting some little time, and I had learnt more than one important fact regarding the intentions of Tournier, “what is your opinion regarding the occupation of Ceuta?”

She glanced at me quickly, as though surprised that I should be aware of what she had believed to be an entire secret.

“Of Ceuta?” she echoed. “And what do you at your Embassy know regarding it?”

“We’ve heard a good deal,” I laughed.

“No doubt you’ve heard a good deal that is untrue,” the clever old lady replied, her powdered face again puckering into a smile. “Do you want to know my honest opinion?” she added.

“Yes, I do.”

“Well,” she went on, “I attach very little importance to the rumours of a projected sale or lease of Ceuta to us. I might tell you in confidence,” she went on, dropping her voice, “that from some words I overheard at the garden-party at de Wolkenstein’s I have come to a firm conclusion that, although during the next few years important changes will be made upon the map of the world, Ceuta will remain Spanish. My country will never menace yours in the Mediterranean at that point. A Ministry might be found in Madrid to consider the question of its disposal, but the Spanish people would rise in revolution before they would consent. Spain is very poor, but very proud. Having lost so many of

her foreign possessions, she will hold more strongly than ever to Ceuta. There you have the whole situation in a nutshell.”

“Then the report that it is actually sold to France is untrue?” I asked eagerly.

“A mere report I believe it to be.”

“But Spain’s financial indebtedness to France might prove an element of danger when Europe justifies Lord Beaconsfield’s prediction and rushes into war over Morocco?”

“Ah, my dear M’sieur Ingram, I do not agree with the prediction of your great statesman,” the old lady said vehemently. “It is not in that direction in which lies the danger of war, but at the other end of the Mediterranean.”

Somehow I suspected her of a deliberate intention to mislead me in this matter. She was a shrewd woman, who only disclosed her secrets when it was to her own interests or the interests of her friends at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to do so. In Paris there is a vast network of French intrigue, and it behoves the diplomatist always to be wary lest he should fall into the pitfalls so cunningly prepared for him. The dividing line between truth and untruth is always so very difficult to define in modern diplomacy. It is when the European situation seems most secure that the match is sufficiently near to fire the mine. Fortunate it is that the public, quick to accept anything that appears in the daily journals, can be placed in a sense of false security by articles inspired by one or other of the embassies interested. If it were not so, European panics would certainly be of frequent occurrence.

My Chief sauntered by, chatting with his close personal friend, Prince Olsoufieff, the Russian Ambassador, who looked a truly striking figure in his white uniform, with the Cross of St. Andrew glittering at his throat. The latter, as he passed, exclaimed confidentially in Russian to my Chief, who understood that language, having been first Secretary of Embassy in Petersburg earlier in his career:

“Da, ya po-ni-mai-ù. Ya sam napishu.” (“Yes, I understand. I will write for you myself.”)

Keen antagonists in diplomacy though they very often were, yet in private life a firm friendship existed between the pair – a friendship dating from the days when the one had been British Attaché in Petersburg and the other had occupied a position in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – that large grey building facing the Winter Palace.

“The lion and the bear strolling together,” laughed the toothless old Baronne, after they had passed. “Olsoufieff is a charming man, but he never accepts my invitations. I cannot tell why. I don’t fancy he considers me his friend.”

“Sibyl was at your reception the other evening,” I remarked suddenly. “She told me she met a man who was a stranger in Paris. His name, I think she said, was Wolf – Rodolphe Wolf. Who is he?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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