Le Queux William

Number 70, Berlin: A Story of Britain's Peril

William Le Queux

Number 70, Berlin: A Story of Britain's Peril

Le Queux W.

Number 70, Berlin: A Story of Britain's Peril / W. Le Queux — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Le Queux William
Number 70, Berlin: A Story of Britain's Peril

Chapter One.
The Man of the Moment

"That man knows too much!"

"Do you really think he overheard?"

"He may not have done. But we must take no risks, my dear fellow. Remember we are at war! With people who know too much there's but one way – dismissal," declared Lewin Rodwell, the tall, well-groomed middle-aged man, in morning-coat and grey trousers, who stood in the panelled boardroom with his chairman, Sir Boyle Huntley, the other directors having left after the weekly meeting of the board.

"He might talk – eh?" Sir Boyle remarked in a low, apprehensive tone.

"He would probably fear the law of libel," said Lewin Rodwell, fair-haired, sleek, rather refined, who, at the moment, was one of the most popular and patriotic figures in London – a man whose praises were sung constantly in the halfpenny press, and who numbered peers, Cabinet Ministers and diplomats among his friends.

His companion, ten years his senior, was of a different type – a somewhat uncouth man, with a reddish, bloated face, dark hair tinged with grey, deep-set crafty eyes, and a voice which betrayed his cockney birth and breeding, which even his Birthday baronetcy could not disguise.

Both men, of humble origin, had won considerable fortune in the City and had worked together on the boards of many companies more or less prosperous. They were "keen business men" – which, in these days, seems to be the accepted description of those who are not above descending to sharp practices – and indeed, if the truth be told, had been guilty of certain financial juggling which would have looked very ugly against them if placed before a court of law.

Yet what they had done had been done within the law, and their hands were, consequently, just as clean as those of hundreds of other company-directors in the City of London.

Rodwell, with his back to the fire – for it was a cold, dark November afternoon in the year 1914 – slowly lit a good cigar which he took from his case, while Sir Boyle fidgeted uneasily with some papers at the table.

"How shall you get rid of that unnecessary fellow?" he asked his friend at last. "If he were dismissed now, he'd at once guess the reason, and might become our enemy."

"Enemy! Bosh!" laughed Lewin Rodwell, scornfully. "There's no fear of that, my dear chap. Leave him to me. I shall do nothing till after our meeting next Thursday. Then we can call in Charlesworth and tell him that the fellow – Sainsbury is his name, I believe – is a slacker, and ought to join the army. Owing to the war we must cut down expenditure – you know. He must go, and several others too – in order to give our economy a flavour of truth."

"Charles worth has always spoken very highly of him. He'll certainly urge us to keep him," the chairman remarked, looking blankly into the fire. "Only a fortnight ago his name was on the list of employees to be retained throughout the war."

"I know. But if Sainsbury has overheard what I said, then he's better outside this building than in it," Rodwell declared emphatically, drawing heavily at his cigar.

"You were a confounded fool to speak of such matters outside your own room at home, Lewin. It was most indiscreet. It isn't like you."

"I know. I was a confounded fool," the other admitted. "But I had no idea anyone had entered. He wears those infernal rubber things on his heels. But leave it to me. I'll clear him out all right."

"It must be done most delicately. He mustn't, for a single moment, suspect the reason of his dismissal."

Lewin Rodwell reflected for a second, and then, as though in his active, clever brain a sudden suggestion had arisen, he laughed and replied:

"There are more ways than one by which to crush an enemy, my dear Boyle – as you yourself know. Leave all to me, and I can guarantee that we shall have nothing to fear from this young prig, Sainsbury. So set your mind at ease at once over it."

"Very well, Lewin. I know how clever you always are in avoiding trouble," laughed Sir Boyle Huntley. "Had it not been for you we'd both have more than once been in a very tight corner. As it is we've prospered famously, and – well, I suppose the world thinks quite a lot of us – especially of you – the man who does so much good and charitable work without any thought of reward – purely as a patriotic Briton."

Lewin Rodwell winked knowingly, and both men laughed aloud.

Rodwell's eye caught the clock. It was half-past four.

"By Jove! I must fly!" he cried. "I promised to be at Lady Betty's soon after four. Trustram, of the Admiralty, will be there, and I particularly want to meet him. I've got my car. Can I drop you anywhere?"

"Yes. At the Constitutional. I'm meeting a man there."

So the pair, leaving the room, were helped on with their overcoats by an obsequious liveried servant and, descending in the lift, passed through the handsome set of offices where a hundred clerks were working beneath the electric-light, and out into Gracechurch Street, where Rodwell's fine limousine was awaiting him; the footman standing with the fur rug ready to throw over his master's knees.

On their way through the City the elder man reverted to the subject they had discussed in the boardroom of The Ochrida Copper Corporation – one of the greatest copper concerns in the world – and, drawing a long breath, he said:

"I really do hope that young fellow heard nothing. What if he knew – eh?"

"Of course he heard," was his co-director's reply. "But whether he understood is quite another thing."

"I fear he did understand."

"Why?"

"Because, as he left the room, I watched his face, and saw both suspicion and surprise upon it."

"Bah! My dear Boyle, don't let that worry you for a second longer," Rodwell laughed, as the car sped silently along Queen Victoria Street and across to the Embankment. "Even if he does suspect he'll soon be rendered quite harmless. When Lewin Rodwell makes up his mind to sweep an enemy from his path, you know that the enemy always disappears."

"I know that," replied the Baronet, with a slight hardening at the corners of his flabby mouth. Perhaps he recollected the fate of certain other enemies. He well knew the callous unscrupulousness of his friend and associate in his determined efforts to get rich quickly. Indeed, they had both got rich very quickly – more especially Rodwell – during the past four or five years by methods which would never bear investigation. Yet, as in so many other cases in our great complex London, the world regarded him as a perfectly honest and trustworthy man – a true Briton, who was ever ready to place both his valuable time and his money at the disposal of the British cause against her barbaric enemy.

"Sainsbury will never trouble us, I assure you," he repeated, as at last Sir Boyle alighted in Northumberland Avenue, and he waved him a cheery good-bye as he went up the steps of the club.

Then, as the car re-started off to Upper Brook Street, Lewin Rodwell sat back, his hands resting idly on the fur rug, his cold, round blue eyes staring straight before him, the skin drawn rather tightly over his cheek-bones, giving him a look haggard and quite unusual.

"Yes," he exclaimed to himself, drawing a long breath, "Boyle is quite right. That young man suspects – curse him! Phew! I must close his mouth somehow. But how? That's the question. In these days, with the Government deceiving the people and lulling them into a false sense of security, the very least breath of suspicion quickly becomes magnified into an open scandal. And scandal, as far as I am concerned, would mean that I should be compelled to invite investigation. Could I bear such a test?" he asked. "Gad! no!" he gasped.

He set his lips firmly, and his eyes narrowed. He tossed his cigar angrily out into the roadway. It tasted bitter.

As the car went up the Haymarket, boys were crying the evening papers. Upon the contents-bill he noticed that the British were fighting gallantly at the Yser, stemming the tide of the Devil's spawn, who were endeavouring to strike a death-blow at French's little army and get through to Calais.

He smiled at his own strange thoughts, and then sank back into the soft cushions, again reflecting. That *contretemps* in the boardroom had really unnerved him. It unnerved him so much, indeed, that from Piccadilly Circus he drove to his club and swallowed a stiff brandy-and-soda – an action quite unusual to him – and then he went along to Upper Brook Street.

When the rather pompous elderly butler announced him at the door of the large drawing-room, Lady Betty Kenworthy, a tall, middle-aged woman, rose, greeting the great man affably, and then she introduced him to the dozen or so of her friends who were gossiping over their teacups – the names of most of them being household words both to those in society and the readers of the halfpenny picture-papers out of it.

