



MY HEART
AND STEPHANIE
BY R. W. KAUFFMAN



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MY HEART AND STEPHANIE

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WORKS OF
REGINALD WRIGHT
KAUFFMAN



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L. C. PAGE & COMPANY
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Stephanie, Countess Routkovsky



MY HEART AND STEPHANIE

A Novel

By

Reginald Wright Kauffman

Author of "Jarvis of Harvard," "Miss Frances Baird,
Detective," etc.

With two portraits in colour from paintings by

A. G. Learned



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To
R. H. K.

Dear Ruth: — Only a few weeks have elapsed since, seated on that shaded boulder beside the lake at Neuchâtel, I first read you what was then but the mere skeleton of this little story. I remember, as I know you, too, remember, how the sun, out of a mackerel sky, flung great handfuls of riotous gold upon the blue water; I remember how the light breeze rustled the leaves in the treetops overhead, and I remember (you may be sure that I shall never forget!) the word with which, as I ceased, you bade me complete the task I had so carelessly begun. Only a few weeks — and yet, here is the finished narrative!

What followed that first reading I need not now rehearse. If the dry bones have been given life, it was your breath that inspired them. Stephanie is not my mystery, but ours. We have, in these past few days, stood together in the guilty house at Mountville; have pillaged together the embassy in the Rue de Varenne; and have together fought the conspirators before the secret prison at the end of our dream-stairway. In a word, this book would never have been completed but for your constant encouragement and indefatigable assistance, and, since I know that you will not permit me to say that the story is yours, I am at least resolved that you permit me thus at last to say that it is — yours-and-mine.

R. W. K.

Hotel Ritz, Paris.

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MY HEART AND STEPHANIE



CHAPTER I

THE VEILED CLIENT

“To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

“A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

“A time to kill.”

It seems impossible that, after one brief year, so little should remain of it — as impossible as that the commonplace death of a poverty-stricken stranger in a little Pennsylvania village should contain the seeds of a mystery which imperiled the succession to a crown, sent the spy systems of two great empires buzzing over half the world and at one time threatened to plunge Europe into the greatest war of modern history. And yet, after all, these things have happened, and now, with only a twelvemonth come and gone,

this brown-stained bit of newspaper and this single lock of auburn hair are all that are left to remind me of my voluntary part in a matter so momentous; all that remain to recall Colonel Lichtenstein, Bolfras Czibulka, the Baron Ferdinand-Salvator Klepsch-Kloth de Hetzendorf — and the Countess Routkovsky.

Is it any marvel that the whole thing should seem, at this last, so like a strange delirium dimly remembered by a weary convalescent? The world has gone on its way unguessing; the ready ear of gossip has caught no echo of our sword-play; the map of Europe is unchanged, and I, looking out from my study window upon the silent April night in this quiet Philadelphia suburb, rub my eyes and begin to wonder vainly whether indeed I ever saw the great jewel gleaming in the death-house at Mountville; whether I was ever accomplice to Frances Baird, robbing the ambassador's desk in Paris; whether I did not only dream that Stephanie kissed me upon the darkened stairway of the *Rat Mort*, and whether, in fact, I ever heard the voice of the Mad Prince singing the *mattchiche* out of tune behind that high-barred window in the Rue Colbert.

Ending, it would seem, in what was perhaps a tragic nothing, it began in what, at the time, appeared to me but a commonplace in the daily

calendar of my friend, the detective. It was Sunday in the dull season for newspaperdom, and, as the star reporter of the *Globe-Express*, I had decided upon a long vacation. Fealy, the managing editor, had, only that afternoon, arranged the matter with a promptness characteristic of the profession.

“Let you off?” he had asked, without looking up from the A. P. “flimsy” he was reading. “Yes, I can let you off: two weeks with pay and two without. You may start now.”

And so, having gained my desire, and feeling helpless and restless in its possession, I had begun my vacation by remaining in the city, taking Frances Baird to a roof-garden and trying to make her tell me where I ought to go to get that rest and quiet which I so required and which, as the event proved, I was so little destined to obtain.

We had talked of almost everything, save the matter in hand, and had returned, I remember, to Frances’s quarters. The light was low in the apartment that she called her studio, but, as she sat on the big divan under the swinging lamp by the open window, I could see her plainly: her small, white hands clasped over her knee, her lithe, young body relaxed at ease, and her well-shaped head, with its delicate features, its

large brown eyes and its wealth of black hair, buried in the cushions. Behind me, smoking in the armchair within a yard of her, the long, cool room stretched away in slow gradations of gloom to complete darkness. Out of the shadows here and there rose the indistinct figure of some strange bit of furniture or bric-a-brac gathered in this or that odd corner of the world, for the most part either a reward for the detective services of my incongruously-demure hostess, or else a portion of the stage-setting in some celebrated crime. Upon the wall opposite, against a Samoan marriage-mat, itself the relic of a world-chase that had ended in the South Pacific, hung now a multifarious collection of weapons, on each of which the imagination detected the crimson stain; the big desk in the corner had once stood in Stanford White's office, and on the chair before it Dreyfus had sat during the sessions of the court martial that had convicted him. And yet, notwithstanding all these gruesome mementoes, of each of which the history was familiar to me, the atmosphere of the room was one of quiet. The rattle of the trolley-cars in the street seemed very far away; the Summer stars, peeping into our open windows, seemed very close at hand, and the refreshing air that, every minute, stirred the curtains, seemed to

come from some free forest where wrong and vengeance, the offence and the punishment, were alike unknown.

Curiously enough, too, although my companion's theme was professional, her tone was so far reminiscent as to lose the effect of imminent reality, and it struck me then, for the thousandth time, as well nigh incredible that a spirit so young and usually so gentle should have played upon life's stage a part so strenuous and bitter. As, however, we grow older, we cease so much to be amazed at what in our boyhood we were wont to speculate upon as strange coincidence, and now, in looking back at that evening, I take it rather as a matter of course — rather as an inevitable working-out of some natural law of mental telepathy — that Frances Baird should just then have been talking in fine generalities about a system the meshed details of which were so soon to ensnare the two of us.

“The real history of modern times,” she was saying, “never has been and never will be written. Some day, of course, a future historian will spend his life in collecting data and setting forth the events that all the world has at one time known. Our great-grandchildren will read of Alfonso's marriage and Nicholas's coronation, of the War in Manchuria and the Treaty of

Portsmouth, and will suppose that what all mankind saw of these things was all that there was to be seen. They will not know that the body of a Saxon laundress had to sink into the Rhine before the Bourbon King of Spain might marry the Guelph girl of England. Nobody will tell the story of the three days' disappearance of the Russian Emperor; nobody will write the facts of the Muscovite League in Tokio, and not even here in our free America, with its twin blessings of a free press and no personal privacy — not even here will anyone give out the news of the stolen dispatch from St. Petersburg that turned the Czar's defeat at arms into his diplomatic victory."

I had let her run on, in that quiet, low mezzo of hers, without comment or interruption, because I knew her liking for soliloquy and because she was one of the few pretty women from whom one may learn. But now she had touched the tender chord of my reporter's heart.

"Do you mean to tell me," I asked, "that a European spy could pull off such a trick in America, and not one line of it get into the papers?"

Frances laughed.

"My dear boy," she assured me, "despite the intervening Atlantic, this country is the happy

hunting-ground for the Continental secret-service agents. The only trouble is that you fellows aren't in a position to get the real news and wouldn't dare to print it if you did get it. No, no; make up your mind to one thing, Sam Burton: when you come to write of any event of international importance, picturesque or awful as the known facts may chance to be, the unknown facts are always a thousand times more vital, a thousand times more intense, a thousand times more dramatic. Diplomacy is the one play in which the best part of the action goes on behind the scenes."

It was just at that moment — just as those words were uttered — that the maid entered.

Frances took the card that lay on the tray.

"Fraulein Gretchen Meyer," she read, carelessly. "I don't recall the Fraulein, Betty. Did she send any message?"

Under her white-capped head Betty cherished the wits of a very well-trained young person. The visitor had been told that Miss Baird was engaged, but she had replied that she called on business, that the business was urgent, and that she would be deeply indebted for fifteen minutes of Miss Baird's valuable time.

"Very well," said Frances; "show her up, Betty. Sammy, you may wait here, if you don't

mind: there's just one chance in a thousand that this may be the very thing for your vacation."

A moment later the door opened and Betty, announcing "Fraulein Meyer," had presented the new client.

In the dim light all that I could at first make out was a tall woman in black, heavily veiled. But, little by little, as I strained my eyes through the semi-darkness and risked some rudeness in the intensity of my gaze, I began to feel about her an air that plainly bespoke something akin to distinction. There was youth in the figure, but it was youth at perfect ease, youth tempered by superb control; there was grace in every line and movement, but it was the grace that is dignity. The visitor's step had been quick, yet firm; her slight bow had been rather what romancers call an "inclination" and the whole poise of her head, the every slight gesture, hinted at once a certain habit of authority. For half a minute she stood there, silent, and then, at last, she spoke in a deep, contralto voice that thrilled me like the first notes of some master instrument.

"Miss Baird," she said, moving forward to a stiff-backed chair and quite disregarding the easy rocker that Frances had indicated, "I have been told of you by an old acquaintance of mine in Berlin, whose name I need not mention, and I

have been informed in the highest quarters that I may depend upon you for the execution of a delicate commission with both skill and discretion. I should like to lay this matter before you with as little delay as possible."

Her hidden face was turned so frankly toward me that I began to writhe in my place, and certainly I should have beaten an abrupt retreat had not Frances quickly made answer:

"If you will give me the details of your case, Fraulein, I will see what I can do for you. This is my assistant, Mr. Burton, and you may speak quite as freely before him as to me."

It was a speech that, not without intent, might well have offended a mind made sensitive by the experience of similar wounds, but upon our visitor the words alone effected visible impress: the implication she appeared either to ignore or to fail entirely to observe. Instead she merely nodded a grave assent and straightway seemed to forget me completely. Turning again to Frances, as the detective and I resumed our seats, she began speaking quite as if I had no existence, and telling her story in that splendid voice, without hesitation and with only the slightest trace of a foreign accent.

"I am," she said, "a native of the Wurtemberg. My family is an ancient though untitled

one in the Schwarzwald, but I am its last remaining representative. As a very young girl I was sent by my father to a school in Darmstadt and there met a lieutenant in the army, with whom I was foolish enough to fall desperately in love, as I then called it, although the man was more than twice my age and wholly unworthy of any woman's consideration. Like many another school-girl, I wrote him frequent letters — more than a hundred in all — some of them so worded as to make the writer's identity quite clear to even the most casual reader, and several couched in terms which, innocent as our relations really were, could well, as I now see, be misinterpreted to my lasting disadvantage. At the end, however, of about eighteen months after this affair began, my father died suddenly, and the Lieutenant, learning that I was penniless, ceased his suit. For my part, I returned home under the impression that I was broken-hearted, and settled down to a commonplace life upon the small remains of my patrimony."

"One moment," interrupted Frances, raising her head from the cushions in which she had again buried it when the Fraulein began her narrative. "If you don't mind telling me, how long ago was this?"

"Ten years," replied our client; "I was then

only seventeen. Within a month after my return home," she continued, "I heard that the Lieutenant had deserted from the army and completely disappeared, leaving a great indebtedness behind him. From that time until two months ago I heard no more of him, and soon, quite naturally, forgot him altogether.

"At that period it chanced that I met and fell in love with a certain fellow-countryman. I do not care to name him, nor do I think that his name would be of any importance to you in the performance of your task. Suffice it that he is a man of so much power and of so high a position in the government of the Empire that, when he proposed for my hand and our betrothal was announced, the newspapers gave much publicity to the fact. Then —"

The speaker paused. For the first time she showed the slightest tokens of embarrassment and her gloved fingers laced and interlaced in her lap.

Frances, as if echoing her tone, helped her out.

"Then, I suppose," said Frances, "you heard again from our friend the Lieutenant. Your fiancé being rich and powerful, this old admirer saw a chance for a bargain and gave you your choice between paying him a large sum of money and allowing him to send the letters to your betrothed."

The visitor, with a quick movement, raised her head.

“How,” she asked — and yet her tone was even then rather defiant than quavering — “how did you learn of this?”

“I didn’t learn of it,” Frances replied. “From what you have already told me, it was a foregone conclusion. You got the money?”

“I got the money,” assented Fraulein Meyer. “It was less difficult than I had at first imagined, because the professional money-lenders were, I found, fully cognizant of my approaching marriage and more than ready to make advances at profitable terms.”

“They keep advised,” said Frances dryly. “The Lieutenant,” she added, “was, of course, in America?”

“Yes, he was in America, and I could see no way but that I should come to him in person. He was too poor to cross to me, and I knew no one in all Germany whom I could trust with such a mission.”

“Whereas, of course, if you merely mailed him the money, he would have refused to return the letters and would have held you up for more. I see. Is he a resident of this city?”

“No, it appears not. Some months ago, with his brother, he rented a small farm on the out-

skirts of a little village called Mountville, in what I believe is known as Lancaster County, of this State.”

“ And now, Fraulein Meyer, you want me to go there, see this Lieutenant — ”

“ The name which he has been using is Jaeger — Hans Jaeger.”

“ Thank you. You want me, I say, to see this Lieutenant Jaeger, pay the money and get the letters? ”

The Fraulein rose from her chair and, in the momentary silence that followed, I felt the electric thrill of an approaching climax.

“ No,” she finally answered. “ I want you to get the letters, but the money you may keep, and the man you will never see. I myself have been to the farm this afternoon, Miss Baird, and I have learned that, at half-past nine o'clock this morning, Hans Jaeger was found murdered in his house.”

CHAPTER II

THE TANGLED WEB

“For the Lord hath created a new thing in the earth,
A woman shall compass a man.”

FRANCES BAIRD let out a low whistle and sat suddenly upright. In the shadow I could see her eyes grow green and luminous, shining like those of a tigress, and I knew that what she had, a minute ago, been inclined to refuse as a commonplace and uninteresting case, she was now about to seize upon as something really worthy of her remarkable powers. Instantly the whole atmosphere of the room changed its character: Fraulein Meyer ceased to be a mere story-teller and, in effect, went upon the witness-stand for cross-examination.

“How long have you been in this city, Fraulein?” demanded Frances.

Our visitor showed no resentment at the new tone of the detective. Her manner remained serenely superior, but she answered readily:

“I arrived last evening at eleven o’clock.”

“ And you crossed on what boat? ”

“ The *Kaiser Wilhelm II* from Bremen.”

“ Yes — that docked in Hoboken last night at 7.30. Where are you stopping? ”

“ At the Bellevue.”

“ I am asking you these questions, Fraulein, because, as you are a stranger in this country and had strong reasons to dislike the dead man —”

Frances had now spoken gently, almost hesitatingly; she was, as I could see, endeavouring to find the easiest road between the truth that must be told and the fears that might be excited. But again she need not have worried. With perfect calm, our remarkable visitor interrupted:

“ I understand you perfectly. That was one reason why I came to you. Fortunately, however, I can quite easily account for my whereabouts at the time the murder must have been committed.”

“ That is good — and it is important. In what way will you account for it? ”

“ The doctor — the coroner’s physician you call him, do you not? — said, I was told, that, when found, the man had been dead only a short time, but all that time I was either in the train or else in my hired carriage driving to Mountville from the nearest important railway-city, which is Lancaster.”

Covertly I looked at Frances. There was a cold aloofness about the manner in which this veiled woman spoke of the murder of a man whom she had once loved — to risk a paradox, there was a sort of impersonal selfishness in her tone—which sent an unpleasant shiver through me.

But Frances was apparently unnoting.

“ Good,” she said. “ Then you must have left Philadelphia at about seven o’clock? ”

The Fraulein nodded. “ At that very hour, and I reached Lancaster,” she explained, “ about two hours later.”

“ Had there been any arrest? ”

“ None. But the officers are looking for the brother, who has disappeared, but who was last seen, I believe, some time this morning.”

“ How was the killing done? ”

“ That I do not know. Somebody said it was with a knife. That is all that I can tell you, Miss Baird. You must understand that I made no further inquiries. The nature of my own mission was so delicate that I did not dare to show any great personal interest or attract any undue attention. When I found what had happened, I pretended that I was come to the village on other affairs and that I had stopped at the farm merely out of the same morbid curiosity which drew all the neighbours there.”

She spread out her hands with a fine gesture of finality. It was as if, having told all she knew, she could dismiss the subject for ever.

“ You made no search, then, for your letters? ”

“ How could I? The place was in the possession of the police.”

“ I see,” said Frances. “ And now you want me to get them,” she repeated.

Once again we were, apparently, at the sole point of importance. The murder of her former lover Fraulein Meyer could discuss without any emotion, but the existence of the letters and the need of their recovery brought at least a slight touch of feeling into her tone.

“ You *must* get them,” she said. “ If the authorities should now discover them, the whole matter would be printed in your newspapers and I should inevitably be ruined for ever.”

“ Have you any idea how or where they are kept? ”

“ I know perfectly. One of my gifts to the Lieutenant in my schooldays was a handsome dispatch-box, on the top of which was a gold plate, engraved with the arms: two cross-crosslets over a chevron azure upon a field or, with a lion rampant for crest and the motto, ‘ Semper Libertas.’ It was in this, he wrote me in his last letter, that he kept what he called his keepsakes.”

There was a long pause. Frances rose languidly, took a step or two away from her client and then, turning suddenly, directly faced her.

“Now, Fraulein,” she demanded, “do you know why Jaeger was killed?”

For just an instant our visitor’s self-possession was threatened. She, too, got to her feet, but she did it quickly, and I saw her breast rise and fall tumultuously.

“Miss Baird,” she began, and in her voice I now seemed to feel the lightnings, “do you mean to hint that —”

“I mean just what I say: nothing more. If I am to act for you in this matter, I must know all that you know.”

“Then I assure you that you are already in possession of all the facts that I can give you.”

“Very well — very well. And now one thing more, Fraulein: has it not occurred to you that this man’s brother might have killed him in order to gain possession of those letters and himself reap the benefit from you?”

The woman nodded.

“Yes,” she said, “that has occurred to me, and for that reason, if you cannot find the dispatch-box on the premises, I want you to run down this murderer and get them from his person.”

The two were still standing, face to face, in

the middle of the room. Frances took one step backward, reached to the library-table and pressed the button, which flooded the apartment with light.

“Certainly, Fraulein,” she said sweetly. “I shall start at once, and shall at least return sometime to-morrow to report. Can you meet me here at the same hour?”

The visitor nodded.

“You will have no cause for complaint against your remuneration,” she assured us, and turned to go.

Just as she did so, Frances dashed past her, as if to open the door for her, and, brushing by, allowed her hand to catch in the Fraulein’s veil with so sharp a movement that the drapery was brushed aside.

It was but a fleeting glimpse that I caught, yet it was one that I shall never forget. The face was as pale as if cut from Parian marble, and as fine of feature as if some supreme artist had sculptured it. The carefully chiseled temples, the delicately arched nose with its sensitive nostrils, the straight brows and the haughty mouth, a vivid line of scarlet in the white face, all stamped themselves for ever on my memory. Under the hat I caught, also, the flash of a wealth of marvellous auburn hair, and, for a moment,

the gleam of black eyes alight with sudden suspicion and hot hate.

An instant later, however, and the veil had been replaced: Frances was offering the humblest of apologies for her stupid blunder; the Fraulein was accepting her excuses with suave grace, and, finally, before my breathing had again become regular, the door had closed and left me alone with the detective.

