Ironside John

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE MYSTERIOUS FOREIGNER

"Hello! Yes – I'm Maurice Wynn. Who are you?"

"Harding. I've been ringing you up at intervals for hours. Carson's ill, and you're to relieve him. Come round for instructions to-night. Lord Southbourne will give them you himself. Eh? Yes, Whitehall Gardens. Ten-thirty, then. Right you are."

I replaced the receiver, and started hustling into my dress clothes, thinking rapidly the while.

For the first time in the course of ten years' experience as a special correspondent, I was dismayed at the prospect of starting off at a moment's notice – to St. Petersburg, in this instance.

To-day was Saturday, and if I were to go by the quickest route – the Nord express – I should have three days' grace, but the delay at this end would not compensate for the few hours saved on the journey. No, doubtless Southbourne would expect me to get off to-morrow or Monday morning at latest. He was – and is – the smartest newspaper man in England.

Well, I still had four hours before I was due at Whitehall Gardens; and I must make the most of them. At least I should have a few minutes alone with Anne Pendennis, on our way to the dinner at the Hotel Cecil, – the Savage Club "ladies" dinner, where she and my cousin Mary would be guests of Jim Cayley, Mary's husband.

Anne had promised to let me escort her, – the Cayley's brougham was a small one, in which three were emphatically a crowd, – and the drive from Chelsea to the Strand, in a hansom, would provide me with the opportunity I had been wanting for days past, of putting my fate to the test, and asking her to be my wife.

I had thought to find that opportunity to-day, at the river picnic Mary had arranged; but all my attempts to secure even a few minutes alone with Anne had failed; though whether she evaded me by accident or design I could not determine, any more than I could tell if she loved me. Sometimes, when she was kind, my hopes rose high, to fall below zero next minute.

"Steer clear of her, my boy," Jim Cayley had said to me weeks ago, when Anne first came to stay with Mary. "She's as capricious as she's imperious, and a coquette to her finger-tips. A girl with hair and eyes like that couldn't be anything else."

I resented the words hotly at the time, and he retracted them, with a promptitude and good humor that disarmed me. Jim was a man with whom it was impossible to quarrel. Still, I guessed he had not changed his opinion of his wife's guest, though he

appeared on excellent terms with her.

As for Mary, she was different. She loved Anne, – they had been fast friends ever since they were school-girls together at Neuilly, – and if she did not fully understand her, at least she believed that her coquetry, her capriciousness, were merely superficial, like the hard, glittering quartz that enshrines and protects the pure gold, – and has to be shattered before the gold can be won.

Mary, I knew, wished me well, though she was far too wise a little woman to attempt any interference.

Yes, I would end my suspense to-night, I decided, as I wrestled with a refractory tie.

Ting … ting … tr-r-r-ing! Two short rings and a long one. Not the telephone this time, but the electric bell at the outer door of my bachelor flat.

Who on earth could that be? Well, he'd have to wait.

As I flung the tie aside and seized another, I heard a queer scratching noise outside, stealthy but distinct. I paused and listened, then crossed swiftly and silently to the open door of the bedroom. Some one had inserted a key in the Yale lock of the outer door, and was vainly endeavoring to turn it.

I flung the door open and confronted an extraordinary figure, – an old man, a foreigner evidently, of a type more frequently encountered in the East End than Westminster.

"Well, my friend, what are you up to?" I demanded.

The man recoiled, bending his body and spreading his claw-

like hands in a servile obeisance, quaint and not ungraceful; while he quavered out what was seemingly an explanation or apology in some jargon that was quite unintelligible to me, though I can speak most European languages. I judged it to be some Russian patois.

I caught one word, a name that I knew, and interrupted his flow of eloquence.

"You want Mr. Cassavetti?" I asked in Russian. "Well, his rooms are on the next floor."

I pointed upwards as I spoke, and the miserable looking old creature understood the gesture at least, for, renewing his apologetic protestations, he began to shuffle along the landing, supporting himself by the hand-rail.

I knew my neighbor Cassavetti fairly well. He was supposed to be a press-man, correspondent to half a dozen Continental papers, and gave himself out as a Greek, but I had a notion that Russian refugee was nearer the mark, though hitherto I had never seen any suspicious characters hanging around his place.

But if this picturesque stranger wasn't a Russian Jew, I never saw one. He certainly was no burglar or sneak-thief, or he would have bolted when I opened the door. The key with which he had attempted to gain ingress to my flat was doubtless a pass-key to Cassavetti's rooms. He seemed a queer person to be in possession of such a thing, but that was Cassavetti's affair, and not mine.

"Here, you'd better have your key," I called, jerking it out of my lock. It was an ordinary Yale key, with a bit of string tied to

it, and a fragment of dirty red stuff attached to that.

The stranger had paused, and was clinging to the rail, making a queer gasping sound; and now, as I spoke, he suddenly collapsed in a heap, his dishevelled gray head resting against the balustrade.

I guessed I'd scared him pretty badly, and as I looked down at him I thought for a moment he was dead.

I went up the stairs, and rang Cassavetti's bell. There was no answer, and I tried the key. It fitted right enough, but the rooms were empty.

What was to be done? Common humanity forbade me to leave the poor wretch lying there; and to summon the housekeeper from the basement meant traversing eight flights of stairs, for the block was an old-fashioned one, and there was no elevator. Besides, I reckoned that Cassavetti would prefer not to have the housekeeper interfere with his queer visitor.

I ran back, got some whiskey and a bowl of water, and started to give first aid to my patient.

I saw at once what was wrong, – sheer starvation, nothing less. I tore open the ragged shirt, and stared aghast at the sight that met my eyes. The emaciated chest was seamed and knotted with curious scars. I had seen similar scars before, and knew there was but one weapon in the world – the knout – capable of making them. The man was a Russian then, and had been grievously handled; some time back as I judged, for the scars were old.

I dashed water on his face and breast, and poured some of the

whiskey down his throat. He gasped, gurgled, opened his eyes and stared at me. He looked like a touzled old vulture that has been badly scared.

"Buck up, daddy," I said cheerfully, forgetting he wouldn't understand me. I helped him to his feet, and felt in my trouser pocket for a coin. It was food he wanted, but I had none to give him, except some crackers, and I had wasted enough time over him already. If I didn't get a hustle on, I should be late for my appointment with Anne.

He clutched at the half-crown, and bent his trembling old body again, invoking, as I opined, a string of blessings on my unworthy head. Something slipped from among his garments and fell with a tinkle at my feet. I stooped to pick it up and saw it was an oval piece of tin, in shape and size like an old-fashioned miniature, containing a portrait. He had evidently been wearing it round his neck, amulet fashion, for a thin red cord dangled from it, that I had probably snapped in my haste.

He reached for it with a quick cry, but I held on to it, for I recognized the face instantly.

It was a photograph of Anne Pendennis – badly printed, as if by an amateur – but an excellent likeness.

Underneath were scrawled in red ink the initials "A. P." and two or three words that I could not decipher, together with a curious hieroglyphic, that looked like a tiny five-petalled flower, drawn and filled in with the red ink.

How on earth did this forlorn old alien have Anne's portrait

in his possession?

He was cute enough to read my expression, for he clutched my arm, and, pointing to the portrait, began speaking earnestly, not in the patois, but in low Russian.

My Russian is poor enough, but his was execrable. Still, I gathered that he knew "the gracious lady," and had come a long way in search of her. There was something I could not grasp, some allusion to danger that threatened Anne, for each time he used the word he pointed at the portrait with agonized emphasis.

His excitement was so pitiable, and seemed so genuine, that I determined to get right to the root of the mystery if possible.

I seized his arm, marched him into my flat, and sat him in a chair, emptying the tin of crackers before him, and bidding him eat. He started crunching the crackers with avidity, eyeing me furtively all the time as I stood at the telephone.

I must let Anne know at once that I was detained.

I could not get on to the Cayley's number, of course. Things always happen that way! Well, I would have to explain my conduct later.

But I failed to elicit much by the cross-examination to which I subjected my man. For one thing, neither of us understood half that the other said.

I told him I knew his "gracious lady;" and he grovelled on the floor, clawing at my shoes with his skinny hands.

I asked him who he was and where he came from, but could make nothing of his replies. He seemed in mortal fear of some

"Selinski" – or a name that sounded like that; and I did discover one point, that by Selinski he meant Cassavetti. When he found he had given that much away, he was so scared that I thought he was going to collapse again, as he did on the staircase.

And yet he had been entrusted with a pass-key to Cassavetti's rooms!

Only two items seemed perfectly clear. That his "gracious lady" was in danger, – I put that question to him time after time, and his answer never varied, – and that he had come to warn her, to save her if possible.

I could not ascertain the nature of the danger. When I asked him he simply shook his head, and appeared more scared than ever; but I gathered that he would be able to tell "the gracious lady," and that she would understand, if he could only have speech with her. But when I pressed him on this idea of danger he did a curious thing. He picked up Cassavetti's key, flattened the bit of red stuff on the palm of his hand, and held it towards me, pointing at it as if to indicate that here was the clue that he dare not give in words.

I looked at the thing with interest. A tawdry artificial flower, with five petals, and in a flash I understood that the hieroglyphic on the portrait represented the same thing, – a red geranium. But what did they mean, anyhow, and what connection was there between them? I could not imagine.

Finally I made him understand – or I thought I did – that he must come to me next day, in the morning; and meanwhile I

would try and arrange that he should meet his “gracious lady.”

He grovelled again, and shuffled off, turning at every few steps to make a genuflection.

I half expected him to go up the stairs to Cassavetti’s rooms, but he did not. He went down. I followed two minutes later, but saw nothing of him, either on the staircase or the street. He had vanished as suddenly and mysteriously as he had appeared.

I whistled for a hansom, and, as the cab turned up Whitehall, Big Ben chimed a quarter to eight.

CHAPTER II
THE SAVAGE CLUB DINNER

Dinner was served by the time I reached the Cecil, and, as I entered the salon, and made my way towards the table where our seats were, I saw that my fears were realized. Anne was angry, and would not lightly forgive me for what she evidently considered an all but unpardonable breach of good manners.

I know Mary had arranged that Anne and I should sit together, but now the chair reserved for me was on Mary's left. Her husband sat at her right, and next him was Anne, deep in conversation with her further neighbor, who, as I recognized with a queer feeling of apprehension, was none other than Cassavetti himself!

Mary greeted me with a comical expression of dismay on her pretty little face.

"I'm sorry, Maurice," she whispered. "Anne would sit there. She's very angry. Where have you been, and why didn't you telephone? We gave you ten minutes' grace, and then came on, all together. It wasn't what you might call lively, for Jim had to sit bodkin between us, and Anne never spoke a word the whole way!"

Jim said nothing, but looked up from his soup and favored me with a grin and a wink. He evidently imagined the situation to

be funny. I did not.

"I'll explain later, Mary," I said, and moved to the back of Anne's chair.

"Will you forgive me, Miss Pendennis?" I said humbly. "I was detained at the last moment by an accident. I rang you up, but failed to get an answer."

She turned her head and looked up at me, with a charming smile, in which I thought I detected a trace of contrition for her hasty condemnation of me.

"An accident? You are hurt?" she asked impulsively.

"No, it happened to some one else; and it concerns you, Cassavetti," I continued, addressing him, for, as I confessed that I was unhurt, Anne's momentary flash of compunction passed, and her perverse mood reasserted itself. With a slight shrug of her white shoulders she resumed her dinner, and though she must have heard what I told Cassavetti, she betrayed no sign of interest.

In as few words as possible I related the circumstances, suppressing only any mention of the discovery of Anne's portrait in the alien's possession, and our subsequent interview in my rooms. I remembered the man's terror of Cassavetti – or Selinski – as he had called him, and his evident conviction that he was in some way connected with the danger that threatened "the gracious lady," who, alas, seemed determined to be anything but gracious to me on this unlucky evening.

Cassavetti listened impassively. I watched his dark face intently, but could learn nothing from it, not even whether he had

expected the man, or recognized him from my description.

"Without doubt one of my old pensioners," he said unconcernedly. "Strange that I should have missed him, for I was in my rooms before seven, and only left them to come on here. Accept my regrets, my friend, for the trouble he occasioned you, and my thanks for your kindness to him."