Lady Betty, a well-preserved, good-looking woman, whose boy was at the front, was one of those leaders of society who, at the outbreak of war, for want of something more exciting, had become the leader of a movement. In London, after the first few months of war, the majority of society women took up one movement or another: red cross, Serbian relief, socks for the troops, comforts for mine-sweepers, huts for soldiers, work for women, hose-extensions for Highlanders, or one or other of the thousand-and-one "movements" which cropped up and duly found their places in the advertisement columns of the *Times*.

Lady Betty Kenworthy's particular movement was the Anti-Teuton Alliance – an association formed by a few patriotic enthusiasts who bound themselves to take action against the hated German in every way – to expose and intern the enemy in our midst, to free the country from the baneful German influence which has spread into every sphere of our national life, to purchase no goods of German origin, to ban the German language, and to discover the existence of the pro-German sentiment, German intrigue, and the expenditure of German gold – "palm-oil" one distinguished writer has called it – in official and Parliamentary circles.

The programme was, to say the least, a wide and laudable one, and afforded ample scope to the thousands of members who had enrolled themselves.

In Lady Betty's drawing-room that afternoon the committee of the movement had assembled, eager to meet Mr Lewin Rodwell, who had shown such patriotism that even Cabinet Ministers had publicly bestowed great praise upon his ceaseless and self-denying efforts.

There were present, first of all, the usual set of society women of uncertain age, dressed in the latest French models, which gave them an air of youth, yet, at the same time, accentuated their angularity and unnatural freshness; two or three elderly men, led there against their will by their strong-minded spouses, a pretty girl or two from nowhere, and one or two male enthusiasts, including two good-looking and merry-going peers who were loud in their condemnation of the whole Government – from the Prime Minister downwards.

Among those to whom the great and much-advertised Lewin Rodwell was introduced was a rather thick-set, dark-haired, clean-shaven, middle-aged man named Charles Trustram, a thoroughly John Bull type of Englishman, who occupied a highly responsible position in the Transport department of the Admiralty.

The two men shook hands warmly, whereupon Trustram expressed his great pleasure at meeting a man so famous as Lewin Rodwell.

"I came here this afternoon, Mr Rodwell, on purpose to meet you," he assured him. "Lady Kenworthy told me you were coming, and I know the committee of the Anti-Teuton Alliance, of which I'm a member, are most eager to enlist your influence."

"I'll be most delighted," declared Rodwell, in his charmingly affable manner. "I think the movement is a really excellent one. Without a doubt the question has become very serious indeed. There are Germans and German influence in our midst in quarters quite unexpected and undiscovered – high official quarters too. Can we, therefore, be surprised if things don't always go as they should?"

"Exactly," said the Admiralty official, as they both took seats together on a couch against the wall. "There's no doubt that the Germans, as part of their marvellous preparedness, made an audacious attempt to weave a network of vile treachery in our Government Departments and, above all, in the War Office and Admiralty. As an official I can tell you, in strictest confidence of course, that I have, several times of late, had my suspicions seriously aroused. Information leaks out. How – nobody – not even our Intelligence Department itself can discover."

"My dear sir," exclaimed Rodwell confidentially, "is it really to be wondered at when men of German birth and German descent are employed in nearly all the various departments in Whitehall? After all, are we not to-day fighting for our country's life and freedom? Certainly those who come after us would never forgive us – you and I – those who, if born into a Germanised world and held under the iron yoke of barbaric 'Kultur,' looked back to our conduct of the war that sealed their fate and found that, besides supplying the enemy with war material – cotton and the like – we actually harboured Germans in our camp and gave them knowledge, power and position vital to the enemy's success. And I assert to-day, Mr Trustram, that we treat Germany as the 'most-favoured nation,' even though the flower of our land are being sacrificed by thousands and thousands upon the fields of Flanders. Yes, it is an outrageous scandal – a disgrace to our nation. As I said in a speech at Liverpool last week, we are daily being misled, misguided, and lured to our destruction. And for that reason," the great man added – "for that reason I'm only too ready and anxious to help the Anti-Teuton Alliance in their splendid crusade against this canker-worm in England's heart."

Lady Betty, seated quite near, talking to a dowager-duchess, overheard him. He had purposely spoken loudly and emphatically, with that object.

"Good! Mr Rodwell," her ladyship cried. "Excellent! I am so delighted that you thoroughly approve of our efforts. We are trying to do our share, in this terrible crisis. You are such a busy man that I almost feared to ask you to help us."

"I am never too busy, Lady Kenworthy, to help in such a good cause as this," he assured her, in that suave manner of his which stood him in such good stead at times. "True, I am rather a busy man, as everyone has to be in these days. We, in the City, have to bear our share in finance, for we know that one day – sooner or later – the Government will require a big loan to carry on the war. And when they do, we hope to be as ready to meet it as the industrial population of the country will no doubt be. Still, to us it means much thought. We have no time nowadays for any idle week-ends, or golf by the sea."

At mention of golf Lady Betty smiled. She knew well that it was the great man's habit to play golf at Sunningdale or Walton Heath with various important personages.

The conversation regarding the aims and aspirations of the Anti-Teuton Alliance grew general, and everyone was much gratified to hear Mr Lewin Rodwell's reiterated approval of it, especially the half-dozen ascetic, hard-faced women who made "movements" the chief object of their lives.

Lewin Rodwell smiled inwardly at them all, sipped the cup of China tea offered him by a slim, dark-haired, loosely-clad girl who secretly regarded him as a hero, and then talked loudly, airing his opinion of "what the Government really ought to do." To him, the huge farce was amusing. Lady Betty was, of course, "a good sort," but he knew quite well that her association with the Anti-Teuton movement was merely for the sake of advertisement and notoriety – in order to go one better than the Countess of Chesterbridge, who had, for years, been her rival on the face of the social barometer – which, after all, was the personal columns of the daily newspapers.

After an hour, when most of the guests had left, Rodwell rose at last and said to Trustram, with whom he had had a long and very intimate chat:

"I really do wish you'd run in and see me, Mr Trustram. I'd be so awfully delighted. I'm sure we can do something together in order to expose this terrible scandal. Will you?"

"Most certainly. I'll be most pleased."

"Good. Can't you dine with me – say on Tuesday?"

His newly-found friend reflected a moment, and then replied in the affirmative.

"Excellent. Tuesday at eight – eh? You know my address."

"Yes – in Bruton Street."

"Right – that's an appointment," Rodwell exclaimed cheerily; and then, after bending low over Lady Betty's thin white hand, he left.

Chapter Two.
The Suspicions of Elise

At nine o'clock that same evening, in a well-furnished drawing-room half-way up Fitzjohn's Avenue, in Hampstead, a pretty, blue-eyed, fair-haired girl of twenty-one sat at the piano alone, playing a gay French chanson, to pass away the time.

Dressed in a dainty little dinner-gown of carnation pink, and wearing in her well-dressed hair a touch of velvet to match, she presented a pretty picture beneath the shaded electric-light which fell over the instrument set in a corner.

Her mother, Mrs Shearman, a charming, grey-haired lady, had just gone out, while her father, Daniel Shearman, a rich tool-manufacturer, whose works were outside Birmingham, was away at the factory, as was his habit three days each week.

Elise Shearman was just a typical athletic English girl. In her early youth her parents were "making their way in the world," but at fourteen she had been sent abroad to school, first to Lausanne, and afterwards to Dresden, where she had studied music, as so many English girls have done.

On her return to Hampstead, whither her father had removed from the grime and toil of work-a-day Birmingham, she found her home very dull. Because the Shearmans were manufacturers, the snobbishness of Hampstead, with its "first Thursdays," would have nothing to do with them; though, if the truth were told, Dan Shearman could have bought up most of his neighbours in Fitzjohn's Avenue, and was a sterling good Englishman into the bargain – which could not be said of some of those slippery, smooth-tongued City adventurers who resided behind the iron railings of that select thoroughfare.