Frances turned on me with a quiet little laugh — the laugh that she always uses when deep in the intoxication of some swift pursuit.

“Sammy,” said she, “there’s the ’phone; call up the Bellevue.”

I got the number, and Frances, after a look into the hall to make sure that it was deserted, began a rapid conversation with the hotel-clerk.

“Quite right,” she said, as she restored the receiver to its hook. “The Fraulein Meyer is stopping at the Bellevue. She arrived there at eleven o’clock last night and was there until six-thirty this morning, at which rather remarkable hour she went out alone. Her trunks are tagged from Bremen via the *Kaiser Wilhelm II*. Now then, there is a night train for Lancaster, the nearest possible point to Mountville, in half an hour. I’m going and you’re going along. What do you think of our client?”

I had no doubt in my own mind.

“I think,” said I, “that she is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.”

Frances, pinning her hat, snorted.

“I am not so sure about that,” she answered, “but I am quite certain on one point: the lady is a queen of liars.”

CHAPTER III

HER COUNTERFEIT PRESENTMENT

“Bread of deceit is sweet to a man; but afterwards his mouth shall be filled with gravel.”

EVEN at the distance of a year and with the calm advantage of a purely reminiscent mood, I find it difficult to describe the impression which, in that brief visit, our puzzling client had made upon me. I had not talked to her at all. She had, in fact, first plainly shown that she objected to my presence, and had then, when that presence was forced upon her, ended by ignoring me altogether. Her entire visit, moreover, had consumed scarcely half an hour and, at its end, I had seen only so much of her face as one might get by a sudden bolt of lightning. Young I was, but my ten years' experience in newspaper work could hardly, I fancied, have left me impressionable. And yet, in spite of these things — or, perhaps, after all, because of them — I found myself, in the face of Frances's sudden opposition, impelled to take up the cudgels in our visitor's behalf.

Nor was the mood wholly unaware of its own fallacy. I remember clearly the hot flush of anger that burned in my cheeks when my friend thus coolly branded as a liar the woman who had only just left us. I remember the quick retort that leaped to my lips. But I remember also the rush of doubt that crowded fast upon its heels, the keen pang of my wounded pride, still bleeding from the supercilious thrusts so lately suffered, and the immediate sense of relief when Frances's hurried orders cut short the protest I was about to interpose and set me busy with preparations for our instant departure.

"Are you ready to start at once?" she demanded.

I reminded her that my work had for some years been of a character which made it necessary for me always to keep a suit-case packed for at least a week's journey.

"Very well, then," she rattled. "I don't suppose that we can make Mountville to-night, but we ought to have no trouble in getting to Lancaster so that we could drive out, or take a trolley, bright and early in the morning. I have only one or two things to toss into a bag, and, while I am at that, you look up a time-table; 'phone to the station, reserving a compartment; ring for a messenger-boy, and send him to your

rooms for your luggage, and then call a taxi. By that time I shall be as ready as you are."

And by that time she was. From the file of railroad-folders, of which she kept always the latest issues in a special pigeon-hole of her desk, I found that, although Mountville was not on the main passenger-line and was seemingly impossible of nocturnal access, we could, nevertheless, in forty minutes, get a train that would pass through Lancaster. It was an express and was not supposed to stop there, but the telephone put me in touch, at his club, with a railway official for whom I had once done a large newspaper favour, and he promised to issue the necessary orders that would let us off at the little city we were seeking to reach. This difficulty cleared away, I was so relieved that I did not much mind the curt word from the station that told me we should have to ride in a day-coach, and, as all my other commissions were successfully executed, I was rather well pleased with my abilities in the rôle of courier when, at last and with not a moment to spare, we settled ourselves for our two hours' ride and the express pulled out of the West Philadelphia Station.

But even then, when my fatuous mood had had so much time and cause to clear away, I was still, I found, a little bitter at Frances's

denunciation of the Fraulein, and, at any rate, very curious to discover its reason. My detective, however, was also unchanged; her original opinion still remained, and her report of it was still more assertive than argumentative.

“If you please,” she replied to my query in a caustic whisper, “you will not talk quite so loudly in a crowded railroad coach.”

“But why,” I persisted, though in a lower voice, — “why do you feel so sure about the woman’s character when you have scarcely exchanged a thousand words with her?”

Frances shrugged her little shoulders.

“I know the Fraulein is a liar,” she said, “because I know a lie when I hear one. It’s my business to be acquainted with each of the thousand and three brands.”

“But this woman,” I protested, “is no low type. Anybody could see that.”

“I didn’t say that she was a low type; I said she was a liar.”

“The report from the hotel people tends to confirm her in her alibi for the time of the murder.”

“My dear Sammy, you do so confuse the issues! No one accused her of assassination. Do you suppose I should ever have allowed her to leave my rooms unshadowed if I had for an instant

thought that she was even an accomplice to that killing? ”

“ Then, if you believe what she told us about the killing, what part of her story is it that you doubt? ”

“ Every other word of it. And I don't doubt it: I deny it. That yarn is a direct insult to the intelligence of everyone it's told to. It hasn't a probable feature. In the first place, the woman isn't a day over twenty-five, although she certainly has seen a lot in that time and although it takes a mighty motive to make a woman lie on the wrong side of her age. In the second place, scheming European lieutenants don't commit themselves to young girls without making sure of the girls' fortunes by any of the many safe, easy and sure means. In the third place, no man in his senses would expect a Continental woman to cross the Atlantic alone on such a mission as she describes, and no woman of any race, who possessed the calmness and resources which our friend displayed, would wait until she got here to employ a detective. Last of all, Sammy, did you happen to notice her accent? ”

“ Well,” I said, “ I noticed that she had an accent.”

“ Good. In that case you must also have

noticed that, whatever her nationality may be, it certainly is not German."

Of course I had not noticed anything of the sort, and of course I was now thoroughly angry. However, I knew from experience that anger with Frances Baird is never a paying proposition, and so I bought a copy of an illustrated magazine from the newsboy who was passing down the aisle, and, by the vile light of the railway-coach, began sulkily to run through its pages, Frances, in the meantime, quite coolly, and as comfortably as might be, settling herself for a nap.

I was turning the leaves rapidly and, my mind intent upon the problem of our curious quest, was giving small heed to the pictured pages that passed in quick parade before my eyes, but suddenly that disassociated observation which, at such times, seems to stand as a sentinel at the outpost of our consciousness, sounded a quick alarm. Just what it had noted I was not told, but something, I was immediately aware — something on a recently turned page — had possessed an importance which would compel me, now with every faculty alert, to return to it.

I did so at once, and, three pages back, found the illustration that had aroused me. It was one of a half-dozen reproductions of portraits from the brush of Leinbach; it was endorsed merely:

“Portrait of a Lady,” and its original was unquestionably the Fraulein Meyer.

I looked at Frances. She was fast asleep, and I was tempted to learn more of the picture before awakening her. The portraits were illustrations for an article on the work of the German artist, and I was reasonably sure that the subjects themselves were Teutons. Nevertheless, I resolved to consult the text, find what reference I could to this particular likeness and then, with my case fully made out, confront my companion with a complete controversion of her theories.

This, however, was not so easy. I first ran through the article hurriedly; then read it word for word; but nowhere — as is so often annoyingly the case — could I discover a word about the particular picture in which I was interested. All the others, it seemed, were criticized at considerable length, but this one had, apparently, been added by the art-editor merely for its own sake and quite without a word of explanation.

Not that there was any question about its identity. No one who had once seen even for a fleeting second the Fraulein could have entertained a momentary doubt. The pose, oddly enough, was almost precisely that of our visitor as she had stood upon entering Frances’s studio: the tall, graceful figure, the black draperies,

the very hat, and the haughty poise of the head were alone enough to convince me even had the face, with its finely cut temples, delicately arched nose, straight brows and proud mouth — even had these been veiled as they were when the Fraulein first appeared before us.

I leaned over and shook Frances almost roughly. In accord with long professional habit, she was at once clean awake.

“There,” said I, shoving the open magazine under her nose; “what do you make of that?”

For the second time that evening Frances whistled.

“It’s our client right enough,” she assented. “Have you read the article?”

I nodded.

“What does it say of the lady?”

“Not one word, unfortunately. It’s merely a criticism of Leinbach’s work. But that makes no difference. It proves you were wrong anyhow, for Leinbach was a German — ”

The light of interest died instantly in Frances’s brown eyes.

“And, therefore,” she ironically echoed, “he painted nothing but his own countrymen. Shade of Van Dyck! — I suppose he lived on his fees from portraits of penniless beauties of the Schwarzwald! — Oh, let me go to sleep again!”

She actually snuggled back once more, prepared to drop into the immediate slumber that she could always command, and I was sufficiently annoyed at her taunts to feel some secret satisfaction when the brakeman, thrusting his head in at the door, frustrated her plans by announcing that, if we were to force the express to stop at Lancaster, we must prepare for a speedy exit.

But our suspended hostilities were not destined to speedy resumption. The night was already so late as to be almost morning, and we were both glad to find our rooms ready at the hotel — so glad that I for my part, awoke at seven-thirty with many protestations and a warm temper.

Frances, however, came down to breakfast in excellent spirits. When once she was within easy reach of the scene of a crime, her mood was always one of energetic enthusiasm and her manner honey-sweet. To-day she seemed completely to have forgotten our foolish quarrel of the evening previous; could not be sufficiently solicitous over my brief slumber, and had herself, it appeared, been up quite half an hour, arranging for a carriage to drive us out to Mountville, five miles away.

“And what about the murder?” I asked.
“How do the gossips treat the affair?”

“I haven’t inquired of a soul and I haven’t

glanced at a paper," she answered smiling. "Ever since I listened to the talk of a sewing-circle and arrested the wrong man in the Northbrook counterfeiting case, I have forsworn gossips, and ever since I met you, I have mistrusted newspapers."

I bowed my acknowledgments.

"Nevertheless," I began, "it might at least be interesting —"

"Before the day is over," she interrupted, "I expect to have quite enough to interest me, without beginning on nothings at half after seven in the morning. Besides, there's no chance left. There's the carriage now, and the driver is so much of a Pennsylvania-German that he doesn't speak a word of English."

We climbed aboard our conveyance forthwith and in a moment more were bowling out of town and along the turnpike.

In spite of the grewsome errand on which we were bound, the drive was pleasant. Trolley-cars banged by us at full speed; neat, prosperous farm-houses nodded in the morning glow; broad, rich fields rolled away upon either hand, now dotted with sleek cattle and now fresh with the new green of a prospective crop.

I took in deep draughts of the pure, fresh air.

"By Jove," I exclaimed, "this is something

like vacation! What a morning it is, to be sure."

Frances's brown eyes were dreaming on the far horizon.

"Lovely," she ecstatically murmured. "It is just such a morning as the one we arrested Horace Bechtel for the Drumbaugh murder."

There is nothing to be done with a spirit so narrowed, and I was too wise to attempt anything. Instead, I consoled myself with the congratulation that neither my profession nor a disappointment in love had hardened me against the joys of the world, and I proceeded to make the best of the drive until a notable increase in the number of houses along the roadside warned me that we must be approaching Mountville.

To ask our driver, I knew would be useless. My one or two attempts to engage that cryptic individual in conversation had brought forth only monosyllabic replies in a tongue that I did not understand, and so, when we saw a couple of men approaching down the road, I leaned forward, took the reins from the horny fist of our conductor and myself brought the horses to a standstill.

Frances leaped to the ground and faced the newcomers.

"Good morning," she began blithely.

They nodded.

“Is this Mountville?” she continued.

“Yes,” replied the foremost — a tall man and bearded. “Who was you lookin’ fer?”

“Nobody in particular,” Frances assured him. “In fact, it was only a place we were after — not a person. We were curious to see the Jaeger farm.”

I looked for some sign of awe at the mention of that now tragic name, but the stolid faces of the country-folk remained unaltered. Apparently it took something more than violent death to move them to any facial betrayal of emotion.

“The Jaeger farm?” repeated the spokesman.

Frances assented.

Beyond us, about a quarter of a mile from the turnpike, stood, quite alone, a little two-story house, sadly in need of repair. From this house a clay road led to the very point at which we had stopped our carriage, and, down the road, half way to us, two other men were now approaching. It was toward the dilapidated building that our new acquaintance waved his hand.

“That there’s the Jaeger farm,” he said, still quite unmoved. “Turn off here: the road goes by the door yet.”

Even Frances, calmly as she herself was wont to sup on horrors, began to feel the chill that I

was experiencing at this unneighbourly stolidity — to fear, it seemed, that she was, in some way, misunderstood.

“ You are sure? ” she persisted.

But the rustic showed immediate signs of offence at her doubts, which he was quick to misconstrue into bantering.

“ Ef you knowed besser as I did,” he mumbled, “ you didn’t have fer to ast oncet.” — And he was about to move on when Frances put out her slim, strong hand and detained him.

“ One moment,” she said. “ I really didn’t mean to offend you, and I beg your pardon if I have offended. The name isn’t unusual and I thought I might have struck the wrong family. I mean the farm of Hans Jaeger and Wilhelm his brother.”

“ Well,” growled the rustic, “ that’s what I’m givin’ you yet. That there’s their place, and,” he continued, nodding his head toward the other two men, who were by this time within a hundred yards of us up the dirt road, “ ef you want to talk to Hans an’ Wilhelm Jaeger themselves, why, this is them now.”

CHAPTER IV

THE MURDER AT MOUNTVILLE

“ These men die the common death of all men.”

I HAVE observed Frances Baird in a wide variety of situations, any one of which was calculated to shake the nerve of the bravest man. I have watched her hold up three of the most dangerous train-robbers with never so much as the flutter of an eyelid; often have I known her to face the several forms of death with serenity, and once at least — it was in the case of a certain South American President — she met the threat of torture with a smile. Against about every form of surprise, against almost every unexpected turn of fortune, I have wagered her proof. But now — when she had come merrily forth to investigate a murder and was informed calmly that the murdered man was walking toward her in the company of his assassin — now, for the first time in our long friendship, she gave way to sheer amazement. Her brown eyes first stared at the speaker and then grew suddenly

fixed upon the approaching figures he had so astoundingly indicated; her jaw dropped as if she herself had been fatally smitten, and her hand slipped limply from the farmer's arm.

It was this, I think, that saved the situation. For the rustic, thus released, began to amble disgruntledly away, and the movement brought my friend back to her usual quick-thinking self.

"Do you mean to tell me," she however asked, with one last attempt to satisfy her preconceived notions of the situation, — "do you mean to tell me that these two men coming this way are Hans and Wilhelm Jaeger?"

"That's how they call themselves," the farmer answered.

"Then," said Frances, "there has been no — . But never mind," she hurriedly concluded. "I am very much obliged to you — and — and good day." With which words she literally pushed the farmers on their way and turned a shamed face to me. "Well," she laughed, "can you beat that for a puzzle?"

I was able at first only to shake my head. If Frances had been amazed, I was frankly dumfounded. It seemed certain that we were all the figments of some weird nightmare.

"What does it mean?" she asked, more of herself than of me, and, putting her small, white

hands to her forehead, "What does it mean?" she repeated.

"All I can make out," I ruefully confessed, "is that someone with a low sense of humour has put up a very poor joke on us."

Frances laughed.

"Good!" she cried. "Now will you accept my judgment of the beautiful Fraulein's veracity? — But there's more in this than a stupid hoax," she ran on softly, — "a good deal more."

"Just what *is* in it?" I wondered.

She turned from me quickly.

"I propose to find out," she said, "and I may as well begin with our friends, the Jaegers. Here they are."

There they were indeed, so close upon us that they might well have heard her concluding words and now so much more than ever a matter of interest that I studied them with no small amount of care.

The brothers were of about an age — neither could have been much over forty or under forty-eight — and, roughly, they presented a sort of general resemblance one to the other. Both were of good height and bore themselves — as if to account for at least a portion of the Fraulein's story — in a fashion that unmistakably bespoke a military training. Both were keen-eyed men

of rather distinguished features, bearded and tanned from their farm-life, but none the less plainly unused to their present occupation. Yet in manner there was between them a vast difference at once manifest. The one — I suppose he was the elder — had something in his sullen silence that, though approaching dignity, was curiously like the yokel who had just left us, whereas the other, to whom Frances addressed her remarks, was so ready-tongued and yet so rambling in his replies that I began soon to suspect him of some serious mental failing.

“ You are the brothers Jaeger? ” inquired Frances, putting on her best smile.

The younger man thrice bobbed his head in ready confirmation and grinned with a leer that struck me as about the most unpleasant substitute for a smile that I had ever seen.

“ We are the brothers Jaeger, Madame, ” he cackled; “ it is so that our father named us. ”

His voice was a shrill piping and his construction was new to me, but I noted with satisfaction that his accent, although stronger, was precisely the counterpart of the Fraulein's Meyer's.

“ And you live ” — Frances pointed inquiringly to the dilapidated house on the hill — “ up there? ”

“ Yes, Madame, it is there that we have lived these six weeks.”

“ Hum,” said Frances, as if in dry protest against that ingratiating grin; “ own the place, do you? ”

“ Ah, no, we are tenant-farmers only.”

“ Farmers by occupation, I suppose? ”

“ By occupation, Madame.”

“ And training? ” she urged him.

“ Even so. — What a beautiful farm it was! — We left it, thinking that we do better in America. — But we do only worse. It was in Saxony. — One month and a half have we been here. Over there we were born. — It was our father’s and his father’s before him. — What was it that Madame intended to do us the honour to command of us? ”

He leaned forward as he added the last, still leering, and rubbing his hands — which were not the hands of a born farmer — together in a manner disgustingly humble. But I noticed that his little rat-like eyes were first looking over Frances with considerable care and were next turned upon me and the carriage for an examination equally thorough.

The detective, however, was quite as observant as I and fully as sharp as her questioner. It was true that, having seen all that he chose to

see of us, he had, by his inquiry, brought us up with a round turn, but it was also true that Frances, satisfied that nothing was here to be learned, was fully prepared to end the interview.

“ You are very kind,” she answered graciously, “ but I am afraid that you can do nothing. My friend here, Mr. Burton, was thinking of purchasing a farm, and the man to whom you just now saw us talking said that yours was probably for sale.”

Jaeger’s grin broadened and, broadening, waxed uncannily suspicious.

“ Strange,” he said; “ I had been sure that our neighbours they all know we did but rent our little spot of ground. — I wish you a good day.”

And, with a quick movement, he had turned his back upon us, thrust his hand into his brother’s armpit and was leading away that individual, who had all this while been glowering in silence from under the shadow of his deep-rimmed hat.

Frances leaped into the carriage.

“ Lancaster,” she whispered to the stolid coachman, who had passed through both interviews without a sign of interest and who now turned the horses’ heads toward home.

“ Well,” she continued, settling into the seat beside me, “ what do you make of it now? ”

“ Oh, come,” I said, “ that’s your business. I’m only a reporter.”

But the detective maintained her suavity.

“ You’re right,” she admitted; “ but just now I’m a failure in my own profession.”

“ I don’t wonder,” I admitted, mollified by her frankness. “ The only thing that I can say for certain is that your Dutch friend is crazy.”

“ Not quite crazy, Sammy. He may get there in time, but just now he is only extremely sly. He was altogether too sharp for me, at any rate, and I am inclined to think that he had got more out of me by looking me over than I got out of him with all my fool questions. — I wonder what it is that he’s trying to hide. Somehow or other, I shall discover that.”