The words and the tone were courteous enough, and yet they roused in me a sudden fierce feeling of antagonism against this man, whom I had hitherto regarded as an interesting and pleasant acquaintance. For one thing, I saw that Anne had been listening to the brief colloquy, and had grasped the full significance of his remark as to the time when he returned to his rooms. The small head, with its gleaming crown of chestnut hair, was elevated with a proud little movement, palpable enough to my jealous and troubled eyes. I could not see her face, but I knew well that her eyes flashed stormy lightnings at that moment. Wonderful hazel eyes they were, changing with every mood, now dark and sombre as a starless night, now light and limpid as a Highland burn, laughing in the sunshine.

She imagined that the excuse I had made was invalid; for if, as Cassavetti inferred, his – and my – mysterious visitor had been off the premises before seven o'clock, I ought still to have been able to keep my appointment with her. Well, I would have to undeceive her later!

"Don't look so solemn, Maurice," Mary said, as I seated myself beside her. "Tell me all about everything, right now."

I repeated what I had already told Cassavetti.

"Well, I call that real interesting!" she declared. "If you'd left that poor old creature on the stairs, you'd never have forgiven yourself, Maurice. It sounds like a piece out of a story, doesn't it, Jim?"

"You're right, my dear! A fairy story," chuckled Jim, facetiously. "You think so, anyhow, eh, Anne?"

Thus directly appealed to, she had to turn to him, and I heard him explaining his question, which she affected not to understand; heard also her answer, given with icy sweetness, and without even a glance in my direction.

"Oh, no, I am sure Mr. Wynn is not capable of inventing such an excuse."

Thereupon she resumed her conversation with Cassavetti. They were speaking in French, and appeared to be getting on astonishingly well together.

That dinner seemed interminable, though I dare say every other person in the room except my unlucky self – and perhaps Mary, who is the most sympathetic little soul in the world – enjoyed it immensely.

I told her of my forthcoming interview with Southbourne, and the probability that I would have to leave London within forty-eight hours. She imparted the news to Jim in a voice that must have reached Anne's ears distinctly; but she made no sign.

Was she going to continue my punishment right through the evening? It looked like it. If I could only have speech with her

for one minute I would win her forgiveness!

My opportunity came at last, when, after the toast of "the King," chairs were pushed back and people formed themselves into groups.

A pretty woman at the next table – how I blessed her in my heart! – summoned Cassavetti to her side, and I boldly took the place he vacated.

Anne flashed a smile at me, – a real smile this time, – and said demurely:

"So you're not going to sulk all the evening – Maurice?"

This was carrying war into the opposite camp with a vengeance; but that was Anne's way.

I expect Jim Cayley set me down as a poor-spirited skunk, for showing no resentment; but I certainly felt none now. Anne was not a girl whom one could judge by ordinary standards. Besides, I loved her; and she knew well that one smile, one gracious word, would compensate for all past capricious unkindness. Yes, she must have known that; too well, perhaps, just then.

"I told the truth just now, though not all of it," I said, in a rapid undertone.

"I knew you were keeping something back," she declared merrily. "And now you have taken your punishment, sir, you may give your full explanation."

"I can't here; I must see you alone. It is something very serious, – something that concerns you nearly."

"Me! But what about your mysterious old man?"

"It concerns him, too – both of you – "

Even as I spoke, once more the incredibility of any connection between this glorious creature and that poor, starved, half-demented wreck of humanity, struck me afresh.

"But I can't tell you now, as I said, and – hush – don't let him hear; and beware of him, I implore you. No, it's not mere jealousy, – though I can't explain, here." I had indicated Cassavetti with a scarcely perceptible gesture, for I knew that, though he was still talking to the pretty woman in black, he was furtively watching us.

A curious expression crossed Anne's mobile face as she glanced across at him, from under her long lashes.

But her next words, spoken aloud, had no reference to my warning.

"Is it true that you are leaving town at once?"

"Yes. I may come to see you to-morrow?"

"Come as early as you like – in reason."

That was all, for Cassavetti rejoined us, dragging up a chair in place of the one I had appropriated.

"So you and Mr. Wynn are neighbors," she said gaily. "Though he never told me so."

"Doubtless he considered me too insignificant," replied Cassavetti, suavely enough, though I felt, rather than saw, that he eyed me malignantly.

"Oh, you are not in the least insignificant, though you are exasperatingly – how shall I put it? – opinionated," she retorted,

and turned to me. “Mr. Cassavetti has accused me of being a Russian.”

“Not accused – complimented,” he interpolated, with a deprecatory bow.

“You see?” Anne appealed to me in the same light tone, but our eyes met in a significant glance, and I knew that she had understood my warning, perhaps far better than I did myself; for after all I had been guided by instinct rather than knowledge when I uttered it.

“I have told him that I have never been in Russia,” she continued, “and he is rude enough to disbelieve a lady!”

“I protest – and apologize also,” asserted Cassavetti, “though you are smoking a Russian cigarette.”

“As two-thirds of the women here are doing. The others are non-smoking frumps,” she laughed.

“But you smoke them with such a singular grace.”

The words and tone were courtier-like, but their inference was unmistakable. I could have killed him for it! A swift glance from Anne commanded silence and self-restraint.

“You are a flatterer, Mr. Cassavetti,” she said in mock reproof. “Come along, good people; there’s plenty of room here!” as other acquaintances joined us. “Oh, some one’s going to recite – hush!”

The next hour or so passed pleasantly, and all too quickly. Anne was the centre of a merry group, and was now in her wittiest and most gracious mood. Cassavetti remained with us, speaking seldom, though he could be a brilliant conversationalist when he

liked. He listened to Anne's every word, watched every gesture, unobtrusively, but with a curious intentness.

Soon after ten, people began to leave, some who lived at a distance, others who would finish the evening elsewhere. Anne was going on to a birthday supper at Mrs. Dennis Sutherland's house in Kensington, to which many theatrical friends had been bidden. The invitation was an impromptu one, given and accepted a few minutes ago, and now the famous actress came to claim her guest.

"Ready, Anne? Sorry you can't come with us, Mr. Wynn; but come later if you can."

We moved towards the door all together, Anne and her hostess with their hands full of red and white flowers. The "Savages" had raided the table decorations, and presented the spoils to their guests.

Cassavetti intercepted Anne.

"Good night, Miss Pendennis," he said in a low voice, adding, in French, "Will you give me a flower as souvenir of our first meeting?"

She glanced at her posy, selected a spray of scarlet geranium, and presented it to him with a smile, and a word that I did not catch.

He looked at her more intently than ever as he took it.

"A thousand thanks, mademoiselle. I understand well," he said, with a queer thrill in his voice, as of suppressed excitement.

As she passed on I heard him mutter in French: "The symbol!

Then it is she! Yes, without doubt it is she!”

CHAPTER III
THE BLOOD-STAINED PORTRAIT

In the vestibule I hung around waiting till Anne and Mrs. Dennis Sutherland should reappear from the cloak-room.

It was close on the time when I was due at Whitehall Gardens, but I must have a parting word with Anne, even at the risk of being late for the appointment with my chief.

Jim and Mary passed through, and paused to say good night.

"It's all right, Maurice?" Mary whispered. "And you're coming to us to-morrow, anyhow?"

"Yes; to say good-bye, if I have to start on Monday."

"Just about time you were on the war-path again, my boy," said Jim, bluffly. "Idleness is demoralizing, 'specially in London."

Now this was scarcely fair, considering that it was little more than a month since I returned from South Africa, where I had been to observe and report on the conditions of labor in the mines; nor had I been by any means idle during those weeks of comparative leisure. But I knew, of course, that this was an oblique reference to my affair with Anne; though why Jim should disapprove of it so strongly passed my comprehension. If Anne chose to keep me on tenter-hooks, well that was my affair, not his! Still, I wasn't going to quarrel with Jim over his opinion, as

I should have quarrelled with any other man.

Anne joined me directly, and we had two precious minutes together under the portico. Mrs. Sutherland's carriage had not yet come into the courtyard, and she herself was chatting with folks she knew.

There were plenty of people about, coming and going, but Anne and I paced along out of the crowd, and paused in the shadow of one of the pillars.

She looked ethereal, ghostlike, in her long white cloak, with a filmy hood thing drawn loosely over her shining hair.

I thought her paler than usual – though that might have been the effect of the electric lights overhead – and her face was wistful, but very fair and sweet and innocent. One could scarcely believe it the same face that, a few minutes before, had been animated by audacious mischief and coquetry. Truly her moods were many, and they changed with every fleeting moment.

"I've behaved abominably to you all the evening," she whispered tremulously. "And yet you've forgiven me."

"There's nothing to forgive. The queen can do no wrong," I answered. (How Jim Cayley would have jeered at me if he could have heard!) "Anne, I love you. I think you must know that by this time, dear."

"Yes, I know, and – and I am glad – Maurice, though I don't deserve that you should love me. I've teased you so shamefully – I don't know what possessed me!"

If I could only have kissed those faltering lips! But I dare not.

We were within range of too many curious eyes. Still, I held her hand in mine, and our eyes met. In that brief moment we saw each into the other's soul, and saw love there, the true love passionate and pure, that, once born, lasts forever, through life and death and all eternity.

She was the first to speak, breaking a silence that could have lasted but a fraction of time, but there are seconds in which one experiences an infinitude of joy or sorrow.

"And you are going away – so soon! But we shall meet to-morrow?"

"Yes, we'll have one day, at least; there is so much to say – "

Then, in a flash, I remembered the old man and Cassavetti, – the mystery that enshrouded them, and her.

"I may not be able to come early, darling," I continued hurriedly. "I have to see that old man in the morning. He says he knows you, – that you are in danger; I could not make out what he meant. And he spoke of Cassavetti; he came to see him, really. That was why I dare not tell you the whole story just now – "

"Cassavetti!" she echoed, and I saw her eyes dilate and darken. "Who is he – what is he? I never saw him before, but he came up and talked to Mr. Cayley, and asked to be introduced to me; and – and I was so vexed with you, Maurice, that I began to flirt with him; and then – oh, I don't know – he is so strange – he perplexes – frightens me!"

"And yet you gave him a flower," I said reproachfully.

"I can't think why! I felt so queer, as if I couldn't help myself.

I just had to give him one, – that one; and when I looked at him, – Maurice, what does a red geranium mean? Has it – "

"Mrs. Dennis Sutherland's carriage!" bawled a liveried official by the centre steps.

Mrs. Sutherland swept towards us.

"Come along, Anne," she cried, as we moved to meet her. "Perhaps we shall see you later, Mr. Wynn? You'll be welcome any time, up to one o'clock."

I put them into the carriage, and watched them drive away; then started, on foot, for Whitehall Gardens. The distance was so short that I could cover it more quickly walking than driving.

The night was sultry and overcast; and before I reached my destination big drops of rain were spattering down, and the mutter of thunder mingled with the ceaseless roll of the traffic.

I was taken straight to Lord Southbourne's sanctum, a handsomely furnished, but almost ostentatiously business-like apartment.

Southbourne himself, seated at a big American desk, was making hieroglyphics on a sheet of paper before him while he dictated rapidly to Harding, his private secretary, who manipulated a typewriter close by.

He looked up, nodded to me, indicated a chair, and a table on which were whiskey and soda and an open box of cigarettes, and invited me to help myself, all with one sweep of the hand, and without an instant's interruption of his discourse, – an impassioned denunciation of some British statesman who dared

to differ from him – Southbourne – on some burning question of the day, Tariff Reform, I think; but I did not listen. I was thinking of Anne; and was only subconsciously aware of the hard monotonous voice until it ceased.

"That's all, Harding. Thanks. Good night," said Southbourne, abruptly.

He rose, yawned, stretched himself, sauntered towards me, subsided into an easy-chair, and lighted a cigarette.

Harding gathered up his typed slips, exchanged a friendly nod with me, and quietly took himself off.

I knew Southbourne's peculiarities fairly well, and therefore waited for him to speak.

We smoked in silence for a time, till he remarked abruptly: "Carson's dead."

"Dead!" I ejaculated, in genuine consternation. I had known and liked Carson; one of the cleverest and most promising of Southbourne's "young men."

He blew out a cloud of smoke, watched a ring form and float away as if it were the only interesting thing in the world. Then he fired another word off at me.

"Murdered!"

He blew another smoke ring, and there was a spell of silence. I do not even now know whether his callousness was real or feigned. I hope it was feigned, though he affected to regard all who served him, in whatever capacity, as mere pieces in the ambitious game he played, to be used or discarded with equal

skill and ruthlessness, and if an unlucky pawn fell from the board, – why it was lost to the game, and there was an end of it.

Murdered! It seemed incredible. I thought of Carson as I last saw him, the day before I started for South Africa, when we dined together and made a night of it. If I had been available when the situation became acute in Russia a few weeks later, Southbourne would have sent me instead of him; I should perhaps have met with his fate. I knew, of course, that at this time a "special" in Russia ran quite as many risks as a war correspondent on active service; but it was one thing to encounter a stray bullet or a bayonet thrust in the course of one's day's work, – say during an *émeute*, – and quite another to be murdered in cold blood.

"That's terrible!" I said huskily, at last. "He was such a splendid chap, too, poor Carson. Have you any details?"

"Yes; he was found in his rooms, stabbed to the heart. He must have been dead twenty-four hours or more."

"And the police have tracked the murderer?"

"No, and I don't suppose they will. They've so many similar affairs of their own on hand, that an Englishman more or less doesn't count. The Embassy is moving in the matter, but it is very unlikely that anything will be discovered beyond what is known already, – that it was the work of an emissary of some secret society with which Carson had mixed himself up, in defiance of my instructions."

He paused and lighted another cigarette.

"How do you know he defied your instructions?" I burst out

indignantly. The tone of his allusion to Carson riled me. “Don’t you always expect us to send a good story, no matter how, or at what personal risk, we get the material?”

“Just so,” he asserted calmly. “By the way, if you’re in a funk, Wynn, you needn’t go. I can get another man to take your place to-night.”

“I’m not in a funk, and I mean to go, unless you want to send another man. If you do, send him and be damned to you both!” I retorted hotly. “Look here, Lord Southbourne; Carson never failed in his duty, – I’d stake my life on that! And I’ll not allow you, or any man, to sneer at him when he’s dead and can’t defend himself!”

Southbourne dropped his cigarette and stared at me, a dusky flush rising under his sallow skin. That is the only time I have ever seen any sign of emotion on his impassive face.

“I apologize, Mr. Wynn,” he said stiffly. “I ought not to have insinuated that you were afraid to undertake this commission. Your past record has proved you the very reverse of a coward! And, I assure you, I had no intention of sneering at poor Carson or of decrying his work. But from information in my possession I know that he exceeded his instructions; that he ceased to be a mere observer of the vivid drama of Russian life, and became an actor in it, with the result, poor chap, that he has paid for his indiscretion with his life!”

“How do you know all this?” I demanded. “How do you know – ”

"That he was not in search of 'copy,' but in pursuit of his private ends, when he deliberately placed himself in peril? Well, I do know it; and that is all I choose to say on this point. I warned him at the outset, – as I need not have warned you, – that he must exercise infinite tact and discretion in his relations with the police, and the bureaucracy which the police represent; and also with the people, – the democracy. That he must, in fact, maintain a strictly impartial and impersonal attitude and view-point. Well, that's just what he failed to do. He became involved with some secret society; you know as well as I do – better, perhaps – that Russia is honeycombed with 'em. Probably in the first instance he was actuated by curiosity; but I have reason to believe that his connection with this society was a purely personal affair. There was a woman in it, of course. I can't tell you just how he came to fall foul of his new associates, for I don't know. Perhaps they imagined he knew too much. Anyhow, he was found, as I have said, stabbed to the heart. There is no clue to the assassin, except that in Carson's clenched hand was found an artificial flower, – a red geranium, which – "

I started upright, clutching the arms of my chair. A red geranium! The bit of stuff dangling from Cassavetti's pass-key; the hieroglyphic on the portrait, the flower Anne had given to Cassavetti, and to which he seemed to attach so much significance. All red geraniums. What did they mean?

"The police declare it to be the symbol of a formidable secret organization which they have hitherto failed to crush; one that has

ramifications throughout the world," Southbourne continued. "Why, man, what's wrong with you?" he added hastily.

I suppose I must have looked ghastly; but I managed to steady my voice, and answer curtly: "I'll tell you later. Go on, what about Carson?"

He rose and crossed to his desk before he answered, scrutinizing me with keen interest the while.

"That's all. Except that this was found in his breast-pocket; I got it by to-night's mail. It's in a horrid state; the blood soaked through, of course."

He picked up a small oblong card, holding it gingerly in his finger-tips, and handed it to me.

I think I knew what it was, even before I looked at it. A photograph of Anne Pendennis, identical – save that it was unframed – with that which was in the possession of the miserable old Russian, even to the initials, the inscription, and the red symbol beneath it!

CHAPTER IV
THE RIVER STEPS

"This was found in Carson's pocket?" I asked, steadying my voice with an effort.

He nodded.

I affected to examine the portrait closely, to gain a moment's time. Should I tell him, right now, that I knew the original; tell him also of my strange visitant? No; I decided to keep silence, at least until after I had seen Anne, and cross-examined the old Russian again.

"Have you any clue to her identity?" I said, as I rose and replaced the blood-stained card on his desk.

"No. I've no doubt the Russian Secret Police know well enough who she is; but they don't give anything away, – even to me."

"They sent you that promptly enough," I suggested, indicating the photograph with a fresh cigarette which I took up as I resumed my seat. I had managed to regain my composure, and have no doubt that Southbourne considered my late agitation was merely the outcome of my natural horror and astonishment at the news of poor Carson's tragic fate. And now I meant to ascertain all he knew or suspected about the affair, without revealing my personal interest in it.

"Not they! It came from Von Eckhardt. It was he who found poor Carson; and he took possession of that" – he jerked his head towards the desk – "before the police came on the scene, and got it through."

I knew what that meant, – that the thing had not been posted in Russia, but smuggled across the frontier.

I had met Von Eckhardt, who was on the staff of an important German newspaper, and knew that he and Carson were old friends. They shared rooms at St. Petersburg.

"Now why should Von Eckhardt run such a risk?" I asked.

"Can't say; wish I could."

"Where was he when poor Carson was done for?"

"At Wilna, he says; he'd been away for a week."

"Did he tell you about this Society, and its red symbol?"

"'Pon my soul, you've missed your vocation, Wynn. You ought to have been a barrister!" drawled Southbourne. "No, I knew all that before. As a matter of fact, I warned Carson against that very Society, – as I'm warning you. Von Eckhardt merely told me the bare facts, including that about the bit of geranium Carson was clutching. I drew my own inference. Here, you may read his note."

He tossed me a half-sheet of thin note-paper, covered on one side with Von Eckhardt's crabbed German script.

It was, as he had said, a mere statement of facts, and I mentally determined to seize an early opportunity of interviewing Von Eckhardt when I arrived at Petersburg.

"You needn't have troubled to question me," resumed Southbourne, in his most nonchalant manner. "I meant to tell you the little I know, – for your own protection. This Society is one of those revolutionary organizations that abound in Russia, but more cleverly managed than most of them, and therefore all the more dangerous. Its members are said to be innumerable, and of every class; and there are branches in every capital of Europe. A near neighbor of yours, by the way, is under surveillance at this very moment, though I believe nothing definite has been traced to him."

"Cassavetti!" I exclaimed with, I am sure, an excellent assumption of surprise.

"You've guessed it first time; though his name's Vladimir Selinski. If you see him between now and Monday, when you must start, I advise you not to mention your destination to him, unless you've already done so. He was at the Savage Club dinner to-night, wasn't he?"

One of Southbourne's foibles was to pose as a kind of "Sherlock Holmes," but I was not in the least impressed by this pretension to omniscience. He was a member of the club, and ought to have been at the dinner himself. If he had looked down the list of guests he must have seen "Miss Anne Pendennis" among the names, and yet I believed he had not the slightest suspicion that she was the original of that portrait!

"I saw him there," I said, "but I told him nothing of my movements; though we are on fairly good terms. Do you think

I'm quite a fool, Lord Southbourne?"

He looked amused, and blew another ring before he answered, enigmatically: "David said in his haste 'all men are liars.' If he'd said at his leisure 'all men are fools, – when there's a woman in the case' – he'd have been nearer the mark!"

"What do you mean?" I demanded, hotly enough.

"Well, I also dined at the Cecil to-night, though not with the 'Savages,' and I happened to hear that you and Cassavetti – we'll call him that – were looking daggers at each other, and that the lady, who was remarkably handsome, appeared to enjoy the situation! Who is she, Wynn? Do I know her?"

I watched him closely, but his face betrayed nothing.

"I think your informant must have been a – journalist, Lord Southbourne," I said very quietly. "And we seem to have strayed pretty considerably from the point. I came here to take your instructions, and if I'm to start at nine on Monday I shall not see you again."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"All right; we'll get to business. Here's the new code; get it off by heart between now and Monday, and destroy the copy. It's safer. Here's your passport, duly *viséd*, and a cheque. That's all, I think. I don't need to teach you your work. But I don't want you to meet with such a fate as Carson's; so I expect you to be warned by his example. And you are not to make any attempt to unravel the mystery of his death. I tell you that for your own safety! The matter has been taken up from the Embassy, and everything

possible will be done to hunt the assassin down. Good-bye, and good luck!"

We shook hands and I went out into the night. It was now well past midnight, and the streets were even quieter than usual at that hour, for there had been a sharp storm while I was with Southbourne. I had heard the crash of thunder at intervals, and the patter of heavy rain all the time. Now the storm was over, the air was cool and fresh, the sky clear. The wet street gleamed silver in the moonlight, and was all but deserted. The traffic had thinned down to an occasional hansom or private carriage, and there were few foot-passengers abroad. I did not meet a soul along the whole of Whitehall except the policemen, their wet mackintoshes glistening in the moonlight.

But, as I reached the corner of Parliament Square, I saw, just across the road, a man and woman walking rapidly in the direction of Westminster Bridge. I glanced at them casually, then looked again, more intently. The man looked like a sailor; he wore a pea-jacket and a peaked cap, while the woman was enveloped in a long dark cloak, and had a black scarf over her head. I saw a gleam of jewelled shoe-buckles as she picked her way daintily across the wet roadway to the further corner by the Houses of Parliament.

My heart seemed to stand still as I watched her. At any other time or place I would have sworn that I knew the tall, slender figure, the imperial poise of the head, the peculiarly graceful gait, swift but not hurried. I inwardly jeered at myself for my idiocy.

My mind was so full of Anne Pendennis that I must imagine every tall, graceful woman was she! This lady was doubtless a resident in the southern suburbs, detained by the storm, and now on her way to one of the all-night trams that start from the far side of Westminster Bridge. There was quite a suburban touch in a woman in evening dress being escorted by a man in a pea-jacket. She might be an *artiste*, too poor to afford a cab home.

Nevertheless, while these thoughts ran through my mind, I was following the couple. They walked so swiftly that I did not decrease the distance between us. Half-way across the bridge I was intercepted by a beggar, who whined for "the price of a doss" and kept pace with me, till I got rid of him with the bestowal of a coin; but when I looked for the couple I was stalking they had disappeared.

I quickened my pace to a run, and at the further end looked anxiously ahead, but could see no trace of them. There were more people stirring in the Westminster Bridge Road, even at this hour; street hawkers starting home with their sodden barrows, the usual disreputable knot of loungers gathered around a coffee-stall; but those whom I looked for had vanished. Swiftly as they were walking they could scarcely have traversed the distance between the bridge and the trams in so short a time.

Had they gone down the steps to the river embankment? I paused and listened, thought I heard a faint patter, as of a woman's high heels on the stone steps, and ran down the flight.

The paved walk below St. Thomas' Hospital was deserted; I

could see far in the moonlight. But near at hand I heard the plash of oars. I looked around and saw that to the right there was a second flight of steps, almost under the shadow of the first arch of the bridge, and leading right down to the river.

I vaulted the bar that guarded the top of the flight and ran down the steps. Yes, there was the boat, with the sailor and another man pulling at the oars, and the woman sitting in the stern. The scarf had slipped back a little, and I saw the glint of her bright hair.

"Anne! Anne!" I cried desperately.

She heard and turned her face.

My God, it was Anne herself! For a second only I saw her face distinctly, then she pulled the scarf over it with a quick gesture; the boat shot under the dark shadow of the arches and disappeared.

I stood dumbfounded for some minutes, staring at the river, and trying to convince myself that I was mad – that I had dreamt the whole incident.

When at last I turned to retrace my steps I saw something dark lying at the top of the steps, stooped, and picked it up.

It was a spray of scarlet geranium!

CHAPTER V
THE MYSTERY THICKENS

When I regained the bridge I crossed to the further parapet and looked down at the river. I could see nothing of the boat; doubtless it had passed out of sight behind a string of barges that lay in the tideway. As I watched, the moon was veiled again by the clouds that rolled up from the west, heralding a second storm; and in another minute or so a fresh deluge had commenced.

But I scarcely heeded it. I leaned against the parapet staring at the dark, mysterious river and the lights that fringed and spanned it like strings of blurred jewels, seen mistily through the driving rain.