Running her slim white hands over the keys, she began the gay refrain of one of the chansonettes which she had learned in Paris – one of the gay songs of the boulevards, which was, perhaps, not very apropos for young ladies, but which she often sang because of its gay, blithe air – Belloche's "L'Eventail Parisien."

In her sweet, musical treble she sang gaily —

Dès qu'arrivent les grand's chaleurs,
À la terrass' des brasseries
Les éventails de tout's couleurs
Viennent bercer nos rêveries.
Car, pour allécher le client,
Le camelot toujours cocasse
En s'éventant d'un air bonasse
Envoi' ce petit boniment:

And then, with a swing and go, she sang the chorus —

Ça va, ça vient,
Ça donn' de l'air, ça fait du bien.
C'est vraiment magnifique.
Quel instrument magique!
Ça va, ça vient,
Ca donn' de l'air et du maintien
Et ça ne coûte presque rien:
Voici l'éventail parisien!

Hardly had she concluded the final line when the door opened and a tall, dark-haired, good-looking young man entered, crossed to her, and, placing his hand upon her shoulder, bent and kissed her fondly.

"Why, Jack, dear – you really are late!" the girl exclaimed. "Were you kept at the office?"

"Yes, dearest," was his answer. "Or rather I had some work that I particularly wanted to finish, so I stayed behind."

He was tall and broad-shouldered, with a pair of keen, merry brown eyes, a handsome face with high, intelligent brow, as yet unlined by care, a small, dark moustache, and a manner as courteous towards a woman as any diplomat accredited to the Court of St. James.

Jack Sainsbury, though merely an employee of the Ochrida Copper Corporation, a man who went by "Tube" to the City each morning and returned each night to the modest little flat in Heath Street, at which his sister Jane acted as housekeeper for him, was an honest, upright Englishman who had, in the first month of the war, done his duty and gone to the recruiting office of the Honourable Artillery Company to enlist.

A defective elbow-joint had prevented him passing the doctor. And though no one in the office knew he had tried to join the new army, he had returned to the City and continued his soul-killing avocation of adding figures and getting out totals.

His meeting with Elise Shearman was not without its romantic side.

One Sunday morning, two years before, he had been riding his motor-cycle up to Hatfield, as was his habit, to meet at the Red Lion – that old inn that is the rendezvous of all motor-cyclists – the men and women who come out there each Sunday morning, wet or fine, from London. Fine cars, driven by their owners, turn into the inn-yard all the morning, but the motor-cyclist ignores them. It is the meeting-place of the man on the cycle.

One well-remembered Sunday morning Elise, who was advanced enough to put on a Burberry with a leather strap around her waist and sit astride on a motor-cycle, was careering up the North Road beyond Barnet when, of a sudden, she swerved to avoid a cart, and ran headlong into a ditch.

At the moment Jack Sainsbury, who chanced to be behind her, stopped, sprang off, and went to her assistance.

She lay in the ditch with her arm broken. Quickly he obtained medical aid, and eventually brought her home to Fitzjohn's Avenue, where he had, with her father's knowledge and consent, been a constant visitor ever since.

Jack Sainsbury, whose father, and his family before him, had been gentlemen-farmers for two centuries in Leicestershire, was, above all, a thorough-going Englishman. He was no smug, get-on-at-all-hazards person of the consumptive type one meets at every turn in the City. On the contrary, he was a well-set-up, bold, straightforward, fearless fellow who, though but a clerk in a City office, was one of that clean-limbed, splendid type which any girl would have welcomed as her hero.

What Jack Sainsbury said, he meant. His colleagues in the office knew that. They all regarded him as a man of high ideals, and as one whose heart had, ever since the war, been fired with a keen and intense spirit of patriotism.

That Elise Shearman loved him could be seen at the first moment when he had opened the door and crossed the threshold. Her eyes brightened, and her full, red lips puckered sweetly as she returned his fond, passionate kisses.

Yes, they loved each other. Elise's parents knew that. Sometimes they were anxious, for Dan Shearman felt that it would not be altogether a brilliant match, as far as an alliance went. Yet Mrs Shearman, on her part, had so often pleaded, that no separation of the pair had, as yet, been demanded. Hence they found idyllic happiness in each other's love.

"You seem unusually thoughtful to-night, Jack!" exclaimed the girl, tenderly smoothing his hair as they stood together clasped in each other's arms.

"Do I?" he answered with a start. "I really didn't know," he laughed, aroused from his deep thoughts.

"You are, Jack. Why?"

"I – well, I'm really not – except perhaps – "

"Perhaps what?" asked Elise determinedly.

"Well, I had rather a heavy day at the office," was her lover's hesitating reply. "And I've just remembered something."

"Oh! business. And that's all?"

"Yes, business, dearest," was his reply. "I must apologise if my thoughts were, for the moment, far away," he laughed.

"You're like father," said the girl. "He sits by the fire sometimes for a quarter of an hour at a stretch staring into it, and thinking of his horrid business affairs. But of course business is an obsession with him."

"Perhaps when I'm your father's age it will be an obsession with me," replied Jack Sainsbury.

"I sincerely hope it won't," she said, with a smile upon her pretty lips.

"It won't, if I'm able to make sufficient money to keep you properly, darling," was the young man's fervent answer, as he bent until his moustache lightly brushed her cheek.

Truth to tell, he was reflecting seriously. For hours he had thought over those strange words he had overheard on entering the boardroom that afternoon.

Those astounding words of Lewin Rodwell's were, in themselves, an admission – a grave and terrible admission.

Lewin Rodwell and Sir Boyle Huntley were engaged in a great conspiracy, and he – Jack Sainsbury – was the only person who knew the ghastly truth.

Those two highly patriotic men, whose praises were being sung by every newspaper up and down the country; whose charitable efforts had brought in hundreds of thousands of pounds and hundreds of tons of comforts for our troops abroad; the two men whose photographs were in every journal, and whom the world regarded as fine typical specimens of the honest Briton, men who had raised their voices loudly against German barbarism and intrigue, were, Jack Sainsbury knew, wearing impenetrable masks. They were traitors!

He alone knew the truth – a truth so remarkable and startling that, were it told and published to the world, Great Britain would stand aghast and bewildered at the revelation. It was inconceivable, incredible. At times he felt himself doubting what he had really heard with his own ears. Yet it had been Rodwell's voice, and the words had been clear and distinct, a confession of guilt that was as plain as it was damning.

Sir Boyle had, from his seat in the House of Commons, risen time after time and denounced the policy of the Government in not interning every enemy alien in the country; he had heckled the Home Secretary, and had exposed cases of German intrigue; he had demanded that rigorous action should be taken against the horde of German spies in our midst, and had spoken up and down the country warning the Government and the people of the gravity of the spy-peril, and that British citizens would take the law in their own hands if drastic measures were not taken to crush out the enemy in our midst.

Yet that afternoon – by no seeking of his own – Jack Sainsbury had learnt a truth which, even hours after the words had fallen upon his ears, left him staggered and astounded.

He knew the secret of those two great and influential men.

What should he do? How should he act?

Such was the cause of his marked thoughtfulness that night – an attitude which Elise had not failed to notice and which considerably puzzled her.

Mrs Shearman, a pleasant-faced, grey-haired and prosperous-looking lady, who spoke with a strong Lancashire accent, entered the room a few moments later, and the pair, springing aside at the sound of her footsteps, pretended to be otherwise occupied, much to the elder lady's amusement.

After greeting Jack the old lady sat down with him, while Elise, at her mother's request, returned to the piano and began to sing Léon Garnier's "Sublime Caresse," with that catchy refrain so popular on the boulevards of Paris and in cafés in every town in France —

Quand lâchement
À l'autre amant
Je me livre et me donne.
Qu'à lui je m'abandonne.
Le coeur pâmé,
O cher aimé,
C'est à toi que s'adresse
Ma sublime caresse!

Elise, who spoke French excellently, was extremely fond of the French chansonette, and knew a great many. Her lover spoke French quite well also, and very frequently when they were together in the "tube" or train they conversed in that language so that the every-day person around them should not understand.

To speak a foreign language amid the open mouths of the ignorant is always secretly amusing, but not so amusing as to the one person who unfortunately sits opposite and who knows that language even more perfectly than the speaker – I was about to write "swanker."

In that drawing-room of the red-brick Hampstead residence – where the road is so steep that the vulgar London County Council Tramways have never attempted to invade it, and consequently it is a "desirable residential neighbourhood" according to the house-agents' advertisements – Jack and Elise remained after Mrs Shearman had risen and left. For another quarter of an hour they chatted and kissed wholeheartedly, for they loved each other fondly and dearly. Then, at ten o'clock, Jack rose to go. It was his hour, and he never overstepped the bounds of propriety. From the first he had felt himself a mere clerk on the forbidden ground of the successful manufacturer's home. Dan Shearman, honest, outspoken and square, had achieved Hampstead as a stepping-stone to Mayfair or Belgravia. To Jack Sainsbury – the man of the fine old yeoman stock – the refinement of the red-brick and laurels of Hampstead was synonymous with taste and breeding. To him the dull aristocracy of the London squares was unknown, and therefore unregarded.

How the people born in society laugh at Tom, Dick and Harry, with their feminine folk, who, in our world of make-believe, are struggling and fighting with one another to be regarded by the world as geniuses. Money can bring everything – all the thousand attributes this world can give – all except breeding and brains.

Breed, even in the idiot, and brains in the pauper's child, will always tell.

When Jack Sainsbury descended the steps into Fitzjohn's Avenue and strode down the hill to Swiss Cottage station, he was full of grave and bitter thoughts.

As an Englishman and a patriot, what was his line of action? That was the sole thought which filled his mind. He loved Elise with every fibre of his being, yet, on that evening, greater and even more serious thoughts occupied his mind – the safety of the British Empire.

To whom should he go? In whom dare he confide?

As he crossed from the Avenue to the station, another thought arose within him. Would anybody in whom he confided really believe what he could tell them?

Lewin Rodwell and Sir Boyle Huntley were national heroes – men against whom no breath of suspicion as traitors had ever arisen. It was the habit of the day to laugh at any suspicion of Britain's betrayal – an attitude which the Government had carefully cultivated ever since the outbreak of war. On that day the Chief of the Military Operations Department of the War Office – in other words our

Secret Service – had been – for reasons which will one day be revealed – promoted and sent to the front, leaving the Department in the hands of others fresh to the work.

Such, alas! was the British Intelligence Department – an organisation laughed at by the Secret Services of each of our Allies.

The folly of it all was really pathetic.

Jack Sainsbury knew much of this. He had, indeed, been, through Dr Jerome Jerrold, a friend of his, behind the scenes. Like all the world, he had read the optimistic, hide-the-truth newspapers. Often he had smiled in disbelief. Yet, on that afternoon, his worst fears had in a single instant been confirmed. He knew the volcano upon the edge of which Great Britain was seated.

What should he do? How should he act?

In the narrow booking-office of Swiss Cottage station he stood for a moment, hesitating to take his ticket.

Of a sudden an idea crossed his mind. He knew a certain man – his intimate friend. Could he help him? Dare he reveal his suspicions without being laughed at for his pains?

Yes. He would risk being derided, because the safety of the Empire was now at stake.

After all, he – Jack Sainsbury – was a well-bred Briton, without a strain of the hated Teutonic blood in his veins.

He would speak the truth, and expose that man who was so cleverly luring the Empire to its doom.

He passed before the little pigeonhole of the booking-office and took his ticket – an action which was destined to have a greater bearing upon our national defence than any person even with knowledge of the facts could ever dream.

Chapter Three.
The House in Wimpole Street

Just before eleven o'clock that night Jack Sainsbury stopped at a large, rather severe house halfway up Wimpole Street – a house the door of which could be seen in the daytime to be painted a royal blue, thus distinguishing it from its rather dingy green-painted neighbours.

In response to his ring at the visitors' bell, a tall, middle-aged, round-faced manservant opened the door.

"Is Dr Jerrold in?" Jack inquired.

"Yes, sir," was the man's quick reply; and then, as Sainsbury entered, he added politely: "Nice evening, sir."

"Very," responded the visitor, laying-down his hat and stick and taking off his overcoat in the wide, old-fashioned hall.

Dr Jerome Jerrold, though still a young man, was a consulting physician of considerable eminence, and, in addition, was Jack's most intimate friend. Their fathers had been friends, living in the same remote country village, and, in consequence, ever since his boyhood he had known the doctor.

Jack was a frequent visitor at the doctor's house, Jerrold always being at home to him whenever he called. The place was big and solidly furnished, a gloomy abode for a bachelor without any thought of marrying. It had belonged to Jerrold's aunt, who had left it to him by her will, together with a comfortable income; hence her nephew had found it, situated as it was in the centre of the medical quarter of London, a most convenient, if dull, place of abode.

On the ground floor was the usual depressing waiting-room, with its big round table littered with illustrated papers and magazines; behind it the consulting-room, with its businesslike writing-table – whereon many a good man's death-warrant had been written in that open case-book – its heavy leather-covered furniture, and its thick Turkey carpet, upon which the patient trod noiselessly.

Above, in the big room on the first floor, Jerome Jerrold had his cosy library – for he was essentially a studious man, his literary mind having a bent for history, his "History of the Cinquecento" being one of the standard works upon that period. Indeed, while on the ground floor all was heavy, dull and gloomy, well in keeping with the dismal atmosphere which all the most famous West-End doctors seem to cultivate, yet, on the floor above, one passed instantly into far brighter, more pleasant and more artistic surroundings.

Without waiting for the servant, Thomasson, to conduct him upstairs, Jack Sainsbury ran lightly up, as was his habit, and tried the door of the doctor's den, when, to his surprise, he found it locked.

He twisted the handle again, but it was certainly firmly fastened.

"Jerome!" he cried, tapping at the door. "Can I come in? It's Jack!"

But there was no reply. Sainsbury strained his ears at the door, but could detect no movement within.

A taxicab rushed past; then a moment later, when the sound had died away, he cried again —

"Jerome! I'm here! I want to see you, old fellow. Open the door."

Still there was no answer.

Thomasson, standing at the foot of the wide, old-fashioned stairs, heard his master's visitor, and asked —

"Is the door locked, sir?"

"Yes," Jack shouted back.

"That's very strange?" remarked the man. "I've let nobody in since Mr Trustram, of the Admiralty, went away – about a quarter of an hour ago."

"Has he been here?" Jack asked. "I met him here the other day. He struck me as being a rather surly man, and I didn't like him at all," declared Sainsbury, with his usual frankness.

"Neither do I, sir, strictly between ourselves," replied Thomasson quite frankly. "He's been here quite a lot lately. His wife consulted the master about three months ago, and that's how they first met, I believe. But can't you get in?"

"No. Curious, isn't it?"

"Very. The doctor never locks his door in the usual way," Thomasson said, ascending the stairs with Sainsbury, and himself trying the handle.

He knocked loudly, asking —

"Are you in there, sir?" But still no response was given.

"I can't make this out, Mr Sainsbury," exclaimed the man, turning to him with anxiety on his pale face. "The key's in the lock – on the inside too! He must be inside, and he's locked himself in. Why, I wonder?"

Jack Sainsbury bent and put his eye to the keyhole. The room within was lit, for he could see the well-filled bookcase straight before him, and an empty chair was plainly visible.

Instantly he listened, for he thought in the silence – at that moment there being an absence of traffic out in the street – that he heard a slight sound, as though of a low, metallic click.

Again he listened, holding his breath. He was not mistaken. A slight but quite distinct sharp click could be heard, as though a piece of metal had struck the window-pane. Once – twice – it was repeated, afterwards a long-drawn sigh.

Then he heard no more.

"Open the door, Jerrold!" he cried impatiently. "Don't play the fool. What's the matter, old chap?"

"Funny – very funny – isn't it!" Thomasson exclaimed, his brows knit in mystification.

"Most curious," declared Sainsbury, now thoroughly anxious. "How long was Mr Trustram here?"

"He dined out with the doctor – at Prince's, I think – and they came back together about half-past nine. While Mr Trustram was here he was on the telephone twice or three times. Once he was rung up by Mr Lewin Rodwell."

"Mr Lewin Rodwell!" echoed Sainsbury. "Did you happen to hear anything of their conversation?"

"Well, not much, sir," was the servant's discreet reply. "I answered the 'phone at first, and it was Mr Rodwell speaking. He told me who he was, and then asked if Mr Trustram was with the doctor. I said he was, and at once went and called him."

"Did Mr Trustram appear to be on friendly terms with Mr Rodwell?" asked the young man eagerly.

"Oh! quite. I heard Mr Trustram laughing over the 'phone, and saying 'All right – yes, I quite understand. It's awfully good of you to make the suggestion. I think it excellent. I'll propose it to-morrow – yes, at the club to-morrow at four.'"

Suggestion? What suggestion had Lewin Rodwell made to that official of the Transport Department – Lewin Rodwell, of all men!

Jack Sainsbury stood before that locked door, for the moment unable to think. He was utterly dumbfounded.

Those words he had heard in the boardroom in the City that afternoon had burned themselves deeply into his brain. Lewin Rodwell was, it seemed, a personal friend of Charles Trustram, the well-known and trusted official to whose push-and-go the nation had been so deeply indebted – the man who had transported so many hundreds of thousands of our Expeditionary Force across the Channel, with all their guns, ammunition and equipment, without a single mishap. It was both curious and startling. What could it all mean?

Thomasson again hammered upon the stout old-fashioned door of polished mahogany.

"Speak, sir! Do speak!" he implored. "Are you all right?"

Still there was no reply.

"He may have fainted!" Jack suggested. "Something may have happened to him!"

"I hope not, sir," replied the man very anxiously. "I'll just run outside and see whether the window is open. If so, we might get a ladder."

The man dashed downstairs and out into the street, but a moment later he returned breathlessly, saying —

"No. Both windows are closed, just as I closed them at dusk. And the curtains are drawn; not a chink of light is showing through. All we can do, I fear, is to force the door."

"You are quite sure he's in the room?"

"Positive, sir."

"Did you see him after Mr Trustram left?"

"No, I didn't. I let Mr Trustram out, and as he wished me good-night he hailed a passing taxi, and then I went down and read the evening paper. I always have it after the doctor's finished with it."

"Well, Thomasson, what is to be done?" asked Sainsbury, essentially a young man of action. "We must get into this room – and at once. I don't like the present aspect of things a bit."

"Neither do I, sir. Below I've got the jemmy we use for opening packing-cases. We may be able to force the door with that."

And once again the tall, thin, wiry man disappeared below. Jack Sainsbury did not see how the man, when he had disappeared into the basement, stood in the kitchen his face blanched to the lips and his thin hands trembling.

It was only at the moment when Thomasson was alone that his marvellous self-possession forsook him. On the floor above he remained cool, collected, anxious, and perfectly unruffled. Below, and alone, the cook and housemaid not having returned, they being out for a late evening at the theatre, a craven fear possessed him.

It would have been quite evident to the casual observer that the man, Thomasson, possessed some secret fear of what had occurred in the brief interval between Mr Trustram's departure and Sainsbury's arrival. Tall and pale-faced, he stood in the big basement kitchen, with its rows of shining plated covers and plate-racks, motionless and statuesque: his head upon his breast, his teeth set, his cheeks as white as paper.

But only for a moment. A second later he drew a deep breath, nerved himself with a superhuman effort, and then, opening a cupboard, took out a steel tool with an axe-head at one end and a curved and pronged point at the other – very much like a burglar's jemmy. Such a tool was constructed for strong leverage, and, quite cool as before, he carried it up the two flights of stairs to where Jack stood before the locked door, eager and impatient.

Sainsbury, being the younger of the pair, took it, and inserting the flat chisel-like end into the slight crevice between the stout polished door and the lintel, worked it in with leverage, endeavouring to break the lock from its fastening.

This proved unsuccessful, for, after two or three attempts, the woodwork of the lintel suddenly splintered and gave way, leaving the door locked securely as before.

Time after time he tried, but with no other result than breaking away the lintel of the door.

What mystery might not be contained in that locked room?

His hands trembled with excitement and nervousness. Once he had thought of summoning the police by telephone, but such an action might, he thought, for certain reasons which he knew, annoy his friend the doctor, therefore he hesitated.

Probably Jerrold had fainted, and as soon as they could get at him he would recover and be quite right again. He knew how strenuously he had worked of late at Guy's, in those wards filled

with wounded soldiers. Only two days before, Jerrold had told him, in confidence, that he very much feared a nervous breakdown, and felt that he must get away and have a brief rest.

Because of that, Sainsbury believed that his friend had fainted after his hard day at the hospital, and that as soon as they could reach him all would be well.

But why had he locked the door of his den? For what reason had he desired privacy as soon as Trustram had left him?

Again and again both of them used the steel lever upon the door, until at last, taking it from Thomasson's hands, Jack placed the bright curved prong half-way between the lock and the ground and, with a well-directed blow, he threw his whole weight upon it.

There was a sharp snap, a crackling of wood, the door suddenly flew back into the room, and the young man, carried by the impetus of his body, fell headlong forward upon the dark red carpet within.

Chapter Four.
His Dying Words

When Jack recovered himself he scrambled to his feet and gazed around.

The sight which met both their eyes caused them ejaculations of surprise, for, near the left-hand window, the heavy plush curtains of which were drawn, Dr Jerrold was lying, face downwards and motionless, his arms outstretched over his head.

Quite near lay his pet briar pipe, which had fallen suddenly from his mouth, showing that he had been in the act of smoking as, in crossing the room, he had been suddenly stricken.

Without a word, both Sainsbury and Thomasson fell upon their knees and lifted the prostrate form. The limbs were warm and limp, yet the white face, with the dropped jaw and the aimless, staring eyes, was horrible to behold.

"Surely he's not dead, sir!" gasped the manservant anxiously, in an awed voice.

"I hope not," was Sainsbury's reply. "If so, there's a mystery here that we must solve." Then, bending to him, he shook him slightly and cried, "Jerome! Jerome! Speak to me. Jack Sainsbury!"

"I'll get some water," suggested Thomasson, and, springing up, he crossed the room to where, upon a side-table, stood a great crystal bowl full of flowers. These he cast aside, and, carrying the bowl across, dashed water into his master's face.

Sainsbury, who had the doctor's head raised upon his knee, shook him and repeated his appeal, yet the combined efforts of the pair failed to arouse the prostrate man.

"What can have happened?" queried Jack, gazing into the wide-open, staring eyes of his friend, as he pulled his limp body towards him and examined his hands.

"It's a mystery, sir – ain't it?" remarked Thomasson.

"One thing is certain – that the attack was very sudden. Look at his pipe! It's still warm. He was smoking when, of a sudden, he must have collapsed."

"I'll ring up Sir Houston Bird, over in Cavendish Square. He's the doctor's greatest friend," suggested Thomasson, and next moment he disappeared to speak to the well-known pathologist, leaving Sainsbury to gaze around the room of mystery.

It was quite evident that something extraordinary had occurred there in the brief quarter of an hour which had elapsed between Mr Trustram's departure and Jack's arrival. But what had taken place was a great and inscrutable mystery.

Sainsbury recollected that strange metallic click he had heard so distinctly. Was it the closing of the window? Had someone escaped from the room while he had been so eagerly trying to gain entrance there?

He gazed down into his friend's white, drawn face – a weird, haggard countenance, with black hair. The eyes stared at him so fixedly that he became horrified.

He bent to his friend's breast, but could detect no heart-beats. He snatched up a big silver photograph frame from a table near and held it close to the doctor's lips, but upon the glass he could discover no trace of breath.

Was he dead? Surely not.

Yet the suggestion held him aghast. The hands were still limp and warm, the cheeks warm, the white brow slightly damp. And yet there was no sign of respiration, so inert and motionless was he.

He was in well-cut evening clothes, with a fine diamond sparkling in his well-starched shirt-front. Jerome Jerrold had always been well-dressed, and even though he had risen to that high position in the medical profession, he had always dressed even foppishly, so his traducers had alleged.

Jack Sainsbury unloosed the black satin cravat, tore off his collar, and opened his friend's shirt at the throat. But it was all of no avail. There was no movement – no sign of life.

A few moments later Thomasson came back in breathless haste.

"I've spoken to Sir Houston, sir," he said. "He's on his way round in a taxi."

Then both men gazed on the prostrate form which Sainsbury supported, and as they did so there slowly came a faint flush into the doctor's face. He drew a long breath, gasped for a second, and his eyes relaxed as he turned his gaze upon his friend. His right arm moved, and his hand gripped Sainsbury's arm convulsively.

For a few moments he looked straight into his friend's face inquiringly, gazing intently, first as though he realised nothing, and then in slow recognition.

"Why, it's Jack!" he gasped, recognising his friend. "You – I – I felt a sudden pain – so strange, and in an instant I – ah! I – I wonder – save me – I – I – ah! how far off you are! No – no! don't leave me – don't. I – I've been shot – shot! – I know I have – ah! what pain – what agony! I – "

And, drawing a long breath, he next second fell back into Sainsbury's arms like a stone.

Ten minutes later a spruce, young-looking, clean-shaven man entered briskly with Thomasson, who introduced him as Sir Houston Bird.

In a moment he was full of concern regarding his friend Jerrold, and, kneeling beside the couch whereon Sainsbury and Thomasson had placed him, quickly made an examination.

"Gone! I'm afraid," he said at last, in a low voice full of emotion, as he critically examined the eyes.

Jack Sainsbury then repeated his friend's strange words, whereupon the great pathologist – the expert whose evidence was sought by the Home Office in all mysteries of crime – exclaimed —

"The whole affair is certainly a mystery. Poor Jerrold is dead, without a doubt. But how did he die?"

Thomasson explained in detail Mr Trustram's departure, and how, a quarter of an hour later, Sainsbury had arrived.

"The doctor had never before, to my knowledge, locked this door," he went on. "I heard him cheerily wishing Mr Trustram good-night as he came down the stairs, and I heard him say that he was not to fail to call to-morrow night at nine, as they would then carry the inquiry further."

"What inquiry?" asked Sir Houston quickly.

"Ah! sir – that, of course, I don't know," was the servant's response. "My master seemed in the highest of spirits. I just caught sight of him at the head of the stairs, smoking his pipe as usual after his day's work."

The great pathologist knit his brows and cast down his head thoughtfully. He was a man of great influence, the head of his profession – for, being the expert of the Home Office, his work, clever, ingenious, and yet cool and incisive, was to lay the accusing finger upon the criminal.

Hardly a session passed at the Old Bailey but Sir Houston Bird appeared in the witness box, spruce in his morning-coat, and presenting somewhat the appearance of a bank-clerk; yet, in his cold unemotional words, he explained to the jury the truth as written plainly by scientific investigation. Many murderers had been hanged upon his words, always given with that strange, deliberate hesitation, and yet words – that could never, for a moment, be shaken by counsel for the defence.

Indeed, long ago defending counsel had given up cross-examination on any evidence presented by Sir Houston Bird, who had at his service the most expert chemists and analysts which our time could produce.

"This is a mystery," exclaimed the great expert, gazing upon the body of his friend with his big grey eyes. "Do you tell me that he was actually locked in here?"

"Yes, Sir Houston," replied Thomasson. "Curious – most curious," exclaimed the great pathologist, as though speaking to himself. Then, addressing Sainsbury, after the latter had been speaking, he said: "The poor fellow declared that he'd been shot. Is that so?"

"Yes. He said that he felt a sudden and very sharp pain, and the words he used were, 'I've been shot! I know I have!'"

"And yet there appears no trace of any wound, or injury," Sir Houston remarked, much puzzled.

"Both windows and door were secured from the inside, therefore no assassin could possibly escape, sir," declared Thomasson. "I suppose there's no one concealed here in the room?" he added, glancing apprehensively around.

In a few moments the three men had examined every nook and corner of the apartment – the two long cupboards, beneath the table, behind the heavy plush curtains and the chenille portière. But nobody was in concealment.

The whole affair was a profound mystery.

Sir Houston, dark-eyed and thoughtful, gazed down upon the body of his friend.

Sainsbury and Thomasson had already removed Jerrold's coat, and were searching for any bullet-wound. But there was none. Again Sir Houston inquired what the dying man had actually said, and again Sainsbury repeated the disjointed words which the prostrate man had gasped with his dying breath.

To the pathologist it was quite clear first that Jerome Jerrold believed he had been shot; secondly that no second person could have entered the room, and thirdly that the theory of assassination might be at once dismissed.

"I think that poor Jerrold has died a natural death – sudden and painful, for if he had been shot some wound would most certainly show," Sir Houston remarked.

"There will have to be an inquest, won't there?" asked Sainsbury.

"Of course. And, Thomasson, you had better ring up the police at once and inform them of the facts," urged Sir Houston, who, turning again to Sainsbury, added: "At the post-mortem we shall, of course, quickly establish the cause of death."

Again he bent, and with his forefinger drew down the dead man's nether lip.

"Curious," he remarked, as though speaking to himself, as he gazed into the white, distorted face. "By the symptoms I would certainly have suspected poisoning. Surely he can't have committed suicide!"

And he glanced eagerly around the room, seeking to discover any bottle, glass, or cup that could have held a fatal draught.

"I don't see anything which might lead us to such a conclusion, Sir Houston," answered Sainsbury.

"But he may have swallowed it in tablet form," the other suggested.

"Ah! yes. I never thought of that!"

"His dying words were hardly the gasping remarks of a suicide."

"Unless he wished to conceal the fact that he had taken his own life?" remarked Sainsbury.

"If he committed suicide, then he will probably have left some message behind him. They generally do," Sir Houston said; whereupon both men crossed to the writing-table, which, neat and tidy, betrayed the well-ordered life its owner had led.

An electric lamp with a shade of pale green silk was burning, and showed that the big padded writing-chair had recently been occupied. Though nothing lay upon the blotting pad, there were, in the rack, three letters the man now dead had written and stamped for post. Sainsbury took them and glanced at the addresses.

"Had we not better examine them?" he suggested; and, Sir Houston consenting, he tore them open one after the other and quickly read their contents. All three, however, were professional letters to patients.

Next they turned their attention to the waste-paper basket. In it were a number of letters which Jerrold had torn up and cast away. Thomasson having gone to the telephone to inform the police of the tragic affair, the pair busied themselves in piecing together the various missives and reading them.

All were without interest – letters such as a busy doctor would receive every day. Suddenly, however, Sainsbury spread out before him some crumpled pieces of cartridge-paper which proved to be the fragments of a large strong envelope which had been torn up hurriedly and discarded.

There were words on the envelope in Jerrold's neat handwriting, and in ink which was still blue in its freshness. As Sainsbury put them together he read, to his astonishment:

"Private. *For my friend Mr John Sainsbury, of Heath Street, Hampstead. Not to be opened until one year after my death*."

Sir Houston, attracted by the cry of surprise which escaped Sainsbury's lips, looked over his shoulder and read the words.

"Ah!" he sighed. "Suicide! I thought he would leave something!"

Chapter Five.
Certain Curious Facts

Both men searched eagerly through the drawers of the writing-table to see if the dead man had left another envelope addressed to his friend. Two of the drawers were locked, but these they opened with the key which they found upon poor Jerrold's watch-chain which he was wearing.

Some private papers, accounts and ledgers, were in the drawers, but the envelope of which they were in search they failed to discover.

It seemed evident that Jerome Jerrold had written the envelope in which he had enclosed a letter, but, on reflection, he had torn it up. Though the crumpled fragments of the envelope were there, yet the letter – whatever it might have been – was missing. And their careful examination of the waste-paper basket revealed nothing, whereupon Sir Houston Bird remarked —

"He may, of course, have changed his mind, and burned it, after all!"

"Perhaps he did," Jack agreed. "But I wonder what could have been the message he wished to give me a year after his death? Why not now?"

"People who take their own lives sometimes have curious hallucinations. I have known many. Suicide is a fascinating, if very grim study."

"Then you really think this is a case of suicide?"

"I can, I fear, give no opinion until after the post-mortem, Mr Sainsbury," was Sir Houston's guarded reply, his face grave and thoughtful.

"But it is all so strange, so remarkable," exclaimed the younger man. "Why did he tell me that he'd been shot, if he hadn't?"

"Because to you, his most intimate friend, he perhaps, as you suggested, wished to conceal the fact that he had been guilty of the cowardly action of taking his own life," was the reply.

"It is a mystery – a profound mystery," declared Jack Sainsbury. "Jerome dined with Mr Trustram, and the latter came back here with him. Meanwhile, Mr Lewin Rodwell was very anxious concerning him. Why? Was Rodwell a friend of Jerome's? Do you happen to know that?"

"I happen to know to the contrary," declared the great pathologist. "Only a week ago we met at Charing Cross Hospital, and some chance remark brought up Rodwell's name, when Jerrold burst forth angrily, and declared most emphatically that the man who posed as such a patriotic Englishman would, one day, be unmasked and exposed in his true colours. In confidence, he made an allegation that Lewin Rodwell's real name was Ludwig Heitzman, and that he was born in Hanover. He had become a naturalised Englishman ten years ago in Glasgow, and had, by deed-poll, changed his name to Lewin Rodwell."

Jack Sainsbury stared the speaker full in the face.

Lewin Rodwell, the great patriot who, since the outbreak of war, had been in the forefront of every charitable movement, who had been belauded by the Press, and to whom the Prime Minister had referred in the most eulogistic terms in the House of Commons, was a German!

"That's utterly impossible," exclaimed Jack. "He is one of the directors of the Ochrida Copper Corporation, in whose office I am. I know Mr Rodwell well. There's no trace whatever of German birth about him."

"Jerrold assured me that his real name was Heitzman, that he had been born of poor parents, and had been educated by an English shipping-agent in Hamburg, who had adopted him and sent him to England. On the Englishman's death he inherited about two thousand pounds, which he made the nucleus of his present fortune."

"That's all news to me," said Jack reflectively; "and yet – "

"What? Do you know something regarding Rodwell then?" inquired Sir Houston quickly.

"No," he replied. "Nothing very extraordinary. What you have just told me surprises me greatly."

"Just as it surprised me. Yet, surely, his case is only one of many similar. Thousands of Germans have come here, and become naturalised Englishmen."

"A German who becomes a naturalised Englishman is a traitor to his own country, while he poses as our friend. I contend that we have no use for traitors of any sort in England to-day," declared Jack vehemently; both men being still engaged in searching the dead man's room to discover the message which it appeared had been his intention to leave after his death. They had carefully examined the grate, but found no trace of any burnt paper. Yet, from the fact that a piece of red sealing-wax and a burnt taper lay upon the writing-table, it appeared that something had been recently sealed, though the torn envelope bore no seal.

If an envelope had been sealed, then where was it?

"We shall, no doubt, be able to establish the truth of Jerrold's allegation by reference to the register of naturalised Germans kept at the Home Office," Sir Houston said at last.

Jack was silent for a few moments, and then answered:

"That, I fear, may be a little difficult. Jerrold has often told me how it had been discovered that it was a favourite dodge of Germans, after becoming naturalised and changing their names by deed-poll, to adopt a second and rather similar name, in order to avoid any inquiry along the channel which you have just suggested. As an example, if Ludwig Heitzman became naturalised, then it is more than probable that when he changed his name by deed-poll he did not adopt the name of Lewin Rodwell, but something rather near it."

"Very likely," was the great doctor's remark.

Suddenly Jack Sainsbury paused and, facing his companion, said:

"Look here, Sir Houston. In this tragic affair I believe there's something more than suicide. That's my firm opinion. Reflect for one moment, and follow my suspicions. Poor Jerome, in addition to his profession, has for some years been unofficially assisting the Intelligence Department of the War Office. He was one of the keenest and cleverest investigators in England. He scented acts of espionage as a terrier does a rat, and by his efforts half a dozen, or so, dangerous spies have been arrested and punished. In a modest way I have been his assistant, and have helped to watch and follow suspected persons. Together, we have traced cases of petrol-running to the coast, investigated night-signalling in the southern counties, and other things, therefore I happen to know that he was keen on the work. Curious that he never told me of his grave suspicions regarding Mr Rodwell."

"Perhaps he had a reason for concealing them from you," was the other's reply.

"But he was always so frank and open with me, because I believe that he trusted in my discretion to say nothing."

"Probably he had not verified his facts, and intended to do so before revealing the truth to you."

"Yes, he was most careful always to obtain corroboration of everything, before accepting it," was Jack's reply. "But certainly what you have just told me arouses a grave suspicion."

"Of what?"

"Well – that our poor friend, having gained knowledge of Lewin Rodwell's birth and antecedents, may, in all probability, have probed further into his past and – "

"Into his present, I think more likely," exclaimed the great doctor. "Ah! I quite see the line of your argument," he added quickly. "You suggest that Rodwell may have discovered that Jerrold knew the truth, and that, in consequence, death came suddenly and unexpectedly – eh?"

Jack Sainsbury nodded in the affirmative. "But surely Trustram, who was one of Jerrold's most intimate friends, could not have had any hand in foul play! He was the last man who saw him alive. No," he went on. "My own experience shows me that poor Jerrold has died of poisoning, and as nobody has been here, or could have escaped from the room, it must have been administered by his own hand."

"But do you not discern the motive?" cried Sainsbury. "Rodwell has risen to a position of great affluence and notoriety. He is a bosom friend of Cabinet Ministers, and to him many secrets of State are confided. He, and his friend Sir Boyle Huntley, play golf with Ministers, and the name of Lewin Rodwell is everywhere to-day one to conjure with. He has, since the war, risen to be one of the most patriotic Englishmen – a man whose unselfish efforts are praised and admired from one end of Great Britain to another. Surely he would have become desperate if he had the least suspicion that Jerome Jerrold had discovered the truth, and intended to unmask him – as he had openly declared to you."

"Yes, yes, I see," Sir Houston replied dubiously. "If there were any traces of foul play I should at once be of the same opinion. But you see they do not exist."

"Whether there are traces, or whether there are none, nothing will shake my firm opinion, and that is that poor Jerome has been assassinated, and the motive of the crime is what I have already suggested."

"Very well; we shall clear it up at the post-mortem," was the doctor's reply, while at that moment Thomasson re-entered, followed by a police-officer in plain clothes and two constables in uniform.

On their entry, Sainsbury introduced Sir Houston Bird, and told them his own name and that of his dead friend.

Then the officer of the local branch of the Criminal Investigation Department sat down at the dead man's writing-table and began to write in his note-book the story of the strange affair, as dictated by Jack.

Sir Houston also made a statement, this being followed by the man Thomasson, who detailed his master's movements prior to his death – as far as he knew them.

His master, he declared, had seemed in excellent spirits all day. He had seen patients in the morning, had lunched frugally at home, and had gone down to Guy's in the car to see the wounded, as was his daily round. At six he had returned, dressed, and gone forth in a taxi to meet his friend, Mr Trustram of the Admiralty. They having dined together returned, and afterwards Mr Trustram had left and the doctor, smoking his pipe, had retired to his room to write. Nothing further was heard, Thomasson said, till the arrival of Mr Sainsbury, when the door of the room was found locked.

"You heard no one enter the house – no sounds whatever?" asked the detective inspector, Rees by name, a tall, clean-shaven, fresh-complexioned man, with rather curly hair.

"I didn't hear a sound," was the servant's reply. "The others were all out, and, as a matter of fact, I was in the waiting-room, just inside the door, looking at the newspapers on the table. So I should have heard anyone go up or down the stairs."

Inspector Rees submitted Thomasson to a very searching cross-examination, but it was quite evident to all in the room that he knew nothing more than what he had already told. He and his wife had been in Dr Jerrold's service for eight years. His wife, until her death, a year ago, had acted as cook-housekeeper.

"Did you ever know of Mr Lewin Rodwell visiting the doctor?" asked Sir Houston.

"Never, as far as I know, sir. He, of course, might have come to consult him professionally when I've been out, and the maid has sometimes opened the door and admitted patients."

"Have you ever heard Mr Rodwell's name?"

"Only on the telephone to-night – and of course very often in the papers," replied the man.

"Your master was very intimate with Mr Trustram?" inquired the detective.

"Oh yes. They first met about three months ago, and after that Mr Trustram came here several times weekly. The doctor went to stay at his country cottage near Dorking for the week-end, about a fortnight ago."

"Did you ever discover the reason of those conferences?" Jack Sainsbury asked. "I mean, did you ever overhear any of their conversations?"

"Sometimes, sir. But not very often," was Thomasson's discreet reply. "They frequently discussed the war, and the spy-peril, in which – as you know – the doctor was actively interesting himself."

Upon Jack Sainsbury's countenance a faint smile appeared. He now discerned the reason of the visits of that Admiralty official to the man who had been so suddenly and mysteriously stricken down.

He exchanged glances with Sir Houston, who, a moment before, had been searching a cigar cabinet which had hitherto escaped their notice.

At Rees's suggestion, Jack Sainsbury went to the telephone and rang up Charles Trustram, to whom he briefly related the story of the tragic discovery.

Within twenty minutes Trustram arrived, and, to the detective, told the story of the events of the evening: how they had met by appointment at Prince's Restaurant at half-past seven, had dined together, and then he had accompanied the doctor back to Wimpole Street about half-past nine, where they had sat smoking and chatting.

"Jerrold seemed in quite good spirits over the result of an inquiry he had been making regarding a secret store of petrol established by the enemy's emissaries somewhere on the Sussex coast," Mr Trustram explained. "He had, he told me, disclosed it to the Intelligence Department, and they were taking secret measures to watch a certain barn wherein the petrol was concealed, and to arrest those implicated in the affair. He also expressed some anxiety regarding Mr Sainsbury, saying that he wished he could see him to-night." Then, turning to Jack, he added: "At his request I rang up your flat at Hampstead, but you were not in."

"Why did he wish to see me?"

"Ah! that I don't know. He told me nothing," was the Admiralty official's reply. "While I was sitting here with him I was rung up three times – twice from my office, and once by a well-known man I had met for the first time that afternoon – Mr Lewin Rodwell."

At mention of Rodwell all present became instantly interested.

"How did Mr Rodwell know that you were here?" inquired the detective quickly. "That's a mystery. I did not tell him."

"He might have rung up your house, and your servant may possibly have told him that you were dining with Jerrold," Sir Houston suggested.

"That may be so. I will ask my man."

"What did Mr Rodwell want?" Rees asked.

"He told me that he had that evening been in consultation with his friend Sir Boyle Huntley, and that, between them they had resolved to commence a propaganda for the internment of all alien enemies – naturalised as well as unnaturalised – and he asked whether I would meet them at the club to-morrow afternoon to discuss the scheme. To this I readily consented. When I returned to this room I found the doctor in the act of sealing an envelope. After he had finished he gave the envelope to me, saying 'This will be safer in your care than in mine, my dear Trustram. Will you please keep it in your safe?' I consented, of course, and as I took it I saw that it was a private letter addressed to Mr Sainsbury, with instructions that it was not to be opened till a year after his death."

"Then you have the letter!" cried Jack excitedly.

"Yes, I have it at home," replied Mr Trustram; who, proceeding, said: "At first I was greatly surprised at being given such a letter, and chaffingly remarked that I hoped he wouldn't die just yet; whereat he laughed, refilled his pipe and declared that life was, after all, very uncertain. 'I want my friend Sainsbury to know something – but not before a year after I'm gone. You understand, Trustram. I give you this, and you, on your part, will give me your word of honour that, whatever occurs, you will safely guard it, and not allow it to be opened till a year has elapsed after my death.' He seemed to have suddenly grown serious, and I confess I was not a little surprised at his curious change of manner."

"Did it strike you at all that he might be contemplating suicide?"

"No, not in the least. Such an idea never entered my head. I regarded his action just as that of a man who makes his will – that's all. I took the envelope and, about five minutes later, left him, as I had been called down to the Admiralty upon an urgent matter."

"A quarter of an hour afterwards Mr Sainsbury called and we could not get into the room," Thomasson remarked. "That is all we know."

Chapter Six.
Reveals the Victim

Three days had passed.

The coroner's inquiry had been duly held into the death of Dr Jerome Jerrold, and medical evidence, including that of the deceased's friend, Sir Houston Bird, had been called. This evidence showed conclusively that Sir Houston had been right in his conjecture, from the convulsed appearance of the body and other signs, that poor Jerrold had died of poisoning by strychnine. Therefore the proceedings were brief, and a verdict was returned of "Suicide while temporarily insane."

No mention was made of the sealed letter left with Mr Trustram, for in a case of that distressing nature the coroner is always ready to make the inquiry as short as possible.

Jack Sainsbury, who had been granted leave by Mr Charlesworth, the managing-director, to attend the inquest upon his friend, returned to the City in a very perturbed state of mind.

He sat at his desk on that grey December afternoon, unable to attend to the correspondence before him, unable to fix his mind upon business, unable to understand the subtle ramifications of the cleverly conceived and dastardly plot, the key of which he had discovered by those few words he had overheard between the Chairman of the Board and his close friend, the great Lewin Rodwell.

He was wondering whether his dead friend's allegation that Rodwell was none other than Ludwig Heitzman was really the truth. Sir Houston Bird had promised to institute inquiry at the Alien department of the Home Office, yet, only that day he had heard that the official of whom inquiry must be made actually bore a German name. The taint of the Teuton seemed, alas! over everything, notwithstanding the public resentment apparent up and down the whole country, and the formation of leagues and unions to combat the activity of the enemy in our midst.

Jack Sainsbury disagreed with the verdict of suicide. Jerome Jerrold was surely not the man to take his own life by swallowing strychnine. Yet why had he left behind that puzzling and mysterious message which Charles Trustram, having given his word of honour to his friend, refused to be opened for another year?

The will had been found deposited with his solicitor – a will which left the sum of eighteen-odd thousand pounds to "my friend and assistant in many confidential matters, Mr John Sainsbury, of Heath Street, Hampstead."

As far as it went that was gratifying to Jack. It rendered him independent of the Ochrida Copper Corporation, and the strenuous "driving-power," as it is termed in the City, of Charlesworth, the sycophant of Sir Boyle Huntley and his fellow directors. The whole office knew that Huntley and Rodwell, brought in during days of peace "to reorganise the Company upon a sound financial basis," were gradually getting all the power into their own hands, as they had done in other companies. The lives of that pair were one huge money-getting adventure.

In the office strange things were whispered. But Jack alone knew the truth.

The most irritating fact to him was that Jerome Jerrold, just as he had discovered Rodwell's birth and masquerading, had died.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.