“ It’s all one to me,” I said. “ I don’t like to be beaten by a woman and a lunatic. But what end are you going to start work from — Philadelphia or Mountville? ”

“ I’ve not yet decided. Of course, the handsome Fraulein won’t show up at my quarters to-night.”

“ Not unless she’s crazy, too.”

“ But, on the other hand, we must get hold of her somehow before she leaves the city, Sammy.”

“ Yes, we must — if she hasn’t left it already.”

“ You’re right again!” she cried. “ We must

'phone the Bellevue as soon as we reach Lancaster. What time is it? "

I consulted my watch.

" Half-past nine," I said.

" Just the hour at which, yesterday, the murder was supposed to have occurred. Oh, well, we'll telephone as soon as we reach our hotel; get a bite of lunch, and then run back to Philadelphia."

The first portions of the programme were carried out according to schedule, but the news from the Bellevue was not comforting.

" No," came the clerk's far-away answer to my rapid inquiries by long-distance telephone to the Philadelphia hotel; " the Fraulein Meyer has left here."

" Great Scott, Herbert!" I thundered, as if my ability to be heard at a distance of seventy miles were dependent upon my lung-power. " This is Burton. — Yes, Burton of the *Globe-Express*. — It's a big beat for me, if I can land it, so open up, old man, and tell me when she got out."

" At seven o'clock," came the clerk's answer.

" This morning?" I bellowed, forgetting that it could have been at no other time.

" Yes, this morning."

" Gone for good?"

" Paid her bill."

" Took her baggage?"

“ Yes, left in a four-wheeler for Broad Street Station. Wait a minute.” — And then, after I had stamped about the booth for twice that time, my ear glued to the receiver: “ The head porter says it was checked to New York. That’s all we know. Sorry. Good-bye! ”

Ruefully I reported to Frances.

“ It’s my fault,” she declared. “ Feeling as I did about that woman, I should have had her shadowed. Now the best we can do is to wait here and eat our lunch — we can’t get a train back to Philadelphia before that, anyhow.”

“ You mean to go back? ” I asked in amazement.

“ I mean to go forward,” she answered, “ but there is obviously nothing to be gained from the Jaegers — just yet. No, I must trace your Fraulein to New York. Just what her game is I don’t know, but I certainly shall know before I am done with it.”

And so we remained in Lancaster until noon, ate our luncheon and proceeded leisurely trainward. In fact, the train was just rushing into the station when Frances, who had left me to go to the news-stand, laid sudden hold of my shoulder and swung me right face about with such violence that my suit-case dropped from my hand and almost pitched under the wheels.

“Look out!” I called with some feeling. “Do you want me to go to the hospital instead of to Philadelphia?”

“I want you to stay right here,” said Frances. “I want you to read that.”

Without another word she thrust toward me the early edition of a local afternoon paper, and pointed to a scare-head on the first page:

MURDER AT MOUNTVILLE

Hans Jaeger, a German Farmer, Found Stabbed
to Death.

His Brother Wilhelm Missing.

CRIME DISCOVERED AT 9.30 A. M.

“Just twenty-four hours late,” said Frances.

CHAPTER V

THE CRIMSON THUMB

“ In the same hour came forth the fingers of a man’s hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaster of the wall.”

DON’T ask me what I said. I don’t know what it was; I am only sure that, in any case, it was some piece of superlative stupidity. What comment could, after all, be adequate? We had been sent up here to investigate a murder which, we were told, had occurred at a certain hour of one day, and now, after seeing the victim and speaking with him, we were informed that the assassination had occurred at the same hour on the day following — at not much more than fifteen minutes after we had left the predestined scene!

The first words I remember uttering, as I began to emerge from the emotional anæsthetic, were the feeble ones:

“ Do you believe it? ”

“ Of course,” Frances laughed. “ I am past

amazement now, but I can sympathize with you."

"Then what," I piped, still helplessly, "do you propose doing?"

"First of all, I propose going right back to the Jaeger farm. There's no time to lose, unless we want to let the police ruin everything. We'll just charter one of these deep-sea-going station cabs."

We did so at once, and, before the Philadelphia train had left the station, we were again on our way to Mountville, Frances leaning back among the cushions with the fixed stare that meant mental concentration and I doing my best, in spite of the constant jolting of our vehicle, to decipher such brief account of the tragedy as the newspaper had had time to rush into type for its first edition.

"At half-past nine this morning," I read, "there was discovered on a little tenant-farm near Mountville one of the most foul murders that have ever been recorded in the criminal history of Lancaster County. The victim was Hans Jaeger, a recent German emigrant, who rented the farm from the Haefner estate six weeks ago; the killing was done with a common carving-knife, and the police are looking for Wilhelm Jaeger, a brother of the deceased, who

shared the farm with Hans, and who was seen in his company as late as 9.15 A. M., but who is now missing.

“The murder was discovered at the hour above stated by Lawrence Beitman, a collector in the employ of the Haefner estate, who called at the farm in the regular course of his business. Receiving no reply, Beitman pushed open the door, which proved to be unlocked, and proceeded to the kitchen where, on the floor, he found the bloody body of Jaeger, with the carving-knife still protruding from the wound in his breast. Beitman says that the corpse was still warm. He gave the alarm, and the Coroner is now expected to arrive at any moment to take charge of the case.

“County Detective Dooble, who at once went to the scene of the crime, says that he found the house ransacked from top to bottom, but that a large amount of money, which was kept loose in a bureau-drawer in a second-floor bed-room occupied by the dead man, had evidently been overlooked by the murderer. The detective adds that he regards as very suspicious the absence of Wilhelm Jaeger, the brother, whom Henry Schlicter, a neighbouring farmer, saw with Hans, in conversation with a couple of strangers. These strangers were in a carriage

on the Columbia 'pike about fifteen minutes before the discovery of the crime. They were, Schlicter says, a young man and a young woman, who were driving from the direction of Lancaster and who inquired persistently of Schlicter the way to the Jaeger farm. Dooble thinks that, if found, they may be able to throw some interesting light on the affair, and may even be proved to be accessories to the crime.

“Not much is known hereabouts concerning the Jaeger brothers. They lived entirely alone and had very little intercourse with their neighbours.”

“The local authorities,” I remarked, as I ended my reading, “will probably give us a warm welcome, and lock us up.”

Frances shrugged her shoulders.

“Ours would be a suspicious story — if we told it,” she admitted, seriously, “but I have always acted upon the theory that the only useful truth was the truth that sounded true. You had better leave the local authorities to me.”

The event proved that she was quite right, for, as we climbed from our cab before the scene of the murder, we were confronted by Dooble himself — a fat, little man with a bristling, black moustache and a brave, blue eye — to whom

Frances straightway lucidly explained her position. She was, she began by admitting, the woman in the carriage referred to by the newspaper. She had that morning driven here because she had been told in Lancaster that the Jaegers might give her board and lodging on just such a quiet farm as she required for her vacation, but, not liking the appearance of the place, she had at once returned to the county-seat. Seeing, however, that her presence was connected with the murder, she had now returned and, if she could be of any assistance, would be only too happy — as Frances Baird, Detective — to place herself under Mr. Doomble's orders.

The mention of her name resolved our difficulties. Doomble, unlike the rural policeman of tradition, was a keen officer and a level-headed man; he knew her, by reputation of course, and, far from being either suspicious or jealous, welcomed heartily her proffered aid. Under his guidance, we passed the little group of village loafers, who were halted at the humble doorway, and, while Doomble was engaged upon some minor errand, were permitted to go alone into the house that shrouded a mystery so much stranger than was dreamed of by any of that curious crowd outside, and so much deeper than, at that time, even we ourselves suspected.

There were only three rooms on the ground floor, and but two of these had been used by the late inhabitants. What had doubtless been designed for a parlour was as bare as the day the builders left it, but the dining-room behind this was comfortably enough furnished, in a simple way, with the table ready set for the noon meal and places laid for two persons. From this a door, standing ajar, opened into the kitchen and through that we stepped into the presence of the dead. Some lesser business, as we later learned, had detained the Coroner and we now came upon the scene precisely as it had appeared to the frightened rent-collector a few hours before.

The room was in a considerable state of disorder. The doors of the cupboards, which lined two of the walls, had been flung open and much of their scanty supply of pots, kettles and crockery tossed upon the floor. The drawer of the kitchen-table had been torn out and its contents dumped upon the floor in a heap. In two places the boarding had been ripped up, and the bricks before the old-fashioned range had been similarly disturbed. Amid all this, ominously stark, the matted head just beneath the window and the booted feet pointing stiffly ceilingward, lay the dead man — the silent brother of our morning interview, silent now for ever.

We should, perhaps, have shown — the pair of us — something more of horror than we did — should, it may be, have paid that tribute of awe which convention expects of the average man and woman in the presence of convention's greatest conventionality, death. But the hard fact is that both Frances and I were more or less accustomed to tragedy. For several years such scenes as this had been almost a part of our daily work, and so, although I do not think we are either of us uncommonly callous, we are both of us uncommonly practical. My comment was, therefore, not so emotional as businesslike.

“So,” I said; “the quiet one was Hans. I had been wondering.”

“Yes,” confessed Frances, “so had I, but I was ashamed to own up to you that I had been too disconcerted this morning to find out from them which was which.”

“We might have guessed. This is a madman's work, and I told you Wilhelm was mad.”

“Is it a madman's work? I'm not so sure. Do madmen have strange ladies forewarn detectives and announce their crime a day before its commission?”

She was tiptoeing gingerly about the room as she talked, equally intent upon observing everything and disturbing nothing.

“But perhaps,” I ventured, as I carefully followed her, “perhaps he did write some crazy letter to a relative, who planned to have us on the ground ahead of time, without disclosing her secret to us, and so prevent the murder.”

Frances chuckled, and I own that her laughter struck even my none too sensitive ears as rather grim.

“That wild theory,” she said, “has so many holes in it that I can’t shoot at it without my bullet’s going through one of them. No, it was brother Wilhelm, sane enough to hang for it.”

“How about the rent-man?” I inquired.

As I spoke she dived to the floor and picked up a double handful of notes and coin.

“There’s your answer,” she replied. “Besides, though there was probably some struggle, most of all this tearing-up seems to have been done after the stabbing; it was done by someone that knew Hans had something of value concealed about the place — and the something that the assassin was after was clearly not money. — In fact” — and again she pounced upon some object on the floor — “the murderer has left his autograph behind him.”

She was standing erect now, her dark cheeks flushed and her brown eyes gleaming. In her hand she held a rumpled sheet of newspaper —

such a sheet as country-folk spread upon closet-shelves — and, clearly imprinted on that sheet, was the telltale impression of a crimson thumb.

“There you are!” she almost shouted — “the one mark that can never be forged!”

I bent toward it to examine it. My friend was right. The imprint was that of a left thumb and was as clear and definite as if it had been the careful artist’s proof of some prized etching.

Frances ran to the side of the dead man and, in his own blood, made, on the margin of the paper, quick imprints of the victim’s thumbs: there was not the slightest resemblance to the original stain.

“That’s hanging evidence,” she continued, as she rapidly labelled the various impressions with her gold-cased pencil and, folding the paper, handed it into my keeping. “He had no sooner stabbed the man than he ran to the cupboard in his wild search for the reward of his crime. The first thing he touched was this paper, which he jerked from one of the shelves, and on it he left that stain. — He might more safely have left us his card!”

Realizing that Dooble might at any moment come after us, we had been working quickly, and now, when only five minutes had been devoted to the room, Frances bent over the dead man.

“ Yes,” she said, as her deft fingers ran along the victim’s chest; “ the newspaper was right about this. Here’s the weapon: a common carving-knife, driven deep — he must have dropped like a log. It was a left-handed blow — remember that, Sammy — for it slopes from the body’s right to left, and of course the assassin was facing him, so Wilhelm must be a left-handed gentleman, just as that thumb-mark indicates. — The clothing is ordinary enough — pockets empty except for a knife, a ball of twine and some small change. But here — ” Her voice went suddenly calm and softer. “ Lend me your knife,” she concluded.

The very change in her tone warned me that the climax of our investigation was at hand. Hastily I gave her the horn-handled weapon that I always carried with me. She gripped it quickly, ripped open the dead man’s shirt, pulled over his head something that gleamed in the afternoon sunlight, and then, before I could stoop beside her, was holding out to me the object of her quest.

I took it cautiously in my hands and looked at it stupidly. It was a broad, red riband of rusty silk, but at the point of the bight was suspended a blue and gold enamelled flint-stone, with conventionalized flames spreading from it. On its obverse was engraved the motto:

“ Pretium laborum non vile,”

and below hung, suspended by its middle, the figure of a lamb.

“ It’s — I suppose it’s some kind of a foreign decoration? ” I stammered.

“ It is the jewel,” said Frances, “ of the Order of the Golden Fleece.”

CHAPTER VI

THE MAN WITH THE SCAR

“ If a man find his enemy, will he let him go well away ? ”

THERE it lay, in her pink palm, the index — could we but read it — to our whole mystery. About us was the poverty-stricken farmhouse kitchen, the floor littered with sordid debris, the cupboards open and bare, and, close at hand, the dead man, unwitting or uncaring, with the knife deep in his breast and in his staring eyes no sign or token to aid us toward his vengeance.

I looked at Frances, I fear, somewhat blankly. In a general way, I knew, of course, that the Toison d'Or was one of the proudest orders in Europe, but of more than that I now frankly confessed my ignorance.

“ Then it's time you learned,” my companion dryly commented. “ All I can tell you now is that there are only sixty-odd men in the world who may lawfully possess it, and that I myself have never seen it worn by anybody that was not of royal blood. There are two branches of the order — one in Spain and one in Austria,

but this jewel, I am sure, is of the Austrian brand. Unless he stole it, that will give you some idea of the importance, in his own country, of the man who, over here, seems to have seen fit to call himself plain Hans Jaeger; and, if you could guess why he carried it about with him, and why he hid it from sight, you would have solved the riddle. For my own part, I'm going to give up guessing for a while. Instead, I'm going to take a look over Jaeger's other belongings, with an eye to Fraulein Meyer's dispatch-box. Unless Wilhelm was really mad, we sha'n't find it, but, in the meantime, you take care of this bauble and say nothing about it to any of the police. I suspect that it will be useful in a little journey I'm contemplating."

With that she hurried me off upstairs and we began the search that she had correctly prophesied would be fruitless. Save that which, apparently, had once been occupied by Wilhelm, all the rooms in the house were in just such disorder as that reigning in the kitchen. In the apartment where the dead man had evidently slept, the bureau's contents were strewn recklessly about; the heavy trunk upturned; the flooring virtually demolished, and even the mattress and pillows ripped open. But among all this devastation we found neither the box that Gretchen Meyer had described, nor

yet, thorough as we tried to be, one scrap of paper to complement the remarkable discoveries made below stairs, not one bit of evidence to throw a single, fresh ray of light upon the identity of either the dead man or his slayer.

It was quite six o'clock when we abandoned the investigation. The Coroner had come and gone; so had the undertaker. Dooble had twice interrupted us and Frances had twice lied to him about her opinion of the case. And so, at last, discouraged, but not defeated, she faced me in the deepening twilight.

“Sammy,” she said, “there’s nothing more to be learned here, but I think that we have found enough to make it reasonably certain that, whatever else it is, this isn’t exactly a common or garden variety of back-alley crime. Unless I’m all wrong, the endeavour to run it out is going to be long, but never tedious — it is going to be delicate and dangerous — and I believe it is going to bring us up against some of the most powerful forces in the world. Luckily, I happen to have plenty of money to spare just now, and some time, and, also, luckily, you too are in the same boat. — Do you want to come along?”

I seized her hand.

“Of course I do!” I declared.

“Don’t be too cock-sure. I warn you that

we shall probably run several good chances of being killed by persons whom our ghosts would never have the satisfaction of seeing swing for it. So, if you really feel like dropping out, here's your chance."

"Not much," I answered. "You may consider me enlisted 'for three years or during the war.'"

"Very well," said Frances quietly, as if this ended the matter; "in that case, we'll walk over to the local railroad-station."

"Good. Are we going to Philadelphia?" I asked.

"I don't know," said my companion; "but I shouldn't be surprised if we were going to Europe."

And, indeed, Europe was, as it turned out, our ultimate destination. Several precious days we lost in starting — days and nights spent in hunting out any possible clew and following, for some short way, half a dozen false ones. Frances discovered that Dooble had been inquiring at all the stations along the line, for a passenger answering Wilhelm Jaeger's description — inquiring and finding nothing. But she, not satisfied with this, felt it incumbent upon her to trace the progress of every stranger whatsoever, who had left Mountville, or either of the towns

immediately to the east or west of it, within such time of the murder as to render him a legitimate object of suspicion, and this she kept up until I began to abandon all hope. Now and then, to be sure, we were lured away by some more or less promising will-o'-the-wisp. Once it was in one direction and then in another. But at no time, until the seventh day, did we come upon anything that gave us continued promise.

We were talking, I remember, precisely a week after the murder, to the ticket-agent at Rhorerstown, a man of more than ordinary intelligence, who, though he did not wholly guess our purpose, at least did not seek to thwart it by trying to think on his own account.

“This is a very small place, you see,” he said, “and I know most of the persons as goes by the train, but I remember there was two, on that there day you speak about, as I didn’t never see before.”

“At what time?” clicked Frances, her dry business-voice sounding like the cocking of a revolver.

“It must have been about half-pas’ ten, or ten forty-five, fer they bought tickets fer the eleven o’clock.”

“Just time to get over from Mountville,” I mentally commented.

Frances went on:

“ They came together? ”

“ Yes, ma'am, they come togezzzer.”

“ And a pair of them,” I continued to myself, “ would alone explain how so much ransacking could have been done in so short a time.”

“ What did they look like? ” persisted Frances.

“ Oh, like most city folk.”

“ Yes — yes, but were they short or tall? ”

“ Well, the one as bought the tickets, he wasn't what you'd call nowadays short.”

“ Tall, eh? ”

“ No, nor yet what you'd call tall.”

“ Have a beard or moustache? ”

“ No.”

“ What kind of hair? ”

“ Kind of brown and sort of black.”

“ And his eyes? ”

“ I didn't rightly notice his eyes, but I think they were brown, though they might 'a' been blue.”

I began to laugh, but Frances checked me with a frown.

“ Didn't you notice anything particular about him? ” she almost pleaded; “ anything that makes you remember him? ”

“ Oh, yes I did that, miss.”

“ Well, and what was it? ”

“ Why, I thought he was wery well dressed fer a butcher.”

“ For a butcher? — How did you know that he was a butcher? ”

“ I didn’t jest know it yet, but when he reached out his hand fer the change, I seen they was caked blood, like, under the fingernails, an’ I thought perhaps — ”

“ Yes, yes, of course you did. It was his left hand, wasn’t it? ”

“ His left? Well, now, he wouldn’t be likely to use his left, would he? ”

“ He would if he were left-handed. — But never mind. — What sort of tickets did he buy? ”

“ One to New York and one to Washington. — He give the Washington one to his friend.”

“ And what sort of looking man was his friend? ”

“ Him I’ld know anywheres. He was a wery little man, but awful stocky. He had his hat off, an’ was wipin’ his forehead with a silk handkerchief, an’ I noticed his hair (it was black) was all bristly, like, an’ right in his forehead he had a scar just the shape of a three-quarters moon.”