I was bareheaded, for the fierce gust of wind that came as harbinger of the squall had swept off my hat and whirled it into the water, where doubtless it would be carried down-stream, on the swiftly ebbing tide, in the wake of that boat which was hastening – whither? I don't think I knew at the time that my hat was gone. I have lived through some strange and terrible experiences; but I have seldom suffered more mental agony than I did during those few minutes that I stood in the rain on Westminster Bridge.

I was trembling from head to foot, my soul was sick, my mind distracted by the effort to find any plausible explanation of the

scene I had just witnessed.

What was this mystery that encompassed the girl I loved; that had closed around her now? A mystery that I had never even suspected till a few hours ago, though I had seen Anne every day for this month past, – ever since I first met her.

But, after all, what did I know of her antecedents? Next to nothing; and that I had learned mainly from my cousin Mary.

Now I came to think of it, Anne had told me very little about herself. I knew that her father, Anthony Pendennis, came of an old family, and possessed a house and estate in the west of England, which he had let on a long lease. Anne had never seen her ancestral home, for her father lived a nomadic existence on the Continent; one which she had shared, since she left the school at Neuilly, where she and Mary first became friends.

I gathered that she and her father were devoted to each other; and that he had spared her unwillingly for this long-promised visit to her old school-fellow. Mary, I knew, would have welcomed Mr. Pendennis also; but by all accounts he was an eccentric person, who preferred to live anywhere rather than in England, the land of his birth. He and Anne were birds of passage, who wintered in Italy or Spain or Egypt as the whim seized him; and spent the summer in Switzerland or Tyrol, or elsewhere. In brief they wandered over Europe, north and south, according to the season; avoiding only the Russian Empire and the British Isles.

I had never worried my mind with conjectures as to the reason

of this unconventional mode of living. It had seemed to me natural enough, as I, too, was a nomad; a stranger and sojourner in many lands, since I left the old homestead in Iowa twelve years ago, to seek my fortune in the great world. During these wonderful weeks I had been spellbound, as it were, by Anne's beauty, her charm. When I was with her I could think only of her; and in the intervals, – well, I still thought of her, and was dejected or elated as she had been cruel or kind. To me her many caprices had seemed but the outcome of her youthful light-heartedness; of a certain naïve coquetry, that rendered her all the more dear and desirable; "a rosebud set about with little wilful thorns;" a girl who would not be easily wooed and won, and, therefore, a girl well worth winning.

But now – now – I saw her from a different standpoint; saw her enshrouded in a dark mystery, the clue to which eluded me. Only one belief I clung to with passionate conviction, as a drowning man clings to a straw. She loved me. I could not doubt that, remembering the expression of her wistful face as we parted under the portico so short a time ago, though it seemed like a lifetime. Had she planned her flight even then, – if flight it was, – and what else could it be?

My cogitations terminated abruptly for the moment as a heavy hand was laid on my shoulder, and a gruff voice said in my ear: "Come, none o' that, now! What are you up to?"

I turned and faced a burly policeman, whom I knew well. He recognized me, also, and saluted.

"Beg pardon; didn't know it was you, sir. Thought it was one of these here sooicides, or some one that had had – well, a drop too much."

He eyed me curiously. I dare say I looked, in my hatless and drenched condition, as if I might come under the latter category.

"It's all right," I answered, forcing a laugh. "I wasn't meditating a plunge in the river. My hat blew off, and when I looked after it I saw something that interested me, and stayed to watch."

It was a lame explanation and not precisely true. He glanced over the parapet in his turn. The rain was abating once more, and the light was growing as the clouds sped onwards. The moon was at full, and would only set at dawn.

"I don't see anything," he remarked. "What was it, sir? Anything suspicious?"

His tone inferred that it must have been something very much out of the common to have kept me there in the rain. Having told him so much I was bound to tell him more.

"A rowboat, with two or three people in it; going down-stream. That's unusual at this time of night – or morning – isn't it?"

He grinned widely.

"Was that all? It wasn't worth the wetting you've got, sir!"

"I don't see where the joke comes in," I said.

"Well, sir, you newspaper gents are always on the lookout for mysteries," he asserted, half apologetically. "There's nothing out of the way in a boat going up or down-stream at any hour of

the day or night; or if there was the river police would be on its track in a jiffy. They patrol the river same as we walk our beat. It might have been one of their boats you saw, or some bargees as had been making a night of it ashore. If I was you, I'd turn in as soon as possible. 'Tain't good for any one to stand about in wet clothes."

We walked the length of the bridge together, and he continued to hold forth loquaciously. We parted, on the best of terms, at the end of his beat; and following his advice, I walked rapidly homewards. I was chilled to the bone, and unutterably miserable, but if I stayed out all night that would not alter the situation.

The street door swung back under my touch, as I was in the act of inserting my latch-key in the lock. Some one had left it open, in defiance of the regulations, well known to every tenant of the block. I slammed it with somewhat unnecessary vigor, and the sound went booming and echoing up the well of the stone staircase, making a horrible din, fit to wake the seven sleepers of Ephesus.

It did waken the housekeeper's big watch-dog, chained up in the basement, and he bayed furiously. I leaned over the balustrade and called out. He knew my voice, and quieted down at once, but not before his master had come out in his pyjamas, yawning and blinking. Poor old Jenkins, his rest was pretty frequently disturbed, for if any one of the bachelor tenants of the upper flats – the lower ones were let out as offices – forgot his street-door key, or returned in the small hours in a condition

that precluded him from manipulating it, Jenkins would be rung up to let him in; and, being one of the best of good sorts, would certainly guide him up the staircase and put him comfortably to bed.

"I'm right down sorry, Jenkins," I called. "I found the street door open, and slammed it without thinking."

"Open! Well there, who could have left it open, going out or in?" he exclaimed, seeming more perturbed than the occasion warranted. "Must have been quite a short time back, for it isn't an hour since Caesar began barking like he did just now; and he never barks for nothing. I went right up the stairs and there was no one there and not a sound. The door was shut fast enough then, for I tried it. It couldn't have been Mr. Gray or Mr. Sellars, for they're away week ending, and Mr. Cassavetti came in before twelve. I met him on the stairs as I was turning the lights down."

"Perhaps he went out again to post," I suggested. "Good night, Jenkins."

"Good night, sir. You got caught in the storm, then?" He had just seen how wet I was, and eyed me curiously, as the policeman had done.

"Yes, couldn't see a cab and had to come through it. Lost my hat, too; it blew off," I answered over my shoulder, as I ran up the stairs. Lightly clad though he was, Jenkins seemed inclined to stay gossiping there till further orders.

When I got into my flat and switched on the lights, I found I still held, crumpled up in my hand, the bit of geranium I had

picked up on the river steps. But for that evidence I might have persuaded myself that I had imagined the whole thing. I dropped the crushed petals into the waste-paper basket, and, as I hastily changed from my wet clothes into pyjamas, I mentally rehearsed the scene over and over again. Could I have been misled by a chance resemblance? Impossible. Anne was not merely a beautiful girl, but a strikingly distinctive personality. I had recognized her figure, her gait, as I would have recognized them among a thousand; that fleeting glimpse of her face had merely confirmed the recognition. As for her presence in Westminster at a time when she should have been at Mrs. Dennis Sutherland's house in Kensington, or at home with the Cayleys in Chelsea, that could be easily accounted for on the presumption that she had not stayed long at Mrs. Sutherland's. Had the Cayleys already discovered her flight? Probably not. Was Cassavetti cognizant of it, – concerned with it in any way; and was the incident of the open door that had so perplexed Jenkins another link in the mysterious chain? At any rate, Cassavetti was not the man dressed as a sailor; though he might have been the man in the boat.

The more I brooded over it the more bewildered – distracted – my brain became. I tried to dismiss the problem from my mind, "to give it up," in fact; and, since sleep was out of the question, to occupy myself with preparations for the packing that must be done to-morrow – no, to-day, for the dawn had come – if I were to start for Russia on Monday morning.

But it was no use. I could not concentrate my mind on anything; also, though I'm an abstemious man as a rule, I guess I put away a considerable amount of whiskey. Anyhow, I've no recollection of going to bed; but I woke with a splitting headache, and a thirst I wouldn't take five dollars for, and the first things I saw were a whiskey bottle and soda syphon – both empty – on the dressing-table.

As I lay blinking at those silent witnesses – the bottle had been nearly full overnight – and trying to remember what had happened, there came a knock at my bedroom door, and Mrs. Jenkins came in with my breakfast tray.

She was an austere dame, and the glance she cast at that empty whiskey bottle was more significant and accusatory than any words could have been; though all she said was: "I knocked before, sir, with your shaving water, but you didn't hear. It's cold now, but I'll put some fresh outside directly."

I mumbled meek thanks, and, when she retreated, poured out some tea. I guessed there were eggs and bacon, the alpha and omega of British ideas of breakfast, under the dish cover; but I did not lift it. My soul – and my stomach – revolted at the very thought of such fare.

I had scarcely sipped my tea when I heard the telephone bell ring in the adjoining room. I scrambled up and was at the door when Mrs. Jenkins announced severely: "The telephone, Mr. Wynn," and retreated to the landing.

"Hello?"

“Is that Mr. Wynn?” responded a soft, rich, feminine voice that set my pulses tingling. “Oh, it is you, Maurice; I’m so glad. We rang you up from Chelsea, but could get no answer. You won’t know who it is speaking; it is I, Anne Pendennis!”

CHAPTER VI
"MURDER MOST FOUL"

"I'm speaking from Charing Cross station; can you hear me?" the voice continued. "I've had a letter from my father; he's ill, and I must go to him at once. I'm starting now, nine o'clock."

I glanced at the clock, which showed a quarter to nine.

"I'll be with you in five minutes – darling!" I responded, throwing in the last word with immense audacity. "*Au revoir*; I've got to hustle!"

I put up the receiver and dashed back into my bedroom, where my cold bath, fortunately, stood ready. Within five minutes I was running down the stairs, as if a sheriff and posse were after me, while Mrs. Jenkins leaned over the hand-rail and watched me, evidently under the impression that I was the victim of sudden dementia.

There was not a cab to be seen, of course; there never is one in Westminster on a Sunday morning, and I raced the whole way to Charing Cross on foot; tore into the station, and made for the platform whence the continental mail started. An agitated official tried to stop me at the barrier.

"Too late, sir, train's off; here – stand away – stand away there!"

He yelled after me as I pushed past him and scooted along

the platform. I had no breath to spare for explanations, but I dodged the porters who started forward to intercept me, and got alongside the car, where I saw Anne leaning out of the window.

"Where are you going?" I gasped, running alongside.

"Berlin. Mary has the address!" Anne called. "Oh, Maurice, let go; you'll be killed!"

A dozen hands grasped me and held me back by main force.

"See you – Tuesday!" I cried, and she waved her hand as if she understood.

"It's – all right – you fellows – I wasn't trying – to board – the car – " I said in jerks, as I got my breath again, and I guess they grasped the situation, for they grinned and cleared off, as Mary walked up to me.

"Well, I must say you ran it pretty fine, Maurice," she remarked accusatively. "And, my! what a fright you look! Why, you haven't shaved this morning; and your tie's all crooked!"

I put my hand up to my chin.

"I was only just awake when Anne rang me up," I explained apologetically. "It's exactly fifteen and a half minutes since I got out of bed; and I ran the whole way!"

"You look like it, you disreputable young man," she retorted laughing. "Well, you'd better come right back to breakfast. You can use Jim's shaving tackle to make yourself presentable."

She marched me off to the waiting brougham, and gave me the facts of Anne's hasty departure as we drove rapidly along the quiet, clean-washed, sunny streets.

"The letter came last night, but of course Anne didn't get it till she came in this morning, about three."

"Did you sit up for her?"

"Goodness, no! Didn't you see Jim lend her his latch-key? We knew it would be a late affair, – that's why we didn't go, – and that some one would see her safe home, even if you weren't there. The Amory's motored her home in their car; they had to wait for the storm to clear. I had been sleeping the sleep of the just for hours, and never even heard her come in. She'll be dead tired, poor dear, having next to no sleep, and then rushing off like this – "

"What's wrong with Mr. Pendennis?" I interpolated. "Was the letter from him?"

"Why, certainly; who should it be from? We didn't guess it was important, or we'd have sent it round to her at Mrs. Sutherland's last night. He's been sick for some days, and Anne believes he's worse than he makes out. She only sent word to my room a little before eight; and then she was all packed and ready to go. Wild horses wouldn't keep Anne from her father if he wanted her! We're to send her trunks on to-morrow."

While my cousin prattled on, I was recalling the events of a few hours back. I must have been mistaken, after all! What a fool I had been! Why hadn't I gone straight to Kensington after I left Lord Southbourne? I should have spared myself a good deal of misery. And yet – I thought of Anne's face as I saw it just now, looking out of the window, pale and agitated, just as it had looked

in the moonlight last night. No! I might mentally call myself every kind of idiot, but my conviction remained fixed; it was Anne whom I had seen. Suppose she had left Mrs. Sutherland's early, as I had decided she must have done, when I racked my brains in the night. It was close on one o'clock when I saw her on the river; she might have landed lower down. I did not know – I do not know even now – if there were any steps like those by Westminster Bridge, where a landing could be effected; but suppose there were, she would be able to get back to Cayleys by the time she had said. But why go on such an expedition at all? Why? That was the maddening question to which I could not even suggest an answer.

"What was it you called to Anne about seeing her on Tuesday?" demanded Mary, who fortunately did not notice my preoccupation.

"I shall break my journey there."

"Of course. I forgot you were off to-morrow. Where to?"

"St. Petersburg."

"My! You'll have a lively time there by all accounts. Here we are; I hadn't time for breakfast, and I'm hungry. Aren't you?"

As we crossed the hall I saw a woman's dark cloak, flung across an oak settee. It struck me as being rather like that which Anne – if it were Anne – had worn. Mary picked it up.

"That oughtn't to be lying there. It's Mrs. Sutherland's. Anne borrowed it last night as her own was flimsy for a car. I must send it back to-day. Go right up to Jim's dressing-room, Maurice;

you'll find all you want there."

She ran up the stairs before me, the cloak over her arm, little thinking how significant that cloak was to me.

I cut myself rather badly while shaving, and I evinced a poor appetite for breakfast. Jim and Mary, especially Jim, saw fit to rally me on that, and on my solemn visage, which was not exactly beautified by the cut. I took myself off as soon after the meal as I decently could, on the plea of getting through with my packing; though I promised to return in the evening to say good-bye.

I had remembered my appointment with the old Russian, and was desperately anxious not to be out if he should come.

On one point I was determined. I would give no one, not even Mary, so much as a hint of the mysteries that were half-maddening me; at least until I had been able to seek an explanation of them from Anne herself.

My man never turned up, nor had he been there while I was absent, as I elicited by a casual inquiry of Jenkins as to whether any one had called.

I told him when I returned from the Cayleys that I was going away in the morning, and he came to lend a hand with the packing and clearing up.

"No, sir, not a soul's been; the street door was shut all morning. I'd rather be rung up a dozen times than have bad characters prowling about on the staircase. There's a lot of wrong 'uns round about Westminster! Seems quieter than usual up here to-day, don't it, sir? With all the residentials away, except you."

"Why, is Cassavetti away, too?" I asked, looking up.

"I think he must be, sir, for I haven't seen or heard anything of him. But I don't do for him as I do for you and the other gents. He does for himself, and won't let me have a key, or the run of his rooms. His tenancy's up in a week or two, and a pretty state we shall find 'em in, I expect! We shan't miss him like we miss you, sir. Shall you be long away this time?"

"Can't say, Jenkins. It may be one month or six – or forever," I added, remembering Carson's fate.

"Oh, don't say that, sir," remonstrated Jenkins.

"I wonder if Mr. Cassavetti is out. I'd like to say good-bye to him," I resumed presently. "Go up and ring, there's a good chap, Jenkins. And if he's there, you might ask him to come down."

It struck me that I might at least ascertain from Cassavetti what he knew of Anne. Why hadn't I thought of that before?

Jenkins departed on his errand, and half a minute later I heard a yell that brought me to my feet with a bound.

"Hello, what's up?" I called, and rushed up the stairs, to meet Jenkins at the top, white and shaking.

"Look there, sir," he stammered. "What is it? 'Twasn't there this morning, when I turned the lights out, I'll swear!"

He pointed to the door-sill, through which was oozing a sluggish, sinister-looking stream of dark red fluid.

"It's – it's blood!" he whispered.

I had seen that at the first glance.

"Shall I go for the police?"

"No," I said sharply. "He may be only wounded."

I went and hammered at the door, avoiding contact with that horrible little pool.

"Cassavetti! Cassavetti! Are you within, man?" I shouted; but there was no answer.

"Stand aside. I'm going to break the lock," I cried.

I flung myself, shoulder first, against the lock, and caught at the lintel to save myself from falling, as the lock gave and the door swung inwards, – to rebound from something that it struck against.

I pushed it open again, entered sideways through the aperture, and beckoned Jenkins to follow.

Huddled up in a heap, almost behind the door, was the body of a man; the face with its staring eyes was upturned to the light.

It was Cassavetti himself, dead; stabbed to the heart.

CHAPTER VII
A RED-HAIRED WOMAN!

I bent over the corpse and touched the forehead tentatively with my finger-tips. It was stone cold. The man must have been dead many hours.

"Come on; we must send for the police; pull yourself together, man!" I said to Jenkins, who seemed half-paralyzed with fear and horror.

We squeezed back through the small opening, and I gently closed the door, and gripping Jenkins by the arm, marched him down the stairs to my rooms. He was trembling like a leaf, and scarcely able to stand alone.

"We've never had such a thing happen before," he kept mumbling helplessly, over and over again.

I bade him have some whiskey, if he could find any, and remain there to keep an eye on the staircase, while I went across to Scotland Yard; for, through some inexplicable pig-headedness on the part of the police authorities, not even the headquarters was on the telephone.

The Abbey bells were ringing for afternoon service, and there were many people about, churchgoers and holiday makers in their Sunday clothes. The contrast between the sunny streets, with their cheerful crowds, and the silent sinister tragedy of the

scene I had just left struck me forcibly.

If I had sent Jenkins on the errand, I guess he would have created quite a sensation. That is why I went myself; and I doubt if any one saw anything unusual about me, as I threaded my way quietly through the throng at Whitehall corner, where the 'buses stop to take up passengers.

A minute or two later I was in an inspector's room at "the Yard," giving my information to a little man who heard me out almost in silence, watching me keenly the while.

I imagine that I appeared quite calm. I could hear my own voice stating the bald facts succinctly, but, to my ears, it sounded like the voice of some one else, for it was with a great effort that I retained my composure. I knew that this strange and terrible event which I had been the one to discover was only another link in the chain of circumstances, which, so far as my knowledge went, began less than twenty-four hours ago; a chain that threatened to fetter me, or the girl I loved. For my own safety I cared nothing. My one thought was to protect Anne, who must be, either fortuitously, or of her own will, involved in this tangled web of intrigue.

I should, of course, be subjected to cross-examination, and, on my way to Scotland Yard, I had decided just what I meant to reveal. I would have to relate how I encountered the old Russian, when he mistook my flat for Cassavetti's; but of the portrait in his possession, of our subsequent interview, and of the incident of the river steps, I would say nothing.

For the present I merely stated how Jenkins and I had discovered the fact that a murder had been committed.

"I dined in company with Mr. Cassavetti last night," I continued. "But before that – "

I was going to mention the mysterious Russian; but my auditor checked me.

"Half a minute, Mr. Wynn," he said, as he filled in some words on a form, and handed it to a police officer waiting inside the door. The man took the paper, saluted, and went out.

"I gather that you did not search the rooms? That when you found the man lying dead there, you simply came out and left everything as it was?"

"Yes. I saw at once we could do nothing; the poor fellow was cold and rigid."

I felt that I spoke dully, mechanically; but the horror of the thing was so strongly upon me, that, if I had relaxed the self-restraint I was exerting, I think I should have collapsed altogether. This business-like little official, who had received the news that a murder had been committed as calmly as if I had merely told him some one had tried to pick my pocket, could not imagine and must not suspect the significance this ghastly discovery held for me, or the maddening conjectures that were flashing across my mind.

"I wish every one would act as sensibly; it would save us a lot of trouble;" he remarked, closing his note-book, and stowing it, and his fountain pen, in his breast-pocket. "I will return with

you now; my men will be there before we are, and the divisional surgeon won't be long after us."

I pulled out my keys, but, for all the self-control I thought I was maintaining, my hand trembled so I could not fit the latch-key into the lock.

"Allow me," said my companion, and took the bunch out of my shaking hand, just as the door was opened from within by a constable who had stationed himself in the lobby.

On the top landing we overtook another constable, and two plain-clothes officers, to whom Jenkins was volubly asserting his belief that it was none other than the assassin who had left the door open in the night.

The minute investigation that followed revealed several significant facts. One was that the assassin must have been in the rooms for some considerable time before Cassavetti returned, – to be struck down the instant he entered. The position of the body, just behind the door, proved that. Also he was still wearing his thin Inverness, and his hat had rolled to a corner of the little hall. He had not even had time to replace his keys in his trousers pocket; they dangled loosely from their chain, and jingled as the body was lifted and moved to the inner room.

The rooms were in great disorder, and had been subjected to an exhaustive search; even the books had been tumbled out of their shelves and thrown on the floor. But ordinary robbery was evidently not the motive, for there were several articles of value scattered about the room; nor had the body been rifled.

Cassavetti wore a valuable diamond ring, which was still on his finger, as his gold watch was still in his breast-pocket; it had stopped at ten minutes to twelve.

"Run down, so that shows nothing," the detective remarked, as he opened it and looked at the works. "Do you know if your friend carried a pocket-book, Mr. Wynn? He did? Then that's the only thing missing. It was papers they were after, and I presume they got 'em!"

That was obvious enough, for not a scrap of written matter was discovered, nor the weapon with which the crime was committed.

"It's a fairly straightforward case," Inspector Freeman said complacently, later, when the gruesome business was over, and the body removed to the mortuary. "A political affair, of course; the man was a Russian revolutionary – we used to call 'em Nihilists a few years ago – and his name was no more Cassavetti than mine is! Now, Mr. Wynn, you told me you knew him, and dined with him last night. Do you care to give me any particulars, or would you prefer to keep them till you give evidence at the inquest?"

"I'll give them you now, of course," I answered promptly. "I can't attend the inquest, for I'm leaving England to-morrow morning."

"Then you'll have to postpone your journey," he said dryly. "For you're bound to attend the inquest; you'll be the most important witness. May I ask where you were going?"

I told him, and he nodded.

"So you're one of Lord Southbourne's young men? Thought I knew your face, but couldn't quite place you," he responded. "Hope you won't meet with the same fate as your predecessor. A sad affair, that; we got the news on Friday. Sounds like much the same sort of thing as this" – he jerked his head towards the ceiling – "except that Mr. Carson was an Englishman, who never ought to have mixed himself up with a lot like that."

Again came that expressive jerk of the head, and his small bright eyes regarded me more shrewdly and observantly than ever.

"Let me give you a word of warning, Mr. Wynn; don't you follow his example. Remember Russia's not England – "

"I know. I've been there before. Besides, my chief warned me last night."

"Lord Southbourne? Just so; he knows a thing or two. Well, now about Cassavetti – "

I was glad enough to get back to the point; it was he and not I who had strayed from it, for I was anxious to get rid of him.

I gave him just the information I had decided upon, and flattered myself that I did it with a candor that precluded even him from suspecting that I was keeping anything back. To my immense relief he refrained from any questioning, and at the end of my recital put up his pocket-book, and rose, holding out his hand.

"Well, you've given me very valuable assistance, Mr. Wynn.

Queer old card, that Russian. We shouldn't have much difficulty in tracing him, though you never can tell with these aliens. They've as many bolt holes as a rat. You say he's the only suspicious looking visitor you've ever seen here?"

"The only one of any kind I've encountered who wanted Cassavetti. After all, I knew very little of him, and though we were such near neighbors, I saw him far more often about town than here."

"You never by any chance saw a lady going up to his rooms, or on the staircase as if she might be going up there? A red-haired woman, – or fair-haired, anyhow – well-dressed?"

"Never!" I said emphatically, and with truth. "Why do you ask?"

"Because there was a red-haired woman in his flat last night. That's all. Good day, Mr. Wynn."

CHAPTER VIII
A TIMELY WARNING

It was rather late that evening when I returned to the Cayleys; for I had to go to the office, and write my report of the murder. It would be a scoop for the "Courier;" for, though the other papers might get hold of the bare facts, the details of the thrilling story I constructed were naturally exclusive. I made it pretty lurid, and put in all I had told Freeman, and that I intended to repeat at the inquest.

The news editor was exultant. He regarded a Sunday murder as nothing short of a godsend to enliven the almost inevitable dulness of the Monday morning's issue at this time of year.

"Lucky you weren't out of town, Wynn, or we should have missed this, and had to run in with the rest," he remarked with a chuckle.

Lucky!

"Wish I had been out of town," I said gloomily. "It's a ghastly affair."

"Get out! Ghastly!" he ejaculated with scorn. "Nothing's ghastly to a journalist, so long as it's good copy! You ought to have forgotten you ever possessed any nerves, long ago. Must say you look a bit off color, though. Have a drink?"

I declined with thanks. His idea of a drink in office hours, was,

as I knew, some vile whiskey fetched from the nearest "pub," diluted with warm, flat soda, and innocent of ice. I'd wait till I got to Chelsea, where I was bound to happen on something drinkable. As a good American, Mary scored off the ordinary British housewife, who preserves a fixed idea that ice is a sinful luxury, even during a spell of sultry summer weather in London.

I drove from the office to Chelsea, and found Mary and Jim, with two or three others, sitting in the garden. The house was one of the few old-fashioned ones left in that suburb, redolent of many memories and associations of witty and famous folk, from Nell Gwynn to Thomas Carlyle; and Mary was quite proud of her garden, though it consisted merely of a small lawn and some fine old trees that shut off the neighboring houses.

"At last! You very bad boy. We expected you to tea," said Mary, as I came down the steps of the little piazza outside the drawing-room windows. "You don't mean to tell me you've been packing all this time? Why, goodness, Maurice; you look worse than you did this morning! You haven't been committing a murder, have you?"

"No, but I've been discovering one," I said lamely, as I dropped into a wicker chair.

"A murder! How thrilling. Do tell us all about it," cried a pretty, kittenish little woman whose name I did not know. Strange how some women have an absolutely ghoulish taste for horrors!

"Give him a chance, Mrs. Vereker," interposed Jim hastily,

with his accustomed good nature. “He hasn’t had a drink yet. Moselle cup, Maurice, or a long peg?”

He brought me a tall tumbler of whiskey and soda, with ice clinking deliciously in it; and I drank it and felt better.

“That’s good,” I remarked. “I haven’t had anything since I breakfasted with you, – forgot all about it till now. You see I happened to find the poor chap – Cassavetti – when I ran up to say good-bye to him.”

“Cassavetti!” cried Jim and Mary simultaneously, and Mary added: “Why, that was the man who sat next us – next Anne – at dinner last night, wasn’t it? The man the old Russian you told us about came to see?”

I nodded.

“The police are after him now; though the old chap seemed harmless enough, and didn’t look as if he’d the physical strength to murder any one,” I said, and related my story to a running accompaniment of exclamations from the feminine portion of my audience, especially Mrs. Vereker, who evinced an unholy desire to hear all the most gruesome details.

Jim sat smoking and listening almost in silence, his jolly face unusually grave.

“This stops your journey, of course, Maurice?” he said at length; and I thought he looked at me curiously. Certainly as I met his eyes he avoided my gaze as if in embarrassment; and I felt hot and cold by turns, wondering if he had divined the suspicion that was torturing me – suspicion that was all but certainty – that

Anne Pendennis was intimately involved in the grim affair. He had always distrusted her.

"For a day or two only. Even if the inquest is adjourned, I don't suppose I'll have to stop for the further hearing," I answered, affecting an indifference I was very far from feeling.

"Then you won't be seeing Anne as soon as you anticipated," Mary remarked. "I must write to her to-morrow. She'll be so shocked."

"Did Miss Pendennis know this Mr. Cassavetti?" inquired Mrs. Vereker.

"We met him at the dinner last night for the first time. Jim and Maurice knew him before, of course. He seemed a very fascinating sort of man."

"Where is Miss Pendennis, by the way?" pursued the insatiable little questioner. "I was just going to ask for her when Mr. Wynn turned up with his news."

"Didn't I tell you? She left for Berlin this morning; her father's ill. She had to rush to get away."

"To rush! I should think so," exclaimed Mrs. Vereker. "Why, she was at Mrs. Dennis Sutherland's last night; though I only caught a glimpse of her. She left so early; I suppose that was why – "

I stumbled to my feet, feeling sick and dizzy, and upset the little table with my glass that Jim had placed at my elbow.

"Sorry, Mary, I'm always a clumsy beggar," I said, forcing a laugh. "I'll ask you to excuse me. I must get back to the office.

I've to see Lord Southbourne when he returns. He's been out motoring all day."

"Oh, but you'll come back here and sleep," Mary protested. "You can't go back to that horrible flat – "

"Nonsense!" I said almost roughly. "There's nothing wrong with the flat. Do you suppose I'm a child or a woman?"

She ignored my rudeness.

"You look very bad, Maurice," she responded, almost in a whisper, as we moved towards the house. I was acutely conscious that the others were watching my retreat; especially that inquisitive little Vereker woman, whom I was beginning to hate. When we entered the dusk of the drawing-room, out of range of those curious eyes, I turned on my cousin.

"Mary – for God's sake – don't let that woman – or any one else, speak of – Anne – in connection with Cassavetti," I said, in a hoarse undertone.

"Anne! Why, what on earth do you mean?" she faltered.

"He doesn't mean anything, except that he's considerably upset," said Jim's hearty voice, close at hand. He had followed us in from the garden. "You go back to your guests, little woman, and make 'em talk about anything in the world except this murder affair. Try frocks and frills; when Amy Vereker starts on them there's no stopping her; and if they won't serve, try palmistry and spooks and all that rubbish. Leave Maurice to me. He's faint with hunger, and inclined to make an ass of himself even more than usual! Off with you!"

Mary made a queer little sound, that was half a sob, half a laugh.

"All right; I'll obey orders for once, you dear, wise old Jim. Make him come back to-night, though."

She moved away, a slender ghostlike little figure in her white gown; and Jim laid a heavy, kindly hand on my shoulder.

"Buck up, Maurice; come along to the dining-room and feed, and then tell me all about it."

"There's nothing to tell," I persisted. "But I guess you're right, and hunger's what's wrong with me."

I managed to make a good meal – I was desperately hungry now I came to think of it – and Jim waited on me solicitously. He seemed somehow relieved that I manifested a keen appetite.

"That's better," he said, as I declined cheese, and lighted a cigarette. "'When in difficulties have a square meal before you tackle 'em; that's my maxim, – original, and worth its weight in gold. I give it you for nothing. Now about this affair; it's more like a melodrama than a tragedy. You know, or suspect, that Anne Pendennis is mixed up in it?"

"I neither know nor suspect any such thing," I said deliberately. I had recovered my self-possession, and the lie, I knew, sounded like truth, or would have done so to any one but Jim Cayley.

"Then your manner just now was inexplicable," he retorted quietly. "Now, just hear me out, Maurice; it's no use trying to bluff me. You think I am prejudiced against this girl. Well,

I'm not. I've always acknowledged that she's handsome and fascinating to a degree, though, as I told you once before, she's a coquette to her finger-tips. That's one of her characteristics, that she can't be held responsible for, any more than she can help the color of her hair, which is natural and not touched up, like Amy Vereker's, for instance! Besides, Mary loves her; and that's a sufficient proof, to me, that she is 'O. K.' in one way. You love her, too; but men are proverbially fools where a handsome woman is concerned."

"What are you driving at, Jim?" I asked. At any other time I would have resented his homily, as I had done before, but now I wanted to find out how much he knew.

"A timely warning, my boy. I suspect, and you know, or I'm very much mistaken, that Anne Pendennis had some connection with this man who is murdered. She pretended last night that she had never met him before; but she had, – there was a secret understanding between them. I saw that, and so did you; and I saw, too, that her treatment of you was a mere ruse, though Heaven knows why she employed it! I can't attempt to fathom her motive. I believe she loves you, as you love her; but that she's not a free agent. She's not like an ordinary English girl whose antecedents are known to every one about her. She, and her father, too, are involved in some mystery, some international political intrigues, I'm pretty sure, as this unfortunate Cassavetti was. I don't say that she was responsible for the murder. I don't believe she was, or that she had any personal hand in it – "

I had listened as if spellbound, but now I breathed more freely. Whatever his suspicions were, they did not include that she was actually present when Cassavetti was done to death.

"But she was most certainly cognizant of it, and her departure this morning was nothing more or less than flight," he continued. "And – I tell you this for her sake, as well as for your own, Maurice – your manner just now gave the whole game away to any one who has any knowledge or suspicion of the facts. Man alive, you profess to love Anne Pendennis; you do love her; I'll concede that much. Well, do you want to see her hanged, or condemned to penal servitude for life?"

CHAPTER IX
NOT AT BERLIN

"Hanged, or condemned to penal servitude for life."

There fell a dead silence after Jim Cayley uttered those ominous words. He waited for me to speak, but for a minute or more I was dumb. He had voiced the fear that had been on me more or less vaguely ever since I broke open the door and saw Cassavetti's corpse; and that had taken definite shape when I heard Freeman's assertion concerning "a red-haired woman."

And yet my whole soul revolted from the horrible, the appalling suspicion. I kept assuring myself passionately that she was, she must be, innocent; I would stake my life on it!

Now, after that tense pause, I turned on Jim furiously.

"What do you mean? Are you mad?" I demanded.

"No, but I think you are," Jim answered soberly. "I'm not going to quarrel with you, Maurice, or allow you to quarrel with me. As I told you before, I am only warning you, for your own sake, and for Anne's. You know, or suspect at least – "

"I don't!" I broke in hotly. "I neither know nor suspect that – that she – Jim Cayley, would you believe Mary to be a murderess, even if all the world declared her to be one? Wouldn't you – "

"Stop!" he said sternly. "You don't know what you're saying, you young fool! My wife and Anne Pendennis are very different

persons. Shut up, now! I say you've got to hear me! I have not accused Anne Pendennis of being a murderess. I don't believe she is one. But I do believe that, if once suspicion is directed towards her, she would find it very difficult, if not impossible, to prove her innocence. You ought to know that, too, and yet you are doing your best, by your ridiculous behavior, to bring suspicion to bear on her."

"I!"

"Yes, you! If you want to save her, pull yourself together, man; play your part for all it's worth. It's an easy part enough, if you'd only dismiss Anne Pendennis from your mind; forget that such a person exists. You've got to give evidence at this inquest. Well, give it straightforwardly, without worrying yourself about any side issues; and, for Heaven's sake, get and keep your nerves under control, or – "

He broke off, and we both turned, as the door opened and a smart parlor-maid tripped into the room.

"Beg pardon, sir. I didn't know you were here," she said with the demure grace characteristic of the well-trained English servant. "It's nearly supper-time, and I came to see if there was anything else wanted. I laid the table early."

"All right, Marshall. I've been giving Mr. Wynn some supper, as he has to be off. You needn't sound the gong for a few minutes."

"Very well, sir. If you'd ring when you're ready, I'll put the things straight."

She retreated as quietly as she had come, and I think we both felt that her entrance and exit relieved the tension of our interview.

I rose and held out my hand.

"Thanks, Jim. I can't think how you know as much as you evidently do; but, anyhow, I'll take your advice. I'll be off, now, and I won't come back to-night, as Mary asked me to. I'd rather be alone. See you both to-morrow. Good night."

I walked back to Westminster, lingering for a considerable time by the river, where the air was cool and pleasant. The many pairs of lovers promenading the tree-shaded Embankment took no notice of me, or I of them.

As I leaned against the parapet, watching the swift flowing murky tide, I argued the matter out.

Jim was right. I had behaved like an idiot in the garden just now. Well, I would take his advice and buck up; be on guard. I would do more than that. I would not even vex myself with conjectures as to how much he knew, or how he had come by that knowledge. It was impossible to adopt one part of his counsel – impossible to "forget that such a person as Anne Pendennis ever existed;" but I would only think of her as the girl I loved, the girl whom I would see in Berlin within a few days.

I wrote to her that night, saying nothing of the murder, but only that I was unexpectedly detained, and would send her a wire when I started, so that she would know when to expect me. Once face to face with her, I would tell her everything; and she would

give me the key to the mystery that had tortured me so terribly. But I must never let her know that I had doubted her, even for an instant!

The morning mail brought me an unexpected treasure. Only a post-card, pencilled by Anne herself in the train, and posted at Dover.

It was written in French, and was brief enough; but, for the time being, it changed and brightened the whole situation.

> "I scarcely hoped to see you at the station, *mon ami*; there was so little time. What haste you must have made to get there at all! Shall I really see you in Berlin? I do want you to know my father. And you will be able to tell me your plans. I don't even know your destination! The Reichshof, where we stay, is in Friedrich Strasse, close to Unter den Linden. *Au revoir!*
> *A. P."*

A simple message, but it meant much to me. I regarded it as a proof that her hurried journey was not a flight, but a mere coincidence.

Mary had a post-card, too, from Calais; just a few words with the promise of a letter at the end of the journey. She showed it to me when I called round at Chelsea on Monday evening to say good-bye once more. The inquest opened that morning, and was adjourned for a week. Only formal and preliminary evidence was taken – my own principally; and I was able to arrange to leave next day. Inspector Freeman made the orthodox statement

that "the police were in possession of a clue which they were following up;" and I had a chat with him afterwards, and tried to ferret out about the clue, but he was close as wax.

We parted on the best of terms, and I was certain he did not guess that my interest in the affair was more than the natural interest of one who was as personally concerned in it as I was, with the insatiable curiosity of the journalist superadded. Whatever I had been yesterday, I was fully master of myself today.

Jim was out when I reached Chelsea, somewhat to my relief; and Mary was alone for once.

She welcomed me cordially, as usual, and commended my improved appearance.

"I felt upset about you last night, Maurice; you weren't a bit like yourself. And what on earth did you mean in the drawing-room – about Anne?" she asked.

"Sheer madness," I said, with a laugh. "Jim made that peg too strong, and I'm afraid I was – well, a bit screwed. So fire away, if you want to lecture me; though, on my honor, it was the first drink I'd had all day!"

I knew by the way she had spoken that Jim had not confided his suspicions to her. I didn't expect he would.

She accepted my explanation like the good little soul she is.

"I never thought of that. It's not like you, Maurice. But I won't lecture you this time, though you did scare me! I guess you felt pretty bad after finding that poor fellow. I felt shuddery enough

even at the thought of it, considering that we knew him, and had all been together such a little while before. Has the murderer been found yet?"

"Not that I know of. The inquest's adjourned, and I'm off to-morrow. I'll have to come back if necessary; but I hope it won't be. Any message for Anne? I shall see her on Wednesday."

"No, only what I've already written: that I hope her father's better, and that she'd persuade him to come back with her. She was to have stayed with us all summer, as you know; and I'm not going to send her trunks on till she writes definitely that she can't return. My private opinion of Mr. Pendennis is that he's a cranky and exacting old pig! He resented Anne's leaving him, and I surmise this illness of his is only a ruse to get her back again. Anne ought to be firmer with him!"

I laughed. Mary, as I knew, had always been "firm" with her "poppa," in her girlish days; had, in fact, ruled him with a rod of iron – cased in velvet, indeed, but inflexible, nevertheless!

I started on my delayed journey next morning, and during the long day and night of travel my spirits were steadily on the up-grade.

Cassavetti, the murder, all the puzzling events of the last few days, receded to my mental horizon – vanished beyond it – as boat and train bore me swiftly onwards, away from England, towards Anne Pendennis.

Berlin at last. I drove from the Potsdam station to the nearest barber's, – I needed a shave badly, though I had made myself

otherwise fairly spick and span in the toilet car, – and thence to the hotel Anne had mentioned.

She would be expecting me, for I had despatched the promised wire when I started.

"Send my card up to Fraulein Pendennis at once," I said to the waiter who came forward to receive me.

He looked at me – at the card – but did not take it.

"Fraulein Pendennis is not here," he asserted. "Herr Pendennis has already departed, and the Fraulein has not been here at all!"

CHAPTER X
DISQUIETING NEWS

I stared at the man incredulously.

"Herr Pendennis has departed, and the Fraulein has not been here at all!" I repeated. "You must be mistaken, man! The Fraulein was to arrive here on Monday, at about this time."

He protested that he had spoken the truth, and summoned the manager, who confirmed the information.

Yes, Herr Pendennis had been unfortunately indisposed, but the sickness had not been so severe as to necessitate that the so charming and dutiful Fraulein should hasten to him. He had a telegram received, – doubtless from the Fraulein herself, – and thereupon with much haste departed. He drove to the Friedrichstrasse station, but that was all that was known of his movements. Two letters had arrived for Miss Pendennis, which her father had taken, and there was also a telegram, delivered since he left.

Both father and daughter, it seemed, were well known at the hotel, where they always stayed during their frequent visits to the German capital.

I was keenly disappointed. Surely some malignant fate was intervening between Anne and myself, determined to keep us apart. Why had she discontinued her journey; and had she

returned to England, – to the Cayleys? If not, where was she now? Unanswerable questions, of course. All I could do was to possess my soul in patience, and hope for tidings when I reached my destination. And meanwhile, by breaking my journey here, for the sole purpose of seeing her, I had incurred a delay of twelve hours.

One thing at least was certain, – her father could not have left Berlin for the purpose of meeting her *en route*, or he would not have started from the Friedrichstrasse station.

With a rush all the doubts and perplexities that I had kept at bay, even since I received Anne's post-card, re-invaded my mind; but I beat them back resolutely. I would not allow myself to think, to conjecture.

I moped around aimlessly for an hour or two, telling myself that Berlin was the beastliest hole on the face of the earth. Never had time dragged as it did that morning! I seemed to have been at a loose end for a century or more by noon, when I found myself opposite the entrance of the Astoria Restaurant.

"When in difficulties – feed," Jim Cayley had counselled, and a long lunch would kill an hour or so, anyhow.

I had scarcely settled myself at a table when a man came along and clapped me on the shoulder.

"Wynn, by all that's wonderful. What are you doing here, old fellow?"

It was Percy Medhurst, a somewhat irresponsible, but very decent youngster, whom I had seen a good deal of in London, one

way and another. He was a clerk in the British Foreign Office, but I hadn't the least idea that he had been sent to Berlin. He had dined at the Cayleys only a week or two back.

"I'm feeding – or going to feed. What are you doing here?" I responded, as we shook hands. I was glad to see him. Even his usually frivolous conversation was preferable to my own meditations at the moment.

"Just transferred, regular stroke of luck. Only got here last night; haven't reported myself for duty yet. I say, old chap, you look rather hipped. What's up?"

"Hunger," I answered laconically. "And I guess that's easily remedied. Come and join me."

We talked of indifferent matters for a time, or rather he did most of the talking.

"Staying long?" he asked at last, as we reached the coffee and liqueur stage. We had done ourselves very well, and I, at least, felt in a much more philosophic frame of mind than I had done for some hours past.

"No, only a few hours. I'm *en route* for Petersburg."

"What luck; wish I was. Berlin's all right, of course, but a bit stodgy; and they're having a jolly lot of rows at Petersburg, – with more to come. I say, though, what an awful shame about that poor chap Carson. Have you heard of it?"

"Yes; I'm going to take his place. What do you know about him, anyhow?"

"You are? I didn't know him at all; but I know a fellow who

was awfully thick with him. Met him just now. He's frightfully cut up about it all. Swears he'll hunt down the murderer sooner or later – "

"Von Eckhardt? Is he here?" I ejaculated.

"Yes. D'you know him? An awfully decent chap, – for a German; though he's always spouting Shakespeare, and thinks me an ass, I know, because I tell him I've never read a line of him, not since I left Bradfield, anyhow. Queer how these German johnnies seem to imagine Shakespeare belongs to them! You should have heard him just now!

'He was my friend, faithful and just to me,'

– and raving about his heart being in the coffin with Caesar; suppose he meant Carson. 'Pon my soul I could hardly keep a straight face; but I daren't laugh. He was in such deadly earnest."

I cut short these irrelevant comments on Von Eckhardt's verbal peculiarities, with which I was perfectly familiar.

"How long's he here for?"

"Don't know. Rather think, from what he said, that he's chucked up his post on the *Zeitung*– "

"What on earth for?"

"How should I know? I tell you he's as mad as a hatter."

"Wonder where I'd be likely to find him; not at the *Zeitung* office, if he's left. I must see him this afternoon. Do you know where he hangs out, Medhurst?"

"With his people, I believe; somewhere in Charlotten Strasse or thereabouts. I met him mooning about in the Tiergarten this

morning."

I called a waiter and sent him for a directory. There were scores of Von Eckhardts in it, and I decided to go to the *Zeitung* office, and ascertain his address there.

Medhurst volunteered to walk with me.

"How are the Cayleys?" he asked, as we went along. "Thought that handsome Miss Pendennis was going to stay with them all the summer. By Jove, she is a ripper. You were rather gone in that quarter, weren't you, Wynn?"

I ignored this last remark.

"How did you know Miss Pendennis had left?" I asked, with assumed carelessness.

"Why? Because I met her at Ostend on Sunday night, to be sure. I week-ended there, you know. Thought I'd have a private bit of a spree, before I had to be officially on the *Spree*."

He chuckled at the futile pun.

"You saw Anne Pendennis at Ostend. Are you certain it was she?" I demanded.

"Of course I am. She looked awfully fetching, and gave me one of her most gracious bows – "

"You didn't speak to her?" I pursued, throwing away the cigarette I had been smoking. My teeth had met in the end of it as I listened to this news.

My ingenuous companion seemed embarrassed by the question.

"Well, no; though I'd have liked to. But – fact is, I – well, of

course, I wasn't alone, don't you know; and though she was a jolly little girl – she – I couldn't very well have introduced her to Miss Pendennis. Anyhow, I shouldn't have had the cheek to speak to her; she was with an awfully swagger set. Count Loris Solovieff was one of 'em. He's really the Grand Duke Loris, you know, though he prefers to go about incog. more often than not. He was talking to Miss Pendennis. Here's the office. I won't come in. Perhaps I'll turn up and see you off to-night. If I don't, good-bye and good luck; and thanks awfully for the lunch."

I was thankful to be rid of him. I dare not question him further. I could not trust myself to do so; for his words had summoned that black horde of doubts to the attack once more, and this time they would not be vanquished.

Small wonder that I had not found Anne Pendennis at Berlin! What was she doing at Ostend, in company with "a swagger set" that included a Russian Grand Duke? I had heard many rumors concerning this Loris, whom I had never seen; rumors that were the reverse of discreditable to him. He was said to be different from most of his illustrious kinsfolk, inasmuch that he was an enthusiastic disciple of Tolstoy, and had been dismissed from the Court in disgrace, on account of his avowed sympathy with the revolutionists.

But what connection could he have with Anne Pendennis?

And she, – she! Were there any limits to her deceit, her dissimulation? She was a traitress certainly; perhaps a murderess.

And yet I loved her, even now. I think even more bitter than

my disillusion was the conviction that I must still love her, though I had lost her – forever!

CHAPTER XI
"LA MORT OU LA VIE!"

I took a cab from the newspaper office to Von Eckhardt's address, – a flat in the west end.

I found him, as Medhurst had reported, considerably agitated. He is a good-hearted chap, and a brilliant writer, though he's too apt to allow his feelings to carry him away; for he's even more sentimental than the average German, and entirely lacking in the characteristic German phlegm. He is as vivacious and excitable as a Frenchman, and I fancy there's a good big dash of French blood in his pedigree, though he'd be angry if any one suggested such a thing!

He did not know me for a moment, but when I told him who I was he welcomed me effusively.

"Ah, now I remember; we met in London, when I was there with my poor friend. 'We heard at midnight the clock,' as our Shakespeare says. And you are going to take his place? I have not yet the shock recovered of his death; from it I never shall recover. O judgment, to brutish beasts hast thou fled, and their reason men have lost. My heart, with my friend Carson, in its coffin lies, and me, until it returns, you must excuse!"

I surmised that he was quoting Shakespeare again, as he had to Medhurst. I wanted to smile, though I was so downright

wretched. He would air what he conceived to be his English, and he was funny!

"Would you mind speaking German?" I asked, for there was a good deal I wanted to learn from him, and I guessed I should get at it all the sooner if I could head him off from his quotations. His face fell, and I hastened to add —

"Your English is splendid, of course, and you've no possible need to practise it; but my German's rusty, and I'd be glad to speak a bit. Just you pull me up, if you can't understand me, and tell me what's wrong."

My German is as good as most folks', any day, but he just grabbed at my explanation, and accepted it with a kindly condescension that was even funnier than his sentimental vein. Therefore the remainder of our conversation was in his own language.

"I hear you've left the *Zeitung*," I remarked. "Going on another paper?"

"The editor of the *Zeitung* dismissed me," he answered explosively. "Pig that he is, he would not understand the reason that led to my ejection from Russia!"

"Conducted to the frontier, and shoved over, eh? How did that happen?" I asked.

"Because I demanded justice on the murderers of my friend," he declared vehemently. "I went to the chief of the police, and he laughed at me. There are so many murders in Petersburg, and what is one Englishman more or less? I went to the British

Embassy. They said the matter was being investigated, and they emphatically snubbed me. They are so insular, so narrow-minded; they could not imagine how strong was the bond of friendship between Carson and me. He loved our Shakespeare, even as I love him."

"You wrote to Lord Southbourne," I interrupted bluntly. "And you sent him a portrait, – a woman's portrait that poor Carson had been carrying about in his breast-pocket. Now why did you do that? And who is the woman?"

His answer was startling.

"I sent it to him to enable him to recognize her, and warn her if he could find her. I knew she was in London, and in danger of her life; and I knew of no one whom I could summon to her aid, as Carson would have wished, except Lord Southbourne, and I only knew him as my friend's chief."

"But you never said a word of all this in the note you sent to Southbourne with the photograph. I know, for he showed it me."

"That is so; I thought it would be safer to send the letter separately; I put a mere slip in with the photograph."

Had Southbourne received that letter? If so, why had he not mentioned it to me, I thought; but I said aloud: "Who is the woman? What is her name? What connection had she with Carson?"

"He loved her, as all good men must love her, as I myself, who have seen her but once, – so beautiful, so gracious, so devoted to her country, to the true cause of freedom, – 'a most triumphant

lady' as our Sha – "

"Her name, man; her name!" I cried somewhat impatiently.

"She is known under several," he answered a trifle sulkily. "I believe her real name is Anna Petrovna – "

That conveyed little; it is as common a name in Russia as "Ann Smith" would be in England, and therefore doubtless a useful alias.

"But she has others, including two, what is it you call them – neck names?"

"Nicknames; well, go on."

"In Russia those who know her often speak of her by one or the other, – 'La Mort,' or 'La Vie,' it is safer there to use a pseudonym. 'La Mort' because they say, – they are superstitious fools, – that wherever she goes, death follows, or goes before; and 'La Vie' because of her courage, her resource, her enthusiasm, her so-inspiring personality. Those who know, and therefore love her most, call her that. But, as I have said, she has many names, an English one among them; I have heard it, but I cannot recall it. That is one of my present troubles."

"Was it 'Anne Pendennis,' or anything like that?" I asked, huskily.

"Ach, that is it; you know her, then?"

"Yes, I know her; though I had thought her an English woman."

"That is her marvel!" he rejoined eagerly. "In France she is a Frenchwoman; in Germany you would swear she had never

been outside the Fatherland; in England an English maiden to the life, and in Russia she is Russian, French, English, German, – American even, with a name to suit each nationality. That is how she has managed so long to evade her enemies. The Russian police have been on her track these three years; but they have never caught her. She is wise as the serpent, harmless as the dove – "

I had to cut his rhapsodies short once more.

"What is the peril that threatens her? She was in England until recently; the Secret Police could not touch her there?"

"It is not the police now. They are formidable, – yes, – when their grasp has closed on man or woman; but they are incredibly stupid in many ways. See how often she herself has slipped through their fingers! But this is far more dangerous. She has fallen under the suspicion of the League."

"The League that has a red geranium as its symbol?"

He started, and glanced round as if he suspected some spy concealed even in this, his own room.

"You know of it?" he asked in a low voice.

"I have heard of it. Well, are you a member of it?"

"I? Gott in Himmel, no! Why should I myself mix in these Russian politics? But Carson was involved with them, – how much even I do not know, – and she has been one of them since her childhood. Now they say she is a traitress. If possible they will bring her before the Five – the secret tribunal. Even they do not forget all she has done for them; and they would give her the

chance of proving her innocence. But if she will not return, they will think that is sufficient proof, and they will kill her, wherever she may be."

"How do you know all this?"

"Carson told me before I left for Wilna. He meant to warn her. They guessed that, and they condemned, murdered him!"

He began pacing up and down the room, muttering to himself; and I sat trying to piece out the matter in my own mind.

"Have you heard anything of a man called Cassavetti; though I believe his name was Selinski?" I asked at length.

Von Eckhardt turned to me open-mouthed.

"Selinski? He is himself one of the Five; he is in London, has been there for months; and it is he who is to bring her before the tribunal, by force or guile."

"He is dead, murdered; stabbed to the heart in his own room, even as Carson was, four days ago."

He sat down plump on the nearest chair.

"Dead! That, at least, is one of her enemies disposed of! That is good news, splendid news, Herr Wynn. Why did you not tell me that before? 'To a gracious message an host of tongues bestow,' as our Shakespeare says. How is it you know so much? Do you also know where she is? I was told she would be here, three days since; that is why I have waited. And she has not come! She is still in England?"

"No, she left on Sunday morning. I do not know where she is, but she has been seen at Ostend with – the Russian Grand Duke

Loris."

I hated saying those last words; but I had to say them, for, though I knew Anne Pendennis was lost to me, I felt a deadly jealousy of this Russian, to whom, or with whom she had fled; and I meant to find out all that Von Eckhardt might know about him, and his connection with her.

"The Grand Duke Loris!" he repeated. "She was with him, openly? Does she think him strong enough to protect her? Or does she mean to die with him? For he is doomed also. She must know that!"

"What is he to her?"

I think I put the question quietly; though I wanted to take him by the throat and wring the truth out of him.

"He? He is the cause of all the trouble. He loves her. Yes, I told you that all good men who have but even seen her, love her; she is the ideal of womanhood. One loves her, you and I love her; for I see well that you yourself have fallen under her spell! We love her as we love the stars, that are so infinitely above us, – so bright, so remote, so adorable! But he loves her as a man loves a woman; she loves him as a woman loves a man. And he is worthy of her love! He would give up everything, his rank, his name, his wealth, willingly, gladly, if she would be his wife. But she will not, while her country needs her. It is her influence that has made him what he is, – the avowed friend of the persecuted people, ground down under the iron heel of the autocracy. Yet it is through him that she has fallen under suspicion; for the League

will not believe that he is sincere; they will trust no aristocrat."

He babbled on, but I scarcely heeded him. I was beginning to pierce the veil of mystery, or I thought I was; and I no longer condemned Anne Pendennis, as, in my heart, I had condemned her, only an hour back. The web of intrigue and deceit that enshrouded her was not of her spinning; it was fashioned on the tragic loom of Fate.

She loved this Loris, and he loved her? So be it! I hated him in my heart; though, even if I had possessed the power, I would have wrought him no harm, lest by so doing I should bring suffering to her. Henceforth I must love her as Von Eckhardt professed to do, or was his protestation mere hyperbole? "As we love the stars – so infinitely above us, so bright, so remote!"

And yet – and yet – when her eyes met mine as we stood together under the portico of the Cecil, and again in that hurried moment of farewell at the station, surely I had seen the love-light in them, "that beautiful look of love surprised, that makes all women's eyes look the same," when they look on their beloved.

So, though for one moment I thought I had unravelled the tangle, the next made it even more complicated than before. Only one thread shone clear, – the thread of my love.

CHAPTER XII
THE WRECKED TRAIN

I found the usual polyglot crowd assembled at the Friedrichstrasse station, waiting to board the international express including a number of Russian officers, one of whom specially attracted my attention. He was a splendid looking young man, well over six feet in height, but so finely proportioned that one did not realize his great stature till one compared him with others – myself, for instance. I stand full six feet in my socks, but he towered above me. I encountered him first by cannoning right into him, as I turned from buying some cigarettes. He accepted my hasty apologies with an abstracted smile and a half salute, and passed on.

That in itself was sufficiently unusual. An ordinary Russian officer, – even one of high rank, as this man's uniform showed him to be, – would certainly have bad-worded me for my clumsiness, and probably have chosen to regard it as a deliberate insult. Your Russian as a rule wastes no courtesy on members of his own sex, while his vaunted politeness to women is of a nature that we Americans consider nothing less than rank impertinence; and is so superficial, that at the least thing it will give place to the sheer brutality that is characteristic of nearly every Russian in uniform. Have I not seen? But pah! I won't write of horrors,

till I have to!

Before I boarded the sleeping car I looked back across the platform, and saw the tall man returning towards the train, making his way slowly through the crowd. A somewhat noisy group of officers saluted him as he passed, and he returned the salute mechanically, with a sort of preoccupied air.

They looked after him, and one of them shrugged his shoulders and said something that evoked a chorus of laughter from his companions. I heard it; though I doubt if the man who appeared to be the object of their mirth did. Anyhow, he made no sign. There was something curiously serene and aloof about him.

"Wonder who he is?" I thought, as I sought my berth, and turned in at once, for I was dead tired.

I slept soundly through the long hours while the train rushed onwards through the night; and did not wake till we were nearing the grim old city of Konigsberg. I dressed, and made my way to the buffet car, to find breakfast in full swing and every table occupied, until I reached the extreme end of the car, where there were two tables, each with both seats vacant.

I had scarcely settled myself in the nearest seat, when my shoulder was grabbed by an excited individual, who tried to haul me out of my place, vociferating a string of abuse, in a mixture of Russian and German.

I resisted, naturally, and indignantly demanded an explanation. I had to shout to make myself heard. He would not listen, or release his hold, while with his free hand he gesticulated

wildly towards two soldiers, who, I now saw, were stationed at the further door of the car. In an instant they had covered me with their rifles, and they certainly looked as if they meant business. But what in thunder had I done?

At that same moment a man came through the guarded doorway, – the tall officer who had interested me so strongly last night.

He paused, and evidently took in the situation at a glance.

"Release that gentleman!" he commanded sternly.

My captor obeyed, so promptly that I nearly lost my balance, and only saved myself from an ignominious fall by tumbling back into the seat from which he had been trying to eject me. The soldiers presented arms to the new-comer, and my late assailant, all the spunk gone out of him, began to whine an abject apology and explanation, which the officer cut short with a gesture.

I was on my feet by this time, and, as he turned to me, I said in French: "I offer you my most sincere apologies, Monsieur. The other tables were full, and I had no idea that these were reserved – "

"They are not," he interrupted courteously. "At least they were reserved in defiance of my orders; and now I beg you to remain, Monsieur, and to give me the pleasure of your company."

I accepted the invitation, of course; partly because, although it was given so frankly and unceremoniously, it was with the air of one whose invitations were in the nature of "commands;" and also because he now interested me more strongly than ever. I

knew that he must be an important personage, who was travelling incognito; though a man of such physique could not expect to pass unrecognized. Seen in daylight he appeared even more remarkable than he had done under the sizzling arc lights of the station. His face was as handsome as his figure; well-featured, though the chin was concealed by a short beard, bronze-colored like his hair, and cut to the fashion set by the present Tsar. His eyes were singularly blue, the clear, vivid Scandinavian blue eyes, keen and far-sighted as those of an eagle, seldom seen save in sailor men who have Norse blood in their veins.

I wonder now that I did not at once guess his identity, though he gave me no clue to it.

When he ascertained that I was an American, who had travelled considerably and was now bound for Russia, he plied me with shrewd questions, which showed that he had a pretty wide knowledge of social and political matters in most European countries, though he had never been in the States.

"This is your first visit to Russia?" he inquired, presently. "No?"

I explained that I had spent a winter in Petersburg some years back, and had preserved very pleasant memories of it.

"I trust your present visit may prove as pleasant," he said courteously. "Though you will probably perceive a great difference. Not that we are in the constant state of excitement described by some of the foreign papers," he added with a slight smile. "But Petersburg is no longer the gay city it was, 'Paris by

the Neva' as we used to say. We – "

He checked himself and rose as the train pulled up for the few minutes' halt at Konigsberg; and with a slight salute turned and passed through the guarded doorway.

"Can you tell me that officer's name?" I asked the conductor, as I retreated to the rear car.

"You know him as well as I do," he answered ambiguously, pocketing the tip I produced.

"I don't know his name."

"Then neither do I," retorted the man surlily.

I saw no more of my new acquaintance till we reached the frontier, when, as with the other passengers I was hustled into the apartment where luggage and passports are examined, I caught a glimpse of him striding towards the great *grille*, that, with its armed guard, is the actual line of demarcation between the two countries. Beside him trotted a fat little man in the uniform of a staff officer, with whom he seemed to be conversing familiarly.

Evidently he was of a rank that entitled him to be spared the ordeal that awaited us lesser mortals.

The tedious business was over at last; and, once through the barrier, I joined the throng in the restaurant, and looked around to see if he was among them. He was not, and I guessed he had already gone on, – by a special train probably.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.