This was, perhaps, something, and it was, at any rate, all we could get from the ticket-seller. We subjected him to a full half-hour more of cross-examination; we harried him and worried

him, but we left him with no more information than that. He had seen only what he had at first described. And yet, doubtful as this clew appeared, and slight as the description certainly was, it proved to be the thin thread which led to the end of our quest. The way thither, as Frances had foretold and as you will see, was both dangerous and difficult, but, when we at last reached it, we did so solely because of what the man at Rhorerstown had told us.

We boarded, that very day, the train that the strangers had taken the previous week, and we found that the conductor of its single Pullman car remembered the pair of whom we were in search.

“ I run on through to New York,” he explained, “ and the one of them went with me, but the other left at Philadelphia just after the lady joined the party.”

“ What lady was that? ” I demanded.

But, even as I spoke, I guessed his answer:

“ A tall, dignified young lady — a young lady in black. She wore a veil when she came aboard, but she raised it after we got under way and I noticed that she was very beautiful, with eyes as black as her clothes and lots of red hair.”

So she didn't go at seven!

Frances slipped the man a five-dollar bill.

“Anything more?” she inquired.

“Yes,” replied the conductor; “at Jersey City the lady asked me whether it would be quicker for them to go to Hoboken from the Jersey City side, or whether they had better cross to New York — that’s all I remember.”

“Thank you,” said Frances; “it is quite enough.”

“But is it?” I wondered, as the conductor left us.

“What more could you ask?” said Frances. “They were going to Hoboken — there are only two big trans-Atlantic lines that have docks there: the Hamburg-American and the North German Lloyd. It was a Monday, and as the German Lloyd boats generally sail early Tuesday morning, and, moreover, as your beautiful *Fraulein* came here by that line, all we have to do is to ask a few questions of the pier-hands to find out whether two such people as our friends didn’t arrive there a week ago at the same hour at which we shall arrive, and whether they didn’t go aboard the boat.”

And that was all that we did have to do. Two employees knew nothing, but the third knew just about what we wanted. The two had arrived, having engaged adjoining staterooms on the *Kaiser Wilhelm II* by telegraph that morning from

Philadelphia. What was more, upon alighting at the pier, they had gone at once to their cabins and had remained there until the boat set sail at five-thirty the next morning.

“The man had no baggage at all except a hand-bag,” our informant concluded, “but the lady’s trunks came later and I remember they still had the *Wilhelm II* labels on ’em, from Bremen.”

We went to the office.

“She won’t have changed her name,” said Frances, “because it might make talk, since she was returning by the same boat that she came on.”

And again Frances was right, for the company’s books showed us that Fraulein Gretchen Meyer had occupied Stateroom No. 103; that No. 104 had been occupied by Wolfgang Johnblatt, and that both these persons had embarked for Cherbourg, at which port the boat had touched at noon of the day before we made our inquiries.

“Wolfgang Johnblatt — Wilhelm Jaeger,” muttered Frances as we came out into the street. “Too late to cable,” she went on, and I admit that, at the thought of the Fraulein, my heart was glad to hear it. “But I dare say,” the detective continued, “that it wouldn’t have done to cable anyhow, because this is no case for

open methods. — Come back for a minute; I am going to engage two staterooms on the *Kronprinz*, which sails from here to-morrow.”

That is the way that things happened when you were with Frances Baird, detective, and I knew better than to ask questions. Unless she chanced to be in one of her soliloquizing moods, it was useless to attempt inquiry, and when she was convinced that a problem could be solved by so simple a process as an immediate trans-Atlantic voyage, she would start upon that voyage without further warning.

So it was, at any rate, in the present instance. There were a few hours of fevered shopping; a silent dinner at Mouquin's; a cab-ride to the Hoboken ferry, and then I tumbled into my berth, tired out from my week's hard work and yet too excited and too puzzled for speedy sleep.

All night long I tossed and turned, beating my brains, until they were sore, against the riddle that confronted us. If the Fraulein were a party to the murder, why had she ever come to us? If she were not a party to it, why had she met Wilhelm Jaeger and gone abroad with him? Why, in any event, had she given us word of the crime on the night before it was committed? Where was the dispatch-box, and what had been in it? Who was the third man with the ticket

to Washington? And to what strange identity, hidden under ground in the potter's field at Mountville, did I hold a key in the shape of that jewel of the Golden Fleece, which was now resting secure beneath my pillow? I would torture my wits until I would doze away from sheer exhaustion, but, even then, to sleep was only to fall dreaming of dead men and kings, of mad murderers and beautiful red-headed women in black, with dark, seductive eyes and lips like a wound — was only to follow the mystery around its dizzy, vicious circle, plunging about like a rat in a bucket, and to start into wakefulness whenever a step sounded outside my stateroom, now in a thrill at the memory of the Fraulein's face, and now in a cold sweat at the vision of Wilhelm Jaeger's little brown eyes boring into mine, his clawlike hands extended, his bloody thumb about to hook itself upon my throat.

Twice I got up, and, stepping into the passage, looked at the transom to Frances's state-room, but, both times, the glass was dark and the detective evidently quietly asleep. Then, at last, toward four in the morning, I myself passed completely into slumber, and did not awake until the key-bugle sounded its reveille.

Half an hour later, pleased to find that we were already out of sight of land, I was taking a

precarious bit of exercise along the promenade deck, preparatory to breakfast. It was still somewhat early; the sea was gray and troubled and the wind high, so that I was not surprised to find that the sole companion of my stroll was a little, but thick-set, broad-shouldered man, who tramped, undisturbed, ahead of me. It did not even startle me when, as he turned under the bridge, a sudden puff of wind blew his steamer-cap directly into my extended hand.

But what did amaze me — what renewed the mazed terrors of the night and sent a chill of fear down my spine — was the fact that, as he wheeled about, with a smile and a word of thanks, to recover his fugitive headgear, I noticed a bristle of erect, black hair upon his bullet-head and, just between the cold eyes, a scar the shape of a three-quarters moon.

CHAPTER VII

BOLFRAS CZIBULKA

“ And he said, Wherefore doth my lord thus pursue after his servant? for what have I done? or what evil is in mine hand? ”

EVERY man, I suppose, has, on occasion, idly speculated as to what his sensations would be if he awakened from a nightmare only to find that the clawed and winged beast that, in his dreams, had just been gnawing out his heart — or clutching tighter and tighter his helpless throat until the life-link between head and body had snapped — was now, in the waking world of fact, descending upon him from the far corner of the bed-room. I, at any rate, have so amused myself — and now I had the not-entirely-pleasant presentation of that problem in the smiling countenance of the man with the scar.

First of all, of course, stupefying amazement began by rooting me, agape, to the tossing deck, and ended by urging me to run away. Next, however, the fever of the chase took command of

my brain and ordered me to attack this apparition, pinion him and summon assistance for the arrest of a murderer. But finally, though I cannot claim a flood tide of common caution, the habit of convention, which, in the long run, rules us all, instinctively asserted itself, and, before the other emotions had left my consciousness clear — before, in fact, I could have held myself tense for more than one hesitating second, although to my wondering brain it seemed the motionless silence of minutes, — I observed my own hand returning the cap and heard my own voice accompanying this action with a familiar inanity.

“It is a very rough day,” I stammered, my eyes still glued on the livid scar.

Amazed as I was at my own course, I was even more surprised at the stranger's. If an escaping criminal could ever be given a hint of danger, surely this man must have read warning in my almost staggering face, but, far from any uneasiness, far from ending our conversation with the single sufficient word, he at once fell into step beside me, apparently glad of companionship and certainly in full possession of his nerves.

Then, for a time, of course, I actually doubted whether this stocky individual, in spite of his bristling, black hair and three-quarters moon of a

scar, could be the man we sought, but, not having gone quite mad, I resolved, at any rate, to make the most of his want of guile, and so, in seeking to match his frankness, at last confirmed my original suspicions.

“This is, perhaps, your first trip?” he was asking me in almost perfect English, as we came to a stop at the rail that shut us from the second cabin.

“Oh, no,” I replied. “I am a newspaper man and had to cross twice before in the course of business, although then I went only to England.”

“So?” he responded, his broad smile showing two rows of firm, flashing teeth. “A journalist? It has been my profession rather to shun the reporters.”

I had imagined as much, but I scarcely expected him to acknowledge it.

“What profession is that?” I asked, trying to laugh with some degree of naturalness.

“Diplomacy,” was his surprising answer. “Oh,” he continued, spreading out his strong hands, palms outward, “only in a ve-ary small way, sar.”

We turned to go forward, the wind proving rather too strong at the rail, and I was glad to get the momentary pause for a stroke of quick

thought. Then I decided that his statement assumed some further inquiry.

“I used to know Washington,” said I. “It was there, I suppose, that you were stationed?”

“Yas. I haf been attache there at the Austrian embassy.”

I think at that I almost stopped short. It was, to be sure, possible, that the world might contain two men, or even a score, that answered the description furnished by the Rhorerstown ticket-agent, so far, indeed, as that curious scar, but, when I remembered the Austrian decoration that we had found in the death-house at Mountville, it seemed well nigh impossible for an Austrian of that ilk, fresh from America and, by his own admission, in touch with the world of secret politics and intrigues, to be any other than the man we wanted.

I let my gaze seek the tossing horizon while I sought, almost vainly, to dig from the labyrinth of my brain some biographical facts that I might give him in order to invite imitation.

“Ah, yes,” I ultimately murmured. “Well, I can’t say that I cared a great deal for Washington, for I began my work there and so had the hardest time of my life in that city.”

Again my companion smiled, his teeth flashing.

“ I confess,” he said, “ that I can share your dislike, Mr. — ”

He raised his eyebrows questioningly and I supplied:

“ Burton — Samuel Burton.”

“ I thank you, Mr. Burton. My own name is Bolfras Czibulka. — As I was saying, I also care not much for Washington, greatly as I like what little else of your charming country I have seen. But then, I too was the beginner there. I go now to a new post — to Paris, where I have just been appointed the secretary private to the Baron de Hetzendorf, our ambassador. Perhaps, now, you also are going to a promotion: perhaps you are to be London correspondent for your newspaper? ”

I did some quick thinking.

“ No,” I replied; “ my cousin, Miss Baird — ”

“ Miss Baird? ”

There was no token of recognition in the repetition of the name, which, since it would be on the passenger-list, I had seen no harm in giving to him.

“ Yes,” I continued, “ my cousin, Miss Baird. We too are going to Paris, but it is no promotion — only a pleasure-trip.”

“ Ah, for that, Mr. Burton, you could go to no better city in the world, although as a residence

you would not like it much more than Washington and not so well as your own New York."

I don't know why it should be, but it is always flattering to a reporter to be thought the member of a New York staff. Still, I have always rebelled against the convention, and so I now corrected my new acquaintance.

"But New York," I said truthfully, "is not my home. I am connected with the Philadelphia *Globe-Express*."

As I spoke these words, we had reached the forward entrance to the saloon, and the Austrian — or Czeck, as I concluded he must be — now flung open the door to it.

Something in his movement caught my instant attention, but for an appreciable moment it could not satisfy my clamouring mind. Then of a sudden, realization came to me: *the hand with which he had opened that door, and the hand which he had previously extended for the return of his runaway cap, had been the left.*

"So?" he was calmly saying, while my eyes remained rivetted on the hand that had opened the door. "I regret that I know not your city. — But I think that I hear the breakfast-call aft and the wind sharpens one's appetite. I trust, sar, that I shall have the honour of a larger acquaintance with you."

Whereupon he left me — and he was still smiling.

Somehow, I didn't like his smile: there was too much of it.

CHAPTER VIII

SPILLED MILK

“Lest the avenger of the blood pursue the slayer, while his heart is hot, and overtake him, because the way is long, and slay him.”

WITH Czibulka out of earshot, there was just one thing for me to do, and I did it without delay. The man with the scar could not have seated himself at table below us before I had Frances walking the deck that he and I had so recently left. It took me about half a minute to tell her all that I had learned, and then I leaned upon the rail and awaited her surprise and commendation.

The surprise, however, was destined to be all my own, and the commendation was nowhere in evidence.

“You’re sure about the scar?” she demanded.

“Positive.”

“And the man is short and stocky?”

“Yes.”

“Bristling black hair?”

“Just so.”

“Hum. — We should have known that it was quite on the cards he’ld be coming along on about this boat.”

Whereupon she put me through the Frances-Baird form of catechism on the conversation between the Austrian and myself. Then, satisfied that she knew all that had passed between us, she bent beside me and looked down in silence at the churning waves.

“Well,” I at last demanded, “what do you think of it?”

“I haven’t begun to think yet,” she answered without raising her eyes. “At the present moment the pressing question seems to me to be not so much what I think as what he thinks.”

“But that’s just the point: he doesn’t think anything!”

At that she delivered her blow.

“You poor innocent!” she cried, suddenly facing me. “On what your reputation as a reporter rests, I, for one, cannot imagine! Here you go, telling this fellow your whole history: telling him that you’re from Philadelphia, which is within a few hours of Mountville, and where he changed cars for Washington, didn’t he, in spite of his saying that he had never been in your city? — telling him you’re a newspaper man with

your cousin, Miss Baird — I'm surprised that you did not, with more exactness, add: Miss Frances Baird, detective, — giving up your mind as freely as if it were located in a sea-sick stomach — and then, you repeat your entire one-sided conversation to me and expect me to believe that the man doesn't suspect anything! — Poof! Let's go down to breakfast."

She made straight for the designated goal, and I could do nothing but follow, protesting as I might against an accusation which, the more I thought it over, seemed to have a far too-substantial basis. Not until she had eaten an exceedingly good meal would she talk any more about the affair, but I noticed that she did not fail to look hard at the Austrian, who sat some tables away from us, never once glancing in our direction, and I was at least gratified when, upon our return to the upper promenade deck, she granted that he must be the man we wanted.

"I've felt all along," she continued, "that the ransacking of that farmhouse was so thorough that it couldn't have been done by one man in the short time that must have elapsed between the occurrence of the murder and its discovery, and I am now sure that our friend Czibulka must have been at work searching the upper part of the house at the very moment when we were

passing the time of day with the brothers Jaeger on the turnpike."

"But you really think," I humbly ventured, "that my lack of caution has injured matters!"

"I don't know. It certainly has not helped them. Of course, if this man Czibulka has been supplied by his confederates with any word of Fraulein Meyer's visit to me, he must be on the lookout, now that you have bared your heart to him. But, after all, that's spilled milk, and I never worry over what can't be picked up again. The only thing for us to do is to keep our eyes as wide open as his can possibly be, and to find out whatever is possible."

What we could find out proved, however, to be little enough. Not that Czibulka became hard of access; on the contrary, it was he who sought a presentation to Frances, and, when he was not playing picquet with me in the Vienna café, he appeared to be spending all his time promenading with the pretty detective, bending over the music-rack while she sat at the piano in the main saloon, or superseding the deck-stewards at their duties of tucking her into her chair and bringing her the mid-morning broth to the clamour of the brass band. But never once did he overdo anything that he attempted, and had not Frances

proved to me after my first encounter with him that he must be quite as much the diplomat as the genial gentleman, I fear I should have renounced my original suspicions of him.

The detective and I were, on the fifth day out, sitting side by side in steamer chairs, lazily watching a quiet, pond-like sea. Czibulka had left us a short time before, after winning from me at cards.

“Does he play well?” inquired Frances meditatively.

“Well enough to prove himself my superior: that is all.”

“One must admit that he is a charming travelling companion,” said Frances.

“Yes,” I agreed; “his cosmopolitan training has furnished him, in spite of his unprepossessive appearance, with a delightful manner.”

“He doesn't bore us much by talking of himself,” added the detective, reminding me of my own powers of giving up information. “No,” she continued, “although I have offered him every opportunity. He seems to prefer bringing me bouillons and arranging my rugs to talking on any but the most general topics. I have tried — quite skillfully, I thought — to gain his confidence, but I receive only his gleaming smile and

the conversation continues to run in channels not connected with his own history and his own activities.”

Indeed, as the days of our voyage had sped toward a close, I had become more and more puzzled, and, as we drew nearer land, I was only further at sea. If he had countered our leads by questions about our own interests, I could have solved him, but, instead, he shamed our curiosity about himself by showing no curiosity regarding us beyond what ways he could be of service or amusement in our immediate needs. He had, in short, completely and easily worsted an experienced newspaper man and a famous criminal investigator, and it was quite our last night upon the water before he even endeavoured to make use of the advantage he had won.

That, of course, was the evening of the Captain's dinner, and most of the passengers sat long at the table. We three, however, went on deck, and then, as I wanted to buy the high field in the pool for the run ending at Cherbourg, I left Frances and Czibulka under the bridge and hurried aft to the smoking-room. I had been there about half an hour and had just purchased my chance when there came a light tap at the port by which I was standing and, looking up, I saw the detective outside.

I joined her immediately. She was stifling with suppressed laughter.

“Well,” she said, “he has played his trump at last.”

“What was it?” I asked.

“The right bower — but, Sammy, I still have the joker up my sleeve.”

“I’m not a dream-book,” I insisted. “What is the game, anyhow?”

“It was a kind of euchre, I suppose; but if it had been bezique, I should have said that Czibulka wants to declare a common marriage.”

“You mean to say that he has been making love to you?”

“It appears that he thinks he’s been doing that all the way over: just now he’s been proposing.”

“The whelp! — In an effort to get the truth out of you?”

“That, I’m afraid, Sammy, is the unflattering fact.”

“And what did you do?”

“I don’t know what I should have done if he had been sudden and American, but Continental proposals are long affairs, so I had plenty of time to think and, when he’d finished, I told him sadly that, at the time of sailing, I hadn’t got my divorce and that the wireless wasn’t working.”

Her levity, I think, angered me even more than Czibulka's impudence.

"Look here," I declared, "I don't know what you propose doing — you haven't been over-confidential with me for the last day or so — but I'll tell you what I intend to do: I intend to prefer a charge of murder against this man as soon as we get ashore."

The threat at least served to sober her.

"No, you won't," she assured me. "We have absolutely nothing worth while toward substantiating such a charge, and, if we made it, the news of it — published or not — would be sure to reach the accomplices and only make our chase all the harder. This thing's difficult enough as it is, thank you."

"Then what do you propose?"

"I propose to follow Czibulka."

"But where's the use of that, Frances?" asked I, a little exasperated with her. "We know that he is going to the embassy."

Frances whistled softly.

"Do you mean to say," she demanded, "that you really believe that cock-and-bull yarn about a diplomatic career and the private secretaryship to the Paris ambassador from Austria?"

Why is it that the most plausible tale begins to sound improbable the moment somebody

applies to it the epithet "cock-and-bull"? It had never occurred to me to doubt that portion of Czibulka's story until I now heard Frances thus describe it, but no sooner was the description accomplished than I was ready to admit that I might have been gulled again.

"Of course you've been," she assured me with a smile. "It is all rot. What you and I must do is to keep after our little friend. If we just follow him quietly enough and closely enough, he'll lead us direct to Fraulein Meyer and Wilhelm Jaeger."

Well, no one could have censured us for lack of devotion. From that moment until the heart of Paris itself had been reached, one or other of us never lost sight of Czibulka. When we touched Plymouth in the dead of night, I stood guard at the gang-way and scrutinized every figure that came aboard or went ashore, but neither did the Austrian attempt to give us the slip, nor did any suspicious passengers join the ship's company. Later, as, in the clear dawn, we scudded by the red English coast, I still patrolled the decks and still watched in vain. Even when we passed among the little fortifications of the French harbour and the many-chimneyed Cherbourg itself lay plain before us, our suspect was still invisible, and it was only when the fat

tender had snorted alongside our liner, to the blare of the band and the shouts of the heavily laden porters, that he at last appeared and, still smiling, preceded us down the plank and, finally, ashore.

I did notice that our Austrian had small trouble with the customs, and that he was one of the first to climb into the waiting Paris express, but, as we managed to keep close behind him wherever he went and to get into the same coach, this troubled me not at all, nor was I annoyed to find that, during all the ride across Normandy, until early evening found us jerking through the purlieus of the French capital, he remained sunk in a reserved silence that was new to us.

But, once we had pulled into the roaring terminal, the man's whole manner changed. His only hand-luggage was a small satchel, and as the *octroi* had passed this without question, he was out of the coach before the wheels had well ceased revolving. There was just another flash of the teeth, a quick farewell, and he had almost vanished into the surging crowd.

Immediately Frances was upon the platform, I following. We darted hither and thither among the screaming *cochers* and porters. Twice we lost sight of Czibulka and twice found him again,

as if by a miracle, until at last we saw him scramble into a taximetre the driver of which at once began to belabour his weary steed.

The detective, whose French was better than mine, was on the instant directing another *cocher* in our behalf.

“Follow that cab,” she commanded, “no matter where it goes. Keep us in full sight of it all the time, and I’ll double your fare!”

We tumbled in just as Czibulka’s vehicle rolled out of the courtyard and, a moment later, at a rattling pace, were trailing our quarry through the brilliant streets.

“Now,” murmured Frances, with something like a sigh of relief; “we ought to be near the end of the chase.”

“Where,” I asked, “do you suppose that it will lead us?”

“Most likely to the *Quartier* or else up Montmartre way,” she responded. “Certainly not into the better part of town.”

And yet, even as she spoke, we had turned into what I later learned was the Rue de Varenne, and there, just ahead of us, was Czibulka’s cab drawn up at an imposing doorway and Czibulka himself entering the big house to which that doorway belonged.

Frances leaped to the curb.

“*Cocher*,” she asked of our driver, “what place is that?”

The cabbie took but a single glance.

“Madame,” he answered, as he pocketed his double fare, “it is the Austrian embassy.”

CHAPTER IX

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

“Enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee: hide thyself as it were for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast.”

THERE are times when I sincerely admire the manner in which Frances Baird, through all her strange career, has preserved those traits which are essentially feminine. But that evening, as we stood under the lamp-post on the Rue de Varenne, the two cabs driving carelessly down the street and the door of the imperial Austrian embassy closing upon the man whose connection with diplomacy my friend had so heartily ridiculed — that evening was not one of them. The average male detective would at least have given me some word of apology for having doubted a story in which I had put my thus justified faith and for having jeered at the faith I had so exhibited. But the woman detective remained a woman. I turned to Frances with a triumphant “I-told-you-so” smile upon my face, and the sole comment of Frances was:

“ I had begun to suspect this, after all.”

I laughed.

“ How long ago? ” I wondered.

“ Never mind that,” she snapped. “ This is hardly a time for argument or even explanation, Sammy. If I’m not mistaken, we are playing the biggest game that I have ever had a part in. Come along! ”

“ With all my heart, but where? ”

“ Into the embassy.”

That was like her too. Whenever she effected a failure, she immediately sought to obliterate its impression by doing something suddenly daring.

“ We sha’n’t get an audience; it’s preposterous, Frances,” I weakly protested. “ The thing’s impossible.”

“ I never say anything’s impossible until I have tried it — and then I try it again,” said Frances. “ Come along.”

I went, meekly enough after her rebuke, and, in a moment, found myself standing before a door that was held scarcely open by a servant out of livery — a queer, thin, wiry runt of a man with a terrible cast in one eye and some defect of the facial muscles that drew one corner of his mouth far down toward his sharp, beardless chin.

“ Monsieur? ” he muttered interrogatively.

Frances took the initiative.

“Your pardon,” she smiled sweetly. “You were going out?”

The Cerebus frowned — and his frown was no more cheerful than his mythological ancestor’s.

“I have responded to madame’s summons,” he grumbled in pretty passable French.

My companion shrugged her shoulders, and no words could more clearly have indicated her doubt that this man was the servant he pretended to be. However, the shrug expressed also Frances’s will to take him on his own terms and with this her next speech accorded:

“To be sure,” she said. “To be sure. Thank you. We are travellers just arrived and so have not had the time to procure a formal introduction, but we are come upon important business with Monsieur the Ambassador.”

It was now Cross-Eye’s turn to shrug, but with him the action was less conciliatory.

“I regret, madame,” he growled. “It is quite impossible.”

He started to close the door, but I was too quick for him. My reporter’s habit of forcing an interview, if necessary, was upon me, and the swinging planks got only so far as my heavy travelling-boot; and when the doors were again flung open in order that the guarding Austrian

might discover the impediment, Frances coolly slipped into the dimly-lighted vestibule, closely followed by me.

Cross-Eye's face went black with Oriental rage, but Frances, ignoring his expression, addressed him in a tone of honey:

"Are you quite sure that it is impossible?"

Her calm lack of regard for the fellow's rudeness was enough to take the wind out of even his sails.

"I — I — it is very certain, madame," he stammered.

She put out her gloved hand and I saw her place into his great palm something that looked like a fifty-franc note.

"Still sure?" she almost whispered.

Cross-Eye at once found his concealed manners.

"If madame would consent to see not the ambassador, but a —"

"But I will not consent."

"Then — then —" and his hand closed tightly over the note; "if madame will but make memorandum of her mission on her card," he murmured obsequiously, "I shall with much pleasure present it to Monsieur the Baron."

Frances was never a woman for hesitation. She drew from her purse one of her own cards, hastily scribbled upon it and then held it up for

me to see. Leaning over her shoulder, I saw written there, above her name:

“ I talked with the man ‘ Hans Jaeger ’ fifteen minutes before his death; a few minutes later I took, secretly, from the Jaeger house, the jewel of the Golden Fleece.”

“ Then take this at once,” she commanded.

Cross-Eye bowed — very low.

“ At once, madame,” he repeated; “ but if Monsieur should still refuse — ”

“ He won’t,” assured Frances, in her tone of finality, and the man, at her words turning his back upon us, seemed at once to vanish through the shadowed wall.

We waited, by tacit consent, in absolute silence. Frances, I suppose, feared that whatever she might say would be overheard, and I, for my part, was quite too amazed by the audacity of the message on that card to give thought to anything save unspoken wonder concerning our next move.

But our patience was not to be tried severely. In fact Cross-Eye was gone but a very short time, and when he returned, it was with a new alacrity. There was a flood of profound apologies upon his lips; there were a dozen *révérences* in his supple little back. Monsieur the Ambassador would give us immediately five minutes. Would we be so good as to follow? Would we be careful

to avoid the single step? And, finally, would we enter?

We would enter — and we did.

The opening door disclosed a small, sparsely furnished room and, notwithstanding the fact that it was but little better-lighted than the vestibule that we had just left, I saw at a glance that we were within the ambassadorial work-room, an office devoted entirely to business affairs. On the low book-shelves, which ran about the four walls, were nothing but those solemn and forbidding volumes which, the world over, one may safely gamble are government-reports. Above these, here and there, hung a few portraits, and, at the far end of the room, over a small safe of ancient pattern, was a large oil painting of the present Austrian Emperor. The sole illumination came from a large, green-shaded lamp, which was suspended above a big roll-top desk that stood just at right angles to a pair of drawn curtains apparently hiding a deep window that looked upon the street. From this desk there arose, as we entered, the representative of Franz-Josef at the French capital.

The Baron Ferdinand-Salvator Klepsch-Kloth de Hetzendorf is a tall man — so tall that, were he not proportionately broad of shoulder and wide of girth, he would seem a veritable giant. His face,

moreover, is the model of diplomatic dignity: the wealth of carefully-dressed hair about the fine temples is silver, and silver is the huge moustache that almost hides his firm, straight mouth; and the bushy eyebrows from beneath which his cold, blue eyes cast glances as swift and as certain as the bullet from a master-marksman's rifle. I confess that, as I then first saw him, I felt we were about to deal with a mind well capable of our best efforts — nor did his opening words to us serve in any wise to remove this impression.

“Mademoiselle Baird,” he said, allowing his eyes first to rest upon her card and then upon my companion; “I am honoured greatly by your visit this evening, but I trust you will pardon a very busy man if he must ask you without delay to inform him exactly as to what the honour is due.”

He had spoken in perfect English; he had bowed graciously over Frances's extended hand; he had nodded to me and had waved us to chairs within a few feet of him; but his voice had been like the click of steel and, as he now sat down at the roll-top desk, his elbow almost touching the dark curtains at the window, he looked at us with a flash of those blue eyes, which plainly said that, having forced the war into our own territory, he meant to keep it there.

But diplomats were not so new a story to Frances as to frighten her.

"I came, monsieur," said she, "because of my connection with the matter of which I have made a memorandum on my card."

Again the Baron scrutinized the card.

"But," he commented, "it is precisely an explanation of that memorandum that I am requesting."

"Do you mean me to understand, monsieur, that you have admitted us without comprehending the message that I sent?"

"My dear Mademoiselle Baird, I must confess to the fault of curiosity. Of all the admirable weaknesses of your charming sex, this is the only one that I have ever permitted myself to emulate."

"Then you wish to tell me that you have not heard of the man Hans Jaeger?"

"The name is scarcely uncommon, mademoiselle."

"Nor of his murder in America?"

"Mademoiselle must know that I have not been in America these twenty years."

There was a pause — Frances smiling sweetly at the Baron and the Baron trying hard to smile sweetly at Frances, but succeeding rather in smiling diplomatically.

It was then that I lost patience. I do not like being ignored more than do most other people, and I was just now tired and hungry and extremely disgusted.

“Monsieur,” said I — and at that the Baron turned upon me with a quickness that seemed to show that he had indeed been forgetting my presence — “monsieur, we are wasting your time and our own. Miss Baird is not a diplomatist; she is just a plain American detective. With her I have come here to run down a murderer — and, if you have not heard the story of that man’s crime, I think it is high time that you should be told of it.”

Whereupon, and before either of my hearers could interrupt me, I took up the narrative of the Mountville mystery and brought it to the moment of our discovery of the Toison d’Or.

“Now, monsieur,” I concluded, “we know from these facts that the victim was a country-man of yours; that he was a man of eminence in his native land. I assure you that we have just as strong reasons to believe that his murderer fled to this city and that he is known to certain persons — probably unworthy servants — in your employ. We know beyond a doubt that this is true of at least one of his accomplices and we mean, in plain terms, to make an arrest unless you can satisfy

us that none should be made, or unless you can answer the question: *Where is the man that passed as Wilhelm Jaeger?* ”

Frances had sat by me in amazed silence during this oration of mine; the Baron, on the other hand, had begun by listening with an attentive, though somewhat perplexed, wrinkle between his bushy eyebrows, but had ended soon by relapsing into an expression of difficultly concealed boredom.

“ Young man,” he said at last, “ you do, indeed, amaze me. I am sure that it is not necessary for me to repeat that I had not before heard of this curious crime, but, now that I have heard of it, I beg to commend both you and your charming collaborateur for your zealous efforts on behalf of vengeance for a deed done to one whom you supposed to have been my countryman. Nevertheless, monsieur, I must point out to you that, in coming to me, you are taking what you Americans would call the longest way home.”

Something in that phrase seemed to catch Frances's ear.

“ You mean — ” she began.

“ I mean,” continued the Baron, his tone politely grave, “ that your proper course would have been to act in conjunction with the regularly-constituted police in your own country, and that — since the presence of the Toison d'Or on the

body of a farmer pointed to a theft committed in Austria — you should have called in the aid of our embassy at Washington — not Paris — which, of course, would have been glad to assist you — providing that you could have proved your story by the production of the jewel.”

There was a nasty twang to those last words, which annoyed me even more than the tenor of all that had preceded them.

“ Does monsieur try to imply,” I demanded, “ that our narrative lacks the convincing quality? ”

The Baron’s gray eyebrows shot upward.

“ My dear sir,” he said, “ I make no doubt that you did find upon this body some sort of ornament that had never before come under your observation. But how many Americans would know the insignia of the Golden Fleece from those, for instance, of the Bath? Or, if the jewel in question answered such printed descriptions as you may have become more or less familiar with, how are you to tell that it is not, after all, a mere counterfeit? ”

In a moment more I should have produced that jewel to convince him. As it was, my hand went flying instinctively to my breast-pocket when Frances’s fingers encountered it and calmly drew it down.

“There is much in your point of view, monsieur,” her quiet voice was murmuring — “a very great deal indeed. I regret that we cannot obtain your expert opinion.”

“Ah, then you have not the jewel with you?”

“I thought it best to leave it in a safe-deposit box in New York.”

The Baron stroked his silver moustache: I was not sure, but I fancied that the long white fingers engaged in that occupation were less steady than they should have been, and, reading disappointment in this evidence of nervousness, I began mentally to congratulate Frances for the quick wit that had saved me from falling into the Ambassador’s trap.

“Yes,” he was saying, “it is a pity, a very great pity. — You say, sir, that you found this decoration about the dead man’s neck?”

I had not said so, but I was about to admit as much when Frances again lied glibly:

“No, not about his neck, monsieur; not even, in reality, on the body. In fact, not to be too precise, we found it in a secret hiding-place in the farm-house — a place evidently overlooked by the searching murderers.”

This was all very well, but I was once more tiring of the Ambassador’s Fabian tactics.

“After all, monsieur,” I said with what finality

I could master, "these details matter little. You are avoiding the issue. I have made you my proposition: do you accept it or do you refuse it?"

In spite of my foreknowledge of my uncertain premises, I looked at him commandingly, trying to force him into a direct yes or no; but the Baron met my bull-dog gaze with a cold, blue eye.

"You still fancy," said he, "that I am really able to tell you the whereabouts of the man you seek?"

"Monsieur," I answered, "will you or will you not tell us the whereabouts of Wilhelm Jaeger?"

"And if I will not?"

"Then we shall be forced to demand of the French government the arrest to which I quite some time ago referred."

De Hetzendorf never let his eyes waver from mine.

"I asked that question," he clicked, "because I found it impossible to conceive that two such clever persons as you and mademoiselle should not appreciate the position in which you have placed yourselves. You admit that you entered that farm-house without authorization, and that you have acted without proper authorization ever

since. You confess yourselves thieves, and mademoiselle has written her confession here in her own hand upon her own card. Monsieur — mademoiselle ” — and the Baron slowly rose from his chair until his six-foot-six towered above us — “ I warn you that you are treading on delicate ground; I assure you that what you saw was no murder, but lawful execution, and, finally, I tell you as my last word and in all frankness, that, unless you leave this house — unless you leave France — without more speech of this affair, I shall end the whole matter by having you both taken into custody upon a charge of theft.”

At that, as you may well imagine, we were all on our feet.

“ Do you mean — ” I spluttered.

“ Exactly what I say,” announced the Baron, his cold eyes harder than ever.

“ You may arrest us and welcome, monsieur,” cooed the dove-like voice of my companion; “ but, as you know, there is no surer way of bringing the whole story before the public.”

De Hetzendorf smiled grimly.

“ Mademoiselle Baird,” he said, “ I beg to remind you that Europe is not your America, and the Parisian press does not chronicle every minor arrest in the capital.”

But now at last I was in a familiar field.

“Perhaps not, monsieur,” I almost shouted; “but I happen to be an American newspaper reporter. Do you think that we came here without my telling my paper why? Let me tell you that the moment we disappear, it will be looking for us. Let me tell you also that this paper will print or suppress the Jaeger story at my command; that it will surely print it if any harm should come to Miss Baird or to me; and that — though I am a reasonable and conscientious man and as such open to conviction — though, in short, I can conceive of reasons why this piece of news might do more harm if published than suppressed — I will, nevertheless, even should you withdraw your threats, print this story unless you can satisfactorily explain your reasons for wanting it kept quiet!”

Well, he didn't like that, and I could not blame him. It was, of course, but a sheer bluff that I had made, but he didn't know it, and on the face of it you would certainly say that I had him. He himself thought so, at any rate, for, after a moment of hard thinking, as we all three stood there in the dim lamp-light, he took up a line of attack that I have never known to be followed save as a desperate hope.

“My friends,” he said, very gravely, “I see that you are not convinced. I can only assure

you yet again that I know no more than you of the whereabouts of the man whom you call Wilhelm Jaeger. But I can also give you my word of honour that, if the highest international interests and the cause of the peace of Europe will serve to induce you to abandon this wild scheme, I shall personally see that you are remunerated to any figure that, within reason and even somewhat beyond it, you may name."

I should have laughed at this — I am somewhat hardened to that sort of thing — but Frances suddenly stepped between us. I had finished my part for the moment and the offer of money was her cue to appear somewhat angrily upon the stage.

"In other words, monsieur," she said, her cheeks flushing and her speech coming rapidly, "you desire to bribe us! It is a defence that none but a trapped coward ever employs — and it ends our negotiations."

I suppose that it isn't often a great diplomat loses his temper, but then it isn't often that a great diplomat and member of one of the oldest and proudest families of all Europe — to his face, at least — is called a coward and a criminal. At all events, de Hetzendorf seemed immediately to see red.

"You may go!" he thundered. "You may go

at once! I have borne enough of your insolence. Neither I nor mine have any knowledge of this matter: tell it how and where you please! Publish it in all your American newspapers if it so pleases you to do. But the Austrian ambassador to Paris knows nothing of it!"

"Very well," replied Frances, who, on the rare occasions when she gave way to anger, always regained her self-control as soon as she had made her enemy lose his; "we shall not detain you longer. But in parting, let me add one word: though I do not for a moment doubt your assurance of ignorance regarding the Jaeger case, there is at least a close acquaintance of yours who cannot truthfully say so much himself."

Perhaps the threat in her tone really frightened him, or perhaps the Baron had spoken truth when he confessed to a feminine curiosity. In either event, his rage began to give place to another emotion.

"To whom," he stiffly demanded, "do you refer?"

Frances took one swift step to the right.

"I mean," she answered, "the man at your elbow: the man in front of your window and behind those curtains!"

A loud crash of glass punctuated her declaration. With a deft toss of her arm, the detective

drew aside the draperies from the window at the Baron's left, and there, just in the act of leaping into the street, crouched our scared and now bleeding friend, the amiable Bolfras Czibulka.

CHAPTER X

THE STOLEN BLUEPRINTS

“Should he reason with unprofitable talk? or with speeches wherewith he can do no good?”

I HAVE often wondered what it was that wiped the next few minutes completely from the tablets of my memory. It wasn't only the unexpectedness of the event, for I could have anticipated nothing less than I anticipated the wild flight that I was soon to make through Montmartre, and yet every incident of the latter occurrence is still clear and fresh in my recollection. On the other hand, it could no more have been the rapidity of the whole denouement, because its action was scarcely more rapid than that slaughter in which I was so speedily to play a part, and yet there is no smallest detail of the latter tragedy that has escaped me.

It is, I suppose, a problem for the ever-investigating psychologist. All that I can say is that I still have a vague vision of Frances, through the flying glass, dragging back Czibulka from his wild effort at retreat, while I covered him with my

revolver and while the Baron de Hetzendorf flung up his hands in a last gesture of despair, and, sinking into his chair again, no longer master of himself and us, motioned us all to seats before him.

Somehow or other we found our way to the indicated chairs and sat down, Frances trying calmly to fan herself with the wisp of linen that she called her handkerchief; I in my former place with my revolver ready in my open palm, and black-cropped, bristling Czibulka between us, smiling no more now, but mopping, ever and anon, the blood that trickled from an ugly cut at the point of his pugnacious chin.

It was the voice of the Ambassador that broke the silence.

“Monsieur,” he began, addressing his compatriot — and speaking, I thought, in a tone even less conciliatory than that which he had latterly employed towards us — “you will agree with me that our American friends have been too clever to let our little plan succeed. They have quite outwitted us” — he bowed first to Frances and then to me — “and I congratulate them accordingly. In the circumstances, then, there is nothing for us to do but to throw ourselves upon their mercy. — Mademoiselle Baird, monsieur — ?”

“Burton,” I supplied.

“Monsieur Burton,” he continued; “I am about to place the safety of my country in your hands. May I feel assured in return, of that good will and secrecy of which the generous American nature should be, *per se*, a guarantee?”

I looked toward Frances — for it was, after all, her game rather than mine — and, in so doing, saw Czibulka’s eyes nearly leaping from their sockets. But Frances, though she too must have noted these tokens of amazement on the part of our late *camarade de vaisseau*, was nodding a ready assent.

“On the part of both Mr. Burton and myself,” she said, “I promise that we shall keep the truth as secret as becomes our respective duties.”

This, it seemed to me, was a mere dodging of the issue, but, oddly enough, the Baron appeared satisfied.

“Very well,” he responded. “You will be obliged, then, to bear with me while I begin by going into a dull matter of political history and end by narrating a little court gossip.”

He leaned back in his chair, evidently at his ease in facing the inevitable, closed his eyes reflectively and placed together the tips of his long, white fingers.

“The internal dissensions of my unhappy country,” he began, “are, of course, so much a matter of common knowledge that I need not, to persons of your intelligence, narrate them in detail. There are two sorts of nations the government of which is mere child’s play: the first is such a nation as France, where all the people are of one blood, one language and one tradition, and the second is such a nation as your own where the body of citizens have either come together with a common purpose, or else are made up of so many various strains that no single strain can hopefully struggle for the entire control. But my own country is in neither category. It is, speaking broadly, composed of but two races, each distinct, each jealous of the other. Its very name, Austro-Hungary, sounds forth the theme of its sorrow, and the miserable war between the Austrians and the Hungarians within its limits is as bitter as it is unceasing.

“For a long time now, this warfare, though confined within the realm of purely political activity, has needed only the appearance of another Kossuth to precipitate open revolution. Lately, moreover, the differences between the two peoples have centred upon the question of the division between them of the expenses of the government, and the bitterness thus centred has,

you may be sure, been tenderly and assiduously nursed among the Hungarians by our arch-enemy in St. Petersburg.

“ Russia is, and has always been, greedy to obtain from us the province of Galicia, which blocks the progress of the Muscovite advance upon the Balkans in its way toward Turkey and the Aegean. In the pursuit of its ancient policy, and by means of the greatest spy-system that the world has ever seen, Russia, therefore, has not long scrupled at any means or any expense for the incitement of discord in my country. In the present crisis it has even, I regret to say, purchased — bribed — ‘bought up,’ or ‘cornered,’ as you Americans so picturesquely put it — persons of considerable standing in Vienna, some of whom are known to us as traitors, but by far the most dangerous of whom have been able to work incalculable evils because they were so long regarded as high above suspicion.

“ Into this latter class fall the tribe with which we have now to deal. One of this triumvirate of Judases was no less a person than the Baron Radetsky, a nephew of the Austrian field-marshal famous during the occupation of Italy, and, at the time of his treasonable activity, attached, in a highly confidential position, to our Department of War. Another was a certain Colonel Lichten-

stein, of the General Staff, undeniably an able officer. And the third was the Countess Routkovsky, probably the most beautiful woman of the court circle and high in the confidence of our beloved emperor himself. With Radetsky, we have learned, the opening was gained because of a slight which he imagined had been put upon him in some matter of promotion. Lichtenstein, on the contrary, has always been at heart, through maternal influences, an ardent supporter of the cause of Hungarian freedom, and the Countess Stephanie Routkovsky was approached when facing ruin precipitated by high play. — Monsieur Czibulka, who originally secured the major portion of this information, will bear me out.”

We looked again at Czibulka, but he was still too busy mopping the cut in his chin to contribute much beyond a nod, and the Ambassador continued:

“The trio that I have named — Radetsky, Lichtenstein and the Countess Routkovsky — soon became the active heads of the Russian secret service bureau of information in Vienna. At last, however, — this was nine months ago — my government, thanks to Monsieur Czibulka, discovered the nature of their activities and had them watched. Evidence was plenty and the net was spread when, just as the arrests were about to be

made, some other traitor warned the three chief criminals: the Countess and the Colonel fled to Germany and were traced as far as Bremen, where all clues vanished, and Radetsky made good his escape to America.

“ Although we should naturally have preferred to punish criminals of so vile a nature, we might not so much have regretted their flight, and might have solaced ourselves with the thought that they were at least removed from the place where they could do us most harm, were it not for the discovery that the thoughtful Radetsky had provided himself against penury by taking along with him from the War Department a large series of blue-prints descriptive of some of our most important fortifications. When, therefore, our spies in Berlin reported that an Austrian in the United States was negotiating with Germany for the sale of plans of some of these fortifications along the northern frontier of his native country, we at once concluded that Radetsky was again becoming perniciously active, and when, set to work, our American agents confirmed these suspicions, we decided that mercy had been sufficiently strained and that the traitor must go no longer unpunished.

“ To shorten a long story, my friends, one of these agents was commissioned to gain the con-

fidence of Radetsky in the United States, by representing himself as a German spy, and this he did just as the fugitive, reduced almost to dire poverty, had rented the farm near the little town where your own adventures began. Our spy, becoming the fast friend of the renegade, offered to join him in this agricultural enterprise until the Berlin government should be heard from, and that offer was finally accepted. Accordingly, the pair of them — spy and runaway — lived on the American farm, where they posed as the brothers Jaeger, while all the time our spy was trying on the one hand to discover and steal from Radetsky the plans that he had somewhere hidden, and while Radetsky, on the other hand, was trying to drive with the supposed German agent as hard a bargain as possible.

“ This continued for nearly six weeks, during which time, of course, the German government was never heard from, while our spy met with no success in his search for the plans. At the end of that period, Radetsky began to grow suspicious.

“ Our agent, noticing this, communicated at last with his ambassador in Washington, whereupon — there is no need nor use in winking at facts — the order went forth that the safety of a nation was above the life of a traitor even if that

traitor was in a foreign country and beyond the jurisdiction of the home government; the traitor must, therefore, be killed on a certain day and his house thereafter ransacked at leisure until the plans be found.

“Monsieur Czibulka was just then attached to the Washington legation. As he had been the source of our original information against Radetsky in Vienna, he was commissioned to go to Mountville, identify the body and assist in the search. He made ready to go — but was delayed twenty-four hours by an attack of ptomaine poisoning caused from your delicious but deadly American lobster. However, at last arrived at his destination by a circuitous route, he entered the farm-house at the hour when, he had been informed, the spy and Radetsky would certainly be on their way to the village postoffice, where they were accustomed to call twice every day in the latter’s hope of hearing from his Austrian fellow-conspirators or of hearing that his supposed friend had received from Berlin the final orders and money for the purchase of the plans of the fortifications.

“Now, Monsieur Czibulka, as he has just assured me, did not, being a humane man, want to be present at the actual killing of Radetsky. The latter, however, seems hourly to have been growing

more and more suspicious of his house-companion, and, on this particular day, when the pair met a couple of strangers on the road and were asked questions of an unusual sort, those suspicions leaped into a kind of hysterical certainty. The traitor insisted upon an immediate return to the house, which, you understand of course, was thus reached before Monsieur Czibulka was expecting such a home-coming.

“ In brief, my friends, there was a tableau — and a cry from Radetsky, which was necessarily cut short by our spy, along with the life of the man who had uttered it. The search of the house was at once completed; the blue-prints were found under the bricks of the kitchen-hearth, and Monsieur Czibulka and the spy, their work quite accomplished, fled with all speed — separating at Philadelphia, the former to return to his duties in Washington, the latter to proceed at once with the papers, to Vienna.

“ Monsieur Czibulka naturally supposed the matter well ended. Indeed, I may say that we all supposed as much, and I make no doubt but that you will appreciate our sense of relief. Alas, the difficulties had only begun!

“ Within a few days we learned, to our amazement, that the spy had been met at Philadelphia by a woman whose description answered to that

of the Countess Routkovsky, though she then called herself by the less lofty name of Gretchen Meyer. The two of them, it seemed, had then proceeded to New York, whence they sailed on the *Kaiser Wilhelm II* for Cherbourg. Thence they were traced to Paris — and here we have lost sight of them altogether!”

The Ambassador paused, his story completed, and, turning up the palms of his hands hopelessly, looked us over with the gaze of a beaten man.

We were all silent for a moment. I looked at Frances to see how she had received the story and thought I noticed a skeptical curve in the corners of her lips. It was she who first spoke.

“Monsieur,” she said, “do you mean to say that your agent eloped with the friend of the man he had just killed?”

The Ambassador nodded.

“That he was so suddenly converted to a cause the temptation of which he had so successfully resisted all the while he was on the Jaeger farm?”

“So it would appear, mademoiselle.”

“But, monsieur, how do you account for anything so out of all reason?”

“I do not account for it: I accept the facts — the testimony of those who, too late, followed the

runaways' trail, and the undeniable truth that, wherever he may now be, this spy has not delivered the papers to his government. Those of my colleagues who like to theorize have concluded that someone in the Washington embassy had forewarned the Countess. She is known to have had a strong, personal dislike for Radetsky, even while compelled to work for him, because it was he who first won money from her and then forced her into the occupation of a spy: my colleagues, therefore, conclude that, forewarned as she must have been, she nevertheless allowed Radetsky to be murdered; that she then either raised funds from the Russian ambassador to America to buy the murderer — or else that she in some way imposed upon the man, doubtless making full use of her wonderful beauty, and so, bringing him to this city, made away with him. It matters little: in either event, the plans are now in the possession of the Countess Routkovsky and Colonel Lichtenstein. It is to recover them that Monsieur Czibulka has been sent to France, and it is because I feared that your impetuous American virtues might prevent this recovery that I assumed toward you, my friends, a manner that I now deeply regret."

Once more we all came to a pause — the others for what reasons I can't guess, but I because, sud-

denly, all things else seemed of small import beside the hope that Gretchen Meyer might still be somewhere in Paris and that it might be my good fortune again to see her beautiful face with its blazing, black eyes and red wound of a mouth.

“ You are sure,” I asked finally, “ that they have not yet left this city? ”

“ I am quite sure that the Colonel, the Countess and the plans are still in Paris. The moment the fugitives were lost sight of by the agent that had trailed them from Cherbourg, we had spies stationed at the Russian embassy, and from that minute until this, every railway station, every avenue of exit from the city, has been watched night and day.”

She was really here then! That was enough for me. I didn't worry any more about the troubles of Austria or the woes of ambassadors. Only dimly do I recall the round of apologies that followed the conclusion of de Hetzendorf's narrative, the detective's re-inforced promises of silence, and the diplomat's shower of compliments. The next thing, in truth, of which I was, in any sane degree, conscious was the fact that we were once more standing, Frances and I, in the Rue de Varenne, and that my own voice, strangely unfamiliar in its detachment from the trend of thoughts, was murmuring:

“ So we needn't have been so careful in keeping an eye on Czibulka, after all.”

“ Perhaps not,” snapped Frances; “ but I think our friend the ambassador had better keep both eyes on him, just the same.”

CHAPTER XI

AU L'ABBAYE

“Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs.”

THE hint of a further mystery about Czibulka brought me back in all haste from the world of dreams.

“What do you think is the row in that quarter?” I asked as we mounted a passing cab and headed toward the Chatham.

“Czibulka,” replied Frances yawning ostentatiously, “is, of course, a traitor to his own employer.”

But I could not at all see how that might be, and I confessed as much.

“If your memory were good,” she responded, “you could not help seeing it. The whole thing hinges on the statement of that Pullman conductor on the Philadelphia train: he told us that the man with the scar left his companion at Philadelphia *after* the red-headed woman came aboard. Therefore, one of three things must be true: first, the conductor’s memory must have

failed him in that particular, although it apparently remained perfect in all others; or, second, the ambassador's whole story is a lie, and much of it sounded true; or, finally, Czibulka, while in the pay of Austria, is also in league with the Countess and her Russian spies. You may take your choice. For my part, I'm inclined to think that there was just a slight tendency toward romance in the ambassador's yarn — there were several points about it that struck me as rather suspicious, as, for instance, the necessity of the murder, when they could have got all they wanted without actual bloodshed and run far less danger of discovery. All the same, I'm about convinced that Czibulka is either a complete traitor to his master or else is carrying water on both shoulders and drawing money from each bucket."

I saw that she was well away on one of her soliloquizing sprees, and I let her go unaccompanied; I myself fell to dreaming again of the Fraulein Meyer — or the Countess Routkovsky — one name was quite as good as another, and none, I felt silently sure, could be the name of a mere adventuress — let her go on, I say, all the while we were being driven through the streets behind a bony Paris horse and as we were being assigned to our rooms by the gallant gentleman in the

plug hat, who greeted us on our entrance to the hotel, and continue until, dinner over and coffee served, she came to a stop at last as we sat looking out on the little hotel-court. Then I saw her yawn again.

I looked at my watch, and her eyes framed a question.

“Ten-thirty,” I answered.

“In that case,” said Frances decisively, “I shall turn in while you go and do the boulevards.”

“While I — . But how did you know — ?”

“Because it’s your first night in Paris. Good-night, and remember that we must breakfast not a moment later than nine.”

With that she left me, and I did set out upon much the sort of expedition that she had hinted at, though to a goal that even Frances Baird little imagined.

Just where I went I didn’t, at that time, know, but now I understand that, at last, I must have walked west along the Boulevard des Capucines, for I came out on the Place de la Madeleine, and thence turned northward into the maze of steep, dark, narrow streets that fringe the southern boundary of Montmartre. There was a chilly silence — almost a mystery — about them that gave me a keener sense of being far from America

than I had met in all the lighted and crowded thoroughfares below, and it was almost with regret that, finally, I struck east upon the Boulevard de Clichy and came into the blaze of lights that crown the Place Pigalle.

I was tired and I wanted to rest; I was hungry and I wanted to eat. I asked a loiterer where I might find a café, and he, shrugging his shoulders, pointed to where the lights were brightest and murmured:

“ *L'Abbaye, le restaurant d'Albert, c'est là.*”

I crossed the street, climbed a narrow flight of stairs, and then the blare of music, the clatter of dishes, the sound of song and the melody of many laughing voices struck me almost as a blow.

In white and pale green from floor to high ceiling, the rectangular room was not so small as to be close, nor yet so large that its habitués might not form one party. The long wall-seats were crowded, and so too were the chairs that faced them across marble-topped tables; even the smaller tables — a gleam with bright silver and napery and heavy with tall bottles and petty dishes — which formed a continuous rampart between, shooting out spurs of still other crowded tables that left scarce ten square feet of highway between the four walls. Here and there a white pillar rose to the roof, but never obstructed one's

view of the *ensemble*, never curtailed one's share in the show.

I looked about me like the veriest yokel in Cosmopolis. There were French faces, German faces, Russian faces; in one corner sat an unmistakable Turk, who had not found it necessary to conceal his nationality in Occidental clothing; and, in another, beside an officer in the uniform of a line regiment, sat a kimonoed Japanese girl smoking a Maryland cigarette. And all the while the red-coated orchestra was crashing away — a brave, little Spaniard flourishing his tambourine before them, or a sinuous woman of his race dancing, with *castagnettes* in her hands, while all the onlookers sang and snapped their fingers by way of accompaniment.

For minutes I stood in the doorway motionless until at last I got the eye of a *garçon*.

“But no,” the bowing waiter declared, “it is impossible to discover for monsieur a place vacant in the chief apartment. The most one can do for him is to offer this. Will monsieur follow?”

He led the way past the gay, laughing faces to “this,” which proved a pretty good second-best. It was a place in a room separated from the main *salon* only by a partition a few feet high, and, as the particular little table to which I was ushered faced this, I soon found myself so ensconced as to

be almost a part of the general gathering. I had a full view of all the company, only partially intercepted by the big, black hat of a woman that was similarly seated, in the larger room, upon the divan that ran along the other side of the low wall. Her back was toward me, of course, and — across the rivulet of white cloth between them — her eyes were seemingly intent upon the man who was evidently her host.

For some time I sat there, watching the moving picture in front of me — the running waiters, flirting their white napkins or bobbing to the floor to raise from its bucket of ice a bottle of champagne; the merry women, with their immaculately old-young lovers; the sweating musicians — and then, somehow, my glance rested on the man facing me, across from the black-hatted woman, and I saw that he was ummistakably an Austrian.

That he belonged to the race of my quest was enough to rivet my attention. Tall, erectly seated, with a pair of angry eyes and fierce, black moustaches, a weather-beaten and rugged face, I at once made up my mind that this man, in spite of his plain evening clothes, was a soldier. And I had just come to that conclusion when the woman turned her profile toward me and I knew that her companion was Colonel Lichtenstein.

For the woman was the Countess Stephanie

Routkovsky. The profile had been turned for only the glimpse of an instant, but that moment had amply served. The pale face, as fine of feature as if cut from Parian marble by a master's hand; the carefully chiseled temples; the delicately-arched nose with its sensitive nostrils; the straight, dark brows; the black eyes; the haughty mouth, a vivid line of scarlet — it was the woman I had been dreaming of, the woman whom, a few weeks before in Frances Baird's darkened studio, I had met as Gretchen Meyer.

Can you wonder that I tried to listen, after that? I did try, at all events, and I thanked Heaven for a brief lull in the music that enabled me to hear her voice again.

“But, truly; you should not have come,” she was saying in her perfect English. “The risk is too great.”

Lichtenstein snorted, almost contemptuously.

“They do not even guess that we are in Paris,” he rumbled in a mighty but subdued bass.

At the risk of his observing me, I leaned far forward to catch her answer, and I fancied a certain weariness in her tone as she replied to him:

“I was not thinking of — ourselves. I was thinking of *him*. You are quite forgetting him: you should have remained at his side.”

The Colonel refilled his glass.

" I am not a jailor," he protested.

" No, not a jailor; but you are a man with a duty," she corrected. " Why did you forget it? Why did you come? "

Lichtenstein's features instantly softened — and I did not like the change.

" Can't you guess? " he asked, bending toward her across the narrow table and trying to temper his voice to a milder note. " It was because I knew that you were to be here: because — "

I saw him put out his heavy hand, and my heart swelled with hate of him, but just then the red-coated orchestra broke into the *matthiche*, and something happened that kept the Colonel's hand suspended in mid-air.

Down at the very entrance of the room a single high, discordant voice had taken up — or tried to take up — the Paphian melody. Woefully out of tune it sang, and it broke altogether on the first high note, but under that and beyond, there was a certain uncanny quality that rasped every ear and brought upon the solitary singer the eye of everyone in the two rooms — such a ghost of a voice it was, or, perhaps, a voice gone mad.

*" Ma jolie Dirce Choux-Choux,
Elle fait — "*

The company roared in glee at the novelty, but I heard the Countess gasp, and saw the Colonel give one quick glance and then spring to his feet.

My own would scarcely have borne me: the singer stood alone by the main entrance; his clothes were conventional; his newly cut hair was brushed straight back, without any parting, from his high, narrow forehead; his face had been freshly shaven; and in his eyes was the fire of madness — but for all that I knew him.

It was Wilhelm Jaeger.

CHAPTER XII

A LEAN SPY AND A KEEN KNIFE

“Mischief shall come upon mischief, and rumour shall be upon rumour.”

My own panic passed even more rapidly than it had come and left me sharp and alert. The old instinct of the reporter took command of me and I was at once the calm and not unresourceful Sammy Burton with whom I was best acquainted. In a single breath I felt that, somehow, my grand moment had at last arrived and had found me ready for it.

Not so the Countess. Her face, turned toward that mad apparition at the doorway, was in full view, and I saw it changed as if momentarily petrified, — the black eyes were wide and rigid, the very lips, but now scarlet, were gone white, and the whole was a fixed mask of terror.

She half arose.

“I told you not to come!” she cried.

But Lichtenstein’s rough hand which, a moment before, had been raised in a caress, fell forcibly upon her shoulder and pushed her back against the cushions of the divan.

“It will be all right!” he muttered in a ready German. “Keep quiet. Sit still.”

He started to leave her and to advance to the leering maniac, who still stood in his former place, apparently well pleased with the applauding company. The Countess, however, plucked at her companion’s sleeve, her face, as she spoke, growing a little more composed.

“Very well,” she said — also in German. “Pretend that he is drunk. But be careful. The front may be watched. I know this place. Say to Albert — the proprietor — the blond man over there — say to him that this person is a friend of mine and must be taken out the rear way.”

The Colonel nodded in ready comprehension.

“Good,” he growled. “Join us as soon as you safely can.”

With that he sailed into action, and even I had to admire the skill with which he managed his difficult task. I saw him approach the madman, smiling the indulgent smile with which the man of the world aids and insults a drunken comrade; I saw him, in this new role, make his quick, reliant way among the gossiping tables, nodding to the laughing company; I saw him whisper a word to Albert; I saw Albert bow, and then I saw him seize the madman by the arm and, before his victim had well recognized the assailant, I saw

him bundle that victim through the door. Thus much, I say, I watched admiringly, but there my interest in Lichtenstein, at least for a time, ended: his exit was my entrance-cue, and I took it without further delay.

Quite as suddenly as the Colonel had gone, I came into the main room and slipped into the seat that he had just left — the seat across the table from the Countess.

“Fraulein,” I said, bowing in as matter-of-fact fashion as I could just then muster, “it is indeed so pleasant a surprise for me to see you here that I cannot but ask the honour of one little word of recognition.”

It was clumsy irony, of course, but, even so, it was too subtle to bash its way into an intelligence still stunned by the terror that I had just witnessed. The Countess did not understand a word of it. Slowly she drew her gaze from the now empty doorway and, quite as slowly, fixed it upon me.

“Perhaps,” I stupidly pursued, “you do not pay me the compliment of recognition. I beg then, mademoiselle, to recall to you the fact that I had the privilege of a presentation to you not long since at the rooms, in Philadelphia, of my friend, Miss Baird.”

I had not thought it possible for her terror to

be intensified, but, as I spoke, I saw, in the marble of her face, a quick spasm of recognition that told of a new agony of fright. Yet I was being ridden by that imp of perversity, which, at such moments, delights to ride us and goad the tongue to wounding what the heart most loves.

“It is true,” I pursued, “that on that occasion you did not care to see much of me, but I had dared to hope, after what I have just observed in this room, that you might now be better inclined —”

And right there in the midst of my half-taunting sentence I stopped short. The face opposite me had undergone another change — a quick softening. A row of white teeth were buried in the lower lip; the great black eyes were filled with tears — the Countess was crying.

Instantly my hand shot out to her in mute appeal, and then, when she still sat there, rigid, speechless, fighting back her tears, I stammered:

“Forgive me! I — I don’t know why I spoke so, mademoiselle. I give you my word that I came here only to help you. Tell me what I can do.”

For a long moment she fixed me with her eyes.

“You can do nothing,” she whispered.

“But I must. You are in trouble, and I have helped to hurt you. If only in order to show me that I have your forgiveness, mademoiselle —”

“ You have my forgiveness,” she said softly.

“ Then, if only to prove that, permit me to help you now — to-night.”

Once more she studied me, her great black eyes looking searchingly into mine, and once more she shook her head.

“ No,” she said in those deep, contralto notes that had so thrilled me when I heard them first; “ I cannot endanger any more of those who wish me well. I thank you, my friend, from my heart, and I myself ” — and she smiled sadly — “ I myself make an apology for the way in which I seemed to treat you on the evening that you have but now mentioned. It is true, what you say: I am in a little trouble. But it is a little trouble only and — I must get away from it alone.”

“ Mademoiselle,” I protested, “ you force me to make you accept my offer of assistance. — Mademoiselle, I know more than you suppose.”

Again she smiled gently.

“ But not the truth,” she said. “ No one seems now to have the truth. You find me indeed so surrounded by treachery that I am suspicious of even those who should be my staunchest allies — so deceived, I fear, by my very friends that I can scarcely hope for good offices from one whom I have met but once and whom at that time I treated so shabbily.”

Protest was still ready on my tongue when one of her phrases struck the alarm-bell of my conscience. I recollected, in a flash, that I was enlisted on the other side, that this woman was one of the criminals that I had crossed the ocean to find and that, could I only compel myself to have the eye of truth, I should see drops of blood upon the little, jewelled hand that lay so close to my own.

“Mademoiselle,” I said stiffly, “your refusal is so final that I must, I suppose, accept it.” — And I made as if to rise.

The Countess raised her proud head. Our glances met again and in her eyes there was that which kept me in my chair.

“I understand,” she said quietly, her eyes unwaveringly fixed on mine: “You believe — what you cannot help believing. Go, then, I have not at any time sought to detain you.”

I writhed.

“I admit it, mademoiselle,” I said. “I honestly wanted to help you — before I remembered — before I came entirely to myself. It is the height of folly for me to confess even so much as this — but, oh, remember how you came to us — how you told us the details of a crime almost twelve hours before it was committed — how, when it was committed, those details were

all just as you had described them to Frances Baird and me!"

I stopped short, but she only nodded gravely.

"Hang it all!" I cried. "Can't you, won't you explain it away? Can't you, at least, tell me that I am mad?"

"I can tell you, monsieur, that I thank you sincerely for being so good as to want to believe well of me, — and then I can say to you only 'Good night.'"

She raised her hand and, for just a fleeting instant, touched mine where it lay clenched upon the table that separated us. It was the merest touch, the unconscious signal of regretful parting, but the thought of the blood upon her pulsing fingers troubled me no more. In that second I flung everything else overboard — and in the next second I was glad of it.

"No," I answered, "not 'Good night.'" I sought to retain the little hand, but it had vanished as it had come, and I continued: "I do not only want to believe well of you, mademoiselle — I *do* believe."

Her face flashed into radiance.

"Then," she said conclusively, "I ask no more of you. You will do your duty on the side in which you are enlisted; but at least I have a gallant foe."

“ About doing my duty, I’ll think later. I cannot, of course, tell you any more of my mission — or what *was* my mission — than you feel that you may tell me of yours, but I shall say that only this evening I learned just how great your danger really is. I learned — ”

“ No more,” she interrupted, lifting her hand with a motion of finality, “ you must not desert your cause.”

But this time it was for me to regard her, looking deep into her black eyes.

“ Mademoiselle,” I solemnly declared, “ I tell you truly that I am a free-lance and that I am altogether at your service.”

“ I cannot permit it,” she insisted.

“ But at least, though, you are going to allow me to help you to-night. I heard you say to your companion that this place may be watched. Oh, believe me, not by anyone to whom I owe allegiance! — Yet I understand that the pressing need of this moment is that you leave here unseen and soon. Let me aid you in this.”

She sat silent for a moment, her chin in her hand, her red lips firm and sweet and two lines of thought between her even brows.

“ Yes,” she admitted at last. “ I may need your help, and I shall let you give it. Listen: I must drive from this place and it is better that I go

boldly. Yet my cab may be followed. You, therefore, must go with me, giving an address that is within not less than a street of my real one. There I shall dismount quickly and so, going the remainder of the way afoot, I shall escape whatever man might follow us in another cab, while you drive on to your hotel. You observe, my friend, that I dare trust not even the drivers. — Will you come? ”

For answer to her question I beckoned the waiter.

“ Mademoiselle’s wraps,” I commanded.

And when I turned to her again, I found her smiling once more — not now in sadness, but, though tenderly, yet with a radiance that lighted her whole, lovely face as with a wistful glory.

“ You tempt me,” she said, “ to enlist you further. Such loyal readiness to serve an unknown cause — one finds it not everywhere, monsieur.”

“ Mademoiselle,” I replied, “ if you would only try me, you would learn what loyalty really is.”

She would have answered, but the waiter had returned with her long, evening cloak, and would have held it for her had I not snatched it, somewhat roughly, I am afraid, from his grasp.

I wonder even now if she knew with what a thrill I wrapped it about her shoulders; if she must not have felt, through its soft, clinging folds,

the caress of my hands, the reverence of my dumb, adoring heart! Perhaps — for it was not until we were half way down the stairs that she spoke.

“The driver,” she said quickly then, returning thus to the practical features of our escape; “you will tell him, please, that he is to drive to the corner of the Rue Vivienne and the Rue du 4 Septembre.”

I had put out my hand, turning at the last step to look up at her.

“And your own address?” I asked.

For only answer to this she put her gloved fingertips lightly upon my open palm and then raised the finger of silence to her scarlet lips.

“That,” she replied to me, “is one of the secrets that you must leave to me, Mr. Burton.”

“Then you don’t quite trust me — even now?”

Something in my tone must have touched a wrong chord. Her proud chin shot upward and her eyes snapped fire.

“I try your faith,” said she in sudden French. “Monsieur must understand that some of my secrets are not mine alone — and, if he refuses, he must recall to himself that his offices were offered before I asked for them.”

There was always that about her which kept the temperature of a conversation constantly on the move — the mercury was never long stationary — and I always followed it. Just now I knew at

once that I had been guilty of some heinous offence.

“ I — I beg your pardon,” I stammered apologetically. “ You’ll forgive me — won’t you? — Confound it,” I broke off, as her face remained unrelaxed, “ you *must* forgive me! — ” And there I stopped short, for she had broken into ready laughter.

“ Go,” she commanded. “ Order the cab nearest at hand.”

There was a line of them — those Parisian night-hawks — at the very door, and I had no sooner put my foot on the pavement than a half-dozen drivers were cocking their heads at me. I looked about hurriedly; noted that, otherwise, the street appeared deserted, and then chose the driver whose vehicle stood opposite our path of exit. A moment later, I had given him the address that the Countess had named and, with that lady deliciously close beside me, was clattering through the wooden-paved darkness.

For quite a while I dared not trust myself to speak. To sit there, so near to her — the woman who, I now realized, had all the while floated through the golden background of my dreams — to see the white mystery of her figure, to have the very perfume of her being in my nostrils and to

feel, like delicate throbs of pain, the proximity of her body — we two, shut out from all the world by the night that only now and then a street-lamp pierced, painting her living reality against the cushions — that was something I dreaded would fade, as all my previous dreams had faded, before material speech.

But again it was the necessity of our situation that forced me back upon the practical plane.

“I feel sure,” said I finally, “that our precaution was useless. The street seemed empty.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“That emptiness signifies nothing, my friend,” she explained almost sadly, I thought. “My enemies are of a sort nearly invisible.”

“But why,” I persisted, “if you were afraid of being followed, did you come to a public café to-night?”

“I feared nothing when I went there. It was something that occurred after my arrival — that something which, of course, you observed — that awoke my fears.”

“But why then — ”

“My friend” — she turned toward me, and I felt, with a sudden catch in my throat, the touch of her hand upon my arm. — “I may think of you as my friend, may I not?”

She could have called me almost anything she

chose — and I think she must have known it — but all I could do was to nod.

“ Then, my friend,” she pursued, with that deep, contralto note in her voice that set my heart-strings into a responding quaver, “ it may be that to-morrow I shall tell you all. Be patient to-night, and I promise that, if all goes well, I shall, to-morrow evening at eleven o’clock, be at the same table that we have left but now.”

My whole soul leaped up to thank her. But — to-morrow? Why, to-morrow — in twenty-four hours — in twelve hours — even to-night, perhaps — the ambassador’s trap might close its steel teeth upon her — the end of all things might well be waiting beyond any tick of the watch!

I resolved again to fling all prejudice at the winds of desire.

“ You are good,” I said, “ and I thank you. But even you do not know the dangers that lie in wait for you between now and then.”

“ I know far more than you guess, monsieur,” she said.

“ But not all that I can tell you.”

“ At least quite all that you can tell me without breaking faith with your allies.”

“ Faith? ” I cried. “ What is faith worth when, to keep it, I may be imperilling you — when, to keep it, I may — ”

“ Faith is worth just this,” she calmly interrupted: “ it is worth my trust in you.”

“ But it is just that — ”

“ It is just that I could trust no man that cannot be true to his own people.”

I felt the merited lash that she gave me and I bowed to it despairingly.

“ Yet this I must say,” I protested: “ the thing that has made you suddenly afraid is the fact of this Wilhelm Jaeger’s appearance at the café. You fear — don’t you — that, through this public appearance, his whereabouts may become known to — your enemies? ”

“ Yes,” she replied slowly, “ that is what I fear.”

“ And you hope that your friends — ”

“ Say rather my colleagues.”

“ That your colleagues will be able to get this man out of Paris some time to-morrow? ”

“ That is our plan.”

“ Then I must tell you that it is impossible. It is already known that you and he are somewhere in this city — and every railway-station, every possible avenue of exit, is watched! ”

As if to punctuate my words, the sudden gleam of a street-lamp fell upon her face and I saw again there the look of white terror that I had first observed in L’Abbaye. Then, as the blackness

enveloped us once more, she laughed — a hard, hopeless little laugh.

“ In that case,” she said in a burst of bitter lightness, “ nothing matters. You must not tell me any more, my friend — indeed, what you have already said reveals all that I did not already know. And now, nothing in the world matters. We are nearly arrived. — Promise me that you will be as loyal now as you were in the beginning.”

“ I promise,” I whispered to her.

“ That when I leave this cab, you will not follow — no matter what happens — unless I call? ”

She held her hand toward me and I bowed over it.

“ I promise,” I repeated.

“ And that from here you will drive straight to your hotel? ”

“ I promise,” I said for the third time.

“ Then, Mr. Burton, I shall take the risk and keep with you my appointment for to-morrow evening.”

The cab stopped. We were at the dark corners she had named. The street was absolutely empty.

I leaped out. I helped the Countess to the curb.

“ Good night,” I whispered.

“ Look! ” she cried.

I wheeled, my eyes following her pointing finger:

uncurling itself from the springs of our cab there was rising the figure of a man.

I made one leap upon him, just as he got to his feet, and let him have a left-swing to the head that sent him hurtling against the wheel. Then, as he came back to me in a kind of rubber rebound, I flung up my right.

"*La Savate!*" I heard the Countess cry behind me, but it was too late — a swift shimmer of his boot in the lamp-light and he had laid me, groaning, upon the sidewalk.

For a moment I could not have stirred if eternal welfare had been the reward. In a sick daze I saw that the Countess had started to run down the street; that the stolid cabbie sat motionless upon his box, and that the wretched little spy was dashing after my companion. Then, still in the haze of nausea after the kick, I saw her, evidently realizing that to retreat farther would be but to disclose her address, stop short, whereat the spy, with one bound more, was full upon her, his hands at her throat.

How I did it I do not know. My head was still swimming and my whole body in contracted agony, but somehow I was on my feet the instant he came up with her, and somehow, an instant later, I had grabbed the cur by the collar and swung him to the wall of the nearest house, closing

in against another vicious *coup de pied* and, with one turn of the wrist, forcing him to let clatter to the ground the knife that he had drawn as I seized him.

“ Now, mademoiselle,” I said, gasping a bit, but serenely conscious of victory; “ you may go in safety. I regret that our position makes it imperative that I shall neither kill our little friend, nor even hand him over to a *sergent de ville*, but I shall at least have no difficulty in keeping him entertained until you are quite out of sight.”

She looked at me with grateful eyes that repaid everything.

“ I shall not forget,” she said quietly and once again held out her hand.

I bent and kissed it, my own fingers firm about that fellow's bull neck.

“ *Adieu*,” I said.

“ No,” she corrected, laughing as she turned away, “ your French is inaccurate.” And then, over her shoulder, she added: “ *Au revoir*.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE RAID ON THE EMBASSY

“ For thy mouth uttereth thine iniquity, and thou chooseth the tongue of the crafty.

“ Thine own mouth condemneth thee, and not I: yea, thine own lips testify against thee.”

I WAITED until the darkness had swallowed up her footsteps, and then tossed my captive over into the light of the cab-lamp.

He was my friend Cross-Eye of the Austrian embassy.

“ So,” I thought, “ I wonder, now, my man, whether you followed me all the way from the Rue de Varenne.” And aloud, in French, I added: “ Who was it that sent you on this pleasant little mission, — the Baron, Czibulka, or both? ”

His answer was only a torrent of what must have been curses in a tongue that must have been Czeck.

I gave him a little shake just to jolt his intelligence.

“ Come,” I said, “ my French was good enough

for you to understand it a few hours ago. Speak up, and answer my question!"

But he only shook his head, and, as he persisted in this pose, I had nothing to do but submit.

"Very well," I grumbled, "I should prefer a companion whom I could talk to with some hope of replies from him, but, since that's impossible, we shall have to make the best of a bad bargain, and keep silence."

And with that I tossed him into the cab, told the driver to drive anywhere for a quarter of an hour, at the end of which time, while we were still going at a fair pace, I dumped the little fellow into the street and, finally, proceeded to my hotel for the last surprise of the evening.

It was waiting for me in the half-lighted passage outside of my room and its name was Frances Baird.

"Good Heavens!" I cried "I thought you had gone to bed hours ago. Don't you know it's nearly morning? What in the world has been happening now?"

"Open your door," she said laughing a little, "and then I may answer one of your questions at a time."

I obeyed and, when I had snapped on the electricity and had lighted a cigarette, Frances, seated by the curtained window, began her story.

“ I did mean to go to bed,” she declared. “ And I turned in just after you left for the boulevards. — If you care to cross the hall and take a look at my room, you’ll find I’ve told the truth. — But I just couldn’t sleep. I believed more and more that we’d been told a pretty pack of lies by the ambassador, and it was impossible for me to rest before I had proved it.”

“ And so — ”

“ And so I robbed the embassy.”

I dropped my cigarette: “ You robbed — ”

“ Tried to, at any rate. The crime is in the intent, you know — and this was at least felonious entry.”

“ But why — ? ”

“ Because I had an idea that if the truth were anywhere — and I begin now to doubt that it is — then the Baron’s secret papers would be the place to seek it.”

“ And you actually robbed the house? ”

Frances’s voice became petulant.

“ See here, Sammy,” she demurred, “ do you want to hear this story, or don’t you? If you don’t, I shall not tell it; but if you do, you must not interrupt me again.”

I threw up my hands in token of surrender and she continued:

“ It’s not the first work of this sort that I have

had to try, and, against just such sort of circumstances, I always carry a more or less complete set of burglar's tools as a regular part of my travelling-kit. That you perhaps did not know. You do know, however, that I have also with me on my little trips a comfortable Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers. These I put on this evening. Then I got your raincoat over them, and left the hotel with the tools in the coat-pocket.

“As soon as I got in the neighbourhood of the embassy, I chucked the coat into a dark corner and began to look over the ground. First of all, of course, I made for the window that Czibulka broke this evening; it was, just as I had expected, covered only by light boards, but it was too exposed, so I gave up that line of attack without any more delay and began to inspect the burglar alarms, only to find that the house was thoroughly wired.

“That was annoying, of course, but it was hardly to be considered a final set-back, for I turned my attention at once to the house next door and found that there, at least, the inhabitants weren't so horribly suspicious of mankind — or,” she smiled, “womankind. This place was, in fact, free from any wiring whatever, and I made an entry easily enough by picking the crude lock to a basement door. From there it was no

trouble to make my way to the roof and, as this roof was only about four feet higher than that of the embassy, I was soon tiptoeing through the darkness over our unsuspecting Baron's head.

“ It didn't take me very long to find what I was after: the wire that must connect the embassy with the police-station, or whatever corresponds to a police-station in this benighted city, came up by the cluster of chimney-pots, and I first clipped it completely and then, just not to overlook any bets, I snipped the telephone wires as well. A few minutes more and I had stumbled over a trap-door that wasn't wired, fortunately, and so got to the loft and, at last, to the stairway.

“ It was pitch black and I didn't dare to use my light, but, once I had got my shoes off and slung them, by the strings, over my shoulder, I didn't much care, for I knew that all these older French houses are built on the same plan and, if I could only reach the ground floor without spilling myself noisily, I was sure of being able to walk directly to the ambassador's office where we had our little conversation with him a few hours before.

“ I did it, too. Oh, there was an adventure or so on the way! Once I encountered a sudden turn in the stairs, and the steps, naturally, creaked frightfully, but I stopped for a good five minutes

after every sound and, considering that I am rather an amateur at burglary, I think I made a pretty successful journey.

“ Inside the office everything was precisely as we last saw it. I had noticed, during my former call, that the safe was a miserably old-fashioned affair and now, as soon as I got my electric glow on it, I found that the lock was a mere commonplace contrivance that would hardly stop a child. It was so old that anybody with a well-trained ear couldn't have helped but hear the catches fall, and in not a second more than fifteen minutes, I had the door open and was going through the private papers of the Baron de Hetzendorf.

“ But I didn't learn much. Many of them were entirely personal — even intimate — in fact, I unearthed enough to get the Baroness (if there is a Baroness) three or four divorces; but that was not exactly what I was after. Then again a lot were in cipher, and there wasn't time to bother with prize puzzles. What was then left seemed to be the sort of thing that would be of no end of interest to diplomats in general, but about our particular little murder-party, there was not a scratch that came under my eyes, though I searched everywhere, until —

“ Well, until I heard a slight sound on the stairs.

“Sammy, I think you know that I am not of a nervous temperament — I’ve outgrown it — but, upon my word, as I knelt there in that silent room, with a glow-light in one hand and a revolver in the other, an open safe in front of me and a heap of papers at my feet — as I knelt there and heard that sudden creak out of the blackness beyond the frail room-door — the blackness full of enemies, who wouldn’t hesitate a moment about what was the correct way to deal with an intruder like me — as I knelt there, I tell you, Sammy, I shook like a sweet girl graduate.

“Then I snapped out my light and listened. For some time — or, surely, for quite a dozen booming heart-beats! — the stillness ached along unbroken. But it didn’t fool me, because I am something of a connoisseur in the various brands of silence and I knew immediately that, as the former had been the sleeping, so this was the wide awake kind. I can’t tell you just what it is that makes the difference, but a real difference there is, and this time I knew it at once: out there in the house somebody was sneaking down the stairs the foot of which was just outside that door.

“I couldn’t have hesitated long after that. It took me almost no time at all to bundle up those papers and slam them into the safe — and just

as I was going to close the door, I heard that sound again.

“ Well, it was better anyhow, for a safe-door that is just swung to may be the result of carelessness, and may even go unnoticed for hours, but the safe-door that closes with a snap in the dead of night is apt to send out something of a sound. Anyhow, what I did was to swing to that piece of iron and make a hop-skip-and-jump to the very curtain that had so conveniently sheltered our Czeck friend during a part of our call on the ambassador.

“ It wasn't an original procedure, I grant you that, Sammy, but it seemed the only course left me. The other windows aren't so well curtained and the door would have been just where I should have met whomever — or whatever — it was that was on the stairs. Anyhow, I did it — and I wasn't a quarter of a second too soon: my head was still out of the curtain when the step outside came again, quite plainly this time, and halted just before the office. Then the door creaked slowly on its hinges; it opened, and a shadow — a kind of double blackness — slipped into the room and across it. I held my breath, but kept my eyes staring: I saw the shadow stop before the safe; I saw a spot-light flare up and show the lock — and in that streak of light I saw the man.

“ It was Czibulka.

“ I don't know whether the gypsy was angry or not. He had a right to be, at any rate, for he had found that safe open and he evidently thought that he was face to face with the proof of some gross carelessness on the part of whatever clerk whose duty it is to set that room in order when it is closed for the night. But in any case, our friend didn't waste time in scolding clerks that were doubtless abed: he had clearly come there to rob the place himself, and he at once set about his business.

“ He set about it too quickly altogether. I saw that at once. The hurried way in which he fumbled among those papers and tossed and tumbled them made me sure that something was soon bound to happen — and soon something did.

“ His trembling hands picked up a tin dispatch-box and let it fall crashing to the hard wood floor.

“ He snapped out his light immediately, and there was a long, horrid pause.

“ Just fancy it, Sammy. There we were: two thieves, a spy spying upon a spy, in a pitch black room, the house full of dangers, and the sudden alarm still ringing in loud overtones in our ears.

“ I was pressed tight back behind my curtains. My own breath was altogether suspended, but I could hear Czibulka's, coming out of the midnight

obscurity, several feet away, where he must have been crouching like a wild beast in some sort of fierce panic. I don't know how he stood it; I'm sure that I couldn't have stood it much longer — I should have shrieked like any ordinary woman — but at last, at the instant when the agony climbed up to my throat and tore at it, the end came like a lightning-stroke.

“ Without a single warning-sound from outside, the room was flooded with light, and, there, in the open doorway, stood the ambassador, fully dressed, his revolver levelled at the terrified Czibulka's head.

“ It was a tableau well worth risking a good deal to see. The old Baron is the genuine thing, and there's no mistake about that, for there he was with death in his hand and death threatening him, and not a line of his old eagle-face showed even a twitch of surprise. Just a yard or two away was Czibulka, half risen, his eyes wide with fright, his own gun clutched in a spasmodic grip, but clutched a second too late. It was quite a breathing-spell before I realized that my head must be half way out between those curtains, and it was even an instant later that I got it back into safe hiding again.

“ An interminable time seemed to pass before anyone uttered a word. Then I heard the am-

bassador, talking in his best and most dignified French, say:

“ ‘ Put down your weapon, my friend.’ ”

“ Czibulka’s revolver clattered to the floor as if it were the very echo of the Baron’s command.

“ ‘ I suppose,’ the Baron went on, after another long pause, in which I knew that he was boring holes through the little man of the scar, ‘ I suppose that the proper guard of this room is in your pay. At all events, I do not care to risk an interruption, so I shall be obliged to take your weapon and lock the door.’ ”

“ I heard him do this, and then I heard him, still in French, continue:

“ ‘ Now, sir, what have you to say for yourself?’ ”

“ Czibulka must have squirmed physically. He surely squirmed intellectually, for he jabbered out appeals and contradictions so fast that I couldn’t follow him at all, especially as part of them were in bad German and the rest, I imagine, in Czeck. But the ambassador was as hard as nails.

“ ‘ It is of no use, sir,’ he declared; ‘ you may take my word for that. Moreover, I have but to press this button either to waken the servants or to turn you over to the gendarmes. One or other of these things I shall certainly do im-

mediately, unless you make a full confession to me. Come!’

“That fetched Czibulka. He gave up his whole soul — and, as the Baron had stuck to the language of diplomacy, Bolfras Czibulka also adopted it, and I understood every word.

“It seems that the gypsy has, as I hinted this afternoon, been playing a double game. ‘The other side,’ as he calls them — and by that I suppose he means the Countess, the Colonel and their allies — suppose him to be with them, whereas he has all along been hunting with the hounds and running with the hares, in order to sell out at the last moment to whichever party would bid the higher figure, or seemed the more likely to win.

“He admitted that he had told the Countess, as soon as he himself had been informed of it, all about what he characterized as ‘the murder at Mountville.’ Then he said that he had fallen ill, just as the Baron told us. That, of course, changed the date of the killing, but, also, of course, prohibited Czibulka from telling the Countess of the postponement. There you have the explanation of her curious call on me, and her foreknowledge of the crime, of course, being afraid herself to go to the scene of the murder to recover the papers when she fancied the place would be

under the eye of the police, who would have been brought there by the assassination.

“ So far, so good. But then followed a dialogue of which I don't even now, after thinking on it ever since, seem able to grasp the true inwardness. As soon as I saw that it touched another mystery, I tried to remember every single word of it, and I think that it ran thus :

“ ‘ How did it happen,’ asked the Baron, ‘ that you did not, in the first place, let them know of the plan in time to prevent the killing? ’

“ ‘ Because,’ said Czibulka, — and he was almost sobbing now — the disgusting, little pig! — ‘ because I was not told of it until the last moment. I did know, however, that the Countess was on her way to Mountville, and so got into touch with her at the earliest possible time — which was when she was at her Philadelphia hotel. I thought then that by the time she heard from me it would be all over, and that I should still be keeping faith with her by telling her so. To add colour to my appearance of loyalty to “ the other side,” I told her to look up this Baird woman, of whom I had heard in Washington, and to commission her to recover *the proofs of the dead man's identity*. These, I pointed out, we knew were in a certain dispatch-box and would be at least some sort of weapon, even if

not so good as the man himself — though all the while I felt sure that our agent would have made away with them.’

“ ‘ And then?’

“ ‘ Then I was delayed, and got to the farm a day late, and everything went wrong. I reached the house while the two were on their way to the post-office, but they came back much sooner than I had expected — just as I told you before: The Prince wanted to go up-stairs — I heard him say so. There was a scuffle — and *he* killed *our* man.’

“ ‘ You must have chosen a weakling.’

“ ‘ I do not think so, monsieur. Besides, I did not choose him; the chief did that: I never saw him until I ran down the stairs and found him dead, with the Prince standing over him and denouncing me. — They both looked strong enough then, but the Prince had the double strength of madness.’

“ ‘ He always had, you remember.’

“ ‘ I had never set eyes on him. I had been in school in England from my fifth year until — ’

“ ‘ Exactly. — Go on with your story.’

“ ‘ There was only one safe course for me, and that I had to take quickly. With much cajoling, however, I succeeded with it: I convinced this lunatic that I was his friend, not the friend of the

dead man; I wired the news to the Countess's New York hotel; I saw him safe to Philadelphia, where she met us, and then I returned to Washington and made my report to our Government.'

" 'Your false report,' corrected the Baron.

" 'It was false, monsieur, in only one particular.'

" 'Hum. — Yes: the rather important particular that the Prince was handed over by you to our enemies, instead of escaping from you, as you had informed us. — Well, I suppose you know what you deserve.'

" Czibulka acknowledged that he did know what he deserved, and the Baron promptly assured him that he would get it. Then the Czeck threw another fit, and the ambassador told him that the only way of gaining a pardon was for the little fellow, to-morrow midnight, to turn over to the embassy's forces the man they had been calling the Prince, and to turn over the Prince's present keepers along with him.

" Well, Czibulka said this was impossible. He said that he had never known the Paris address of the Countess and her allies. The original arrangement that he had made in parting with her and the Prince in Philadelphia was that he should meet her at ten o'clock to-morrow evening at L'Abbaye, in the Place

Pigalle, and that she was at that time to give to him the address of their Moscow headquarters, because, during the day preceding (which, I take it, meant sometime during the day that is now looking in at these windows) the Colonel was to start with his mad ward for Russia.

“ But I had to conclude that the Baron wouldn't be a pleasant man to work for; he has not any slightest use for excuses. He just told Czibulka that the latter could easily do the trick, because, next evening, the gang would either be in the city or else have fallen already into the hands of the embassy's forces. This, he said, was so, because all the railways are watched and the *octroi* so packed with his agents that escape from Paris would be entirely out of the question.

“ ‘ Come, now,’ he said, ‘ this is my bargain: if we catch them by our means, you are to pay with your life; if they have reason to fear that we are watching, and if they, therefore, remain in Paris, then you get their address from the Countess to-morrow evening, and so save yourself — on condition, my friend, that you return immediately to the United States and give to that country the benefit of your citizenship for ever!’

“ Czibulka tried hard to get out of it; he

endeavoured to show that the chances were too heavily in favour of an attempted escape by rail or motor, but the Baron only laughed.

“ ‘ It is a better chance than you are entitled to,’ he said — and I most certainly agree with him! — ‘ As a matter of fact, it is better than you guess, for, a quarter of an hour ago, my man, Schram Revicta, telephoned me that he had come across the Countess’s trail only to be detected and thrown off by the young newspaper reporter that was here this afternoon, and who, of course, has told her of what I foolishly let out about the guarded railways. — Now then, are you willing to take your chance?’ ”

“ That about ends my story. Czibulka grovelled a bit and swore fidelity — to which the ambassador replied that treachery would be quite impossible, because he would be shadowed from that moment forward, only to be killed at the first token of revolt, and that, to begin with, he must be placed at once under guard. And then — well, then they got out of the room and I forced the boards of that window and made tracks for this hotel.”

CHAPTER XIV

CAUGHT IN THE NET

“Boast not thyself of to-morrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.”

FRANCES ended her story with a long sigh.

“There,” she declared, “you have it all and, before you say what you make of it, you may as well tell me how you happened to meet up with the Countess and what trouble you’ve got into.”

I obeyed as well as I could, and then we sat on until the cold, Parisian dawn shivered through the windows, threshing over together all the developments of the preceding night.

What was the truth? How much of it had we been told and how much that had been said to us had been but diplomatic falsehood? Who was this Prince about whom so strange and so silent a battle was raging in this centre of a peaceful civilization? What cause was at stake that could force so beautiful a woman as the Countess Routkovsky to such bloody adventures, and impel so exalted a personage as the Austrian ambassador to such desperate extremities? One

thing alone seemed certain: that the farther we proceeded into the labyrinth, the more hazardous appeared our journey and the smaller our hope of a safe return.

Through it all, however, even when the circumstances surrounding her actions almost compelled suspicion, I stood out for the Countess. No argument, I declared, would, either then or in the future, convince me of any criminality upon her part, and no bribe would re-enlist me against her. I had made up my mind to offer my sword to her service, and I gave formal notice that, upon the morrow evening, I should be found openly under her flag.

It was some comfort to find that Frances was, upon the whole, inclined to agree with my convictions. She was, of course, first of all a detective searching, with as little bias as possible, for the truth, but she was also a woman that had been tricked by the ambassador and one that had all of a woman's hatred for the man that had deceived her. Her attitude was now, in short, that she inclined to my view of the case and that, while reserving a final judgment, she proposed to work constantly ahead in the hope of uncovering something that should prove at least disconcerting to the Baron. In the end, when I gave feeble expression to the fever of distress

in which I writhed at the thought of the dungeon-walls closing in upon the Countess, she had also the good sense to point out that all I could do now was to get myself into as good shape as possible for the hidden difficulties that lay before me and that the best way to begin such a task was at once to get to sleep.

When we met again at the breakfast table, which we reached at four o'clock in the afternoon, Frances was even more ready.

"Czibulka," she began, "is to meet the Countess Stephanie at L'Abbaye at ten this evening. Your appointment was for an hour later. Very well, the proper course for you to pursue is to go early to the Place Pigalle, to stop the Countess as she enters — before Bolfras can possibly get a word alone with her — and then you must warn her of Czibulka's treachery."

"And you?" I asked. "What are you going to do?"

"I shall stay here, waiting close to the 'phone. You will have some trouble, I'm afraid, in convincing the Countess of my good intentions, but, just as soon as you have succeeded, call me up and then we must all three get together and see what can be done to help her. In the meantime, in order that you may provide against the unlikely contingency of a battle of wits with our

friend the Judas, I hold, literally, one last card against him, which, if you don't mind, I shall now instruct you how to play."

To those concluding instructions I listened with both ears alert, and, when we finally parted, it was with refreshed confidence. I could even walk up to the Louvre with some mind for what I could see on the way and, returning, eat with some show of enjoyment a little supper at the Café de Paris. In fact, I managed to put in a few not unpleasant hours on this second day in the City of Gayety and at last, at a quarter after nine, got into a cab by the Halles aux Vins feeling fairly comfortable and quite ready to begin my expedition in behalf of the Countess.

But then the troubles of the night began. My driver had seemed to have some difficulty in comprehending my instructions; he had started out at a pace that would have shamed an Alabama accommodation train, and it shortly began to appear that, if he were heading at all for Montmartre, he was at any rate making his way thither only by the most roundabout course conceivable. Twice he stopped, descended from his box and, poking his thick head and red face in at the window, asked me again where it was that I desired to be driven. Twice more he stopped and exchanged befuddled question and

answer with solitary pedestrians along the dark and narrow streets, which we were now so slowly traversing. And, at last, on a steep incline, he came to a full stop.

We alighted, I think, simultaneously, for I was now almost mad with my anxiety and, to my annoyance, the driver, I at once observed, was mad with drink.

“Get inside this cab!” I shouted in the best French that my anger would permit me. “Get inside, I tell you, and let me take the reins! I’ve hired you and I mean to get to my destination in decent time!”

For answer he swayed uncertainly before me for an instant and then, with the bellow of a great bull, he plunged forward upon me. I caught him on the chin, but he was a mite too quick for me and my blow landed a little too far from the point to be wholly effective. He reeled, but, as if the shock had driven the fumes of brandy from his head, he turned abruptly and I saw his great, wooden *sabot* flash in the air.

But I was not twice to be caught by the same trick. Not dexterously, perhaps, but at least with result, I ducked, grabbed the fellow’s foot in both hands, swung it to my shoulder and dumped its owner into the gutter just as there was

a clatter of arms from out of the darkness above us and a party of three *agents de la police* descended in the name of the Republic and the Law.

I have been arrested more than once in my time and, unless some miracle should remake what we know as human justice, I hope again to be arrested before death ends all my chances. But I don't especially care ever to be restrained in circumstances quite so disquieting. My drunken driver had wasted no end of precious minutes; my present approaching captors would be likely to hold me a prisoner in all events until after ten o'clock, and, all the while, from some unknown house in that city, the Countess Stephanie was making her way toward the trap in the Place Pigalle.

It was no moment for amenities. I leaped nimbly away from the outstretched hand of the headmost *gendarme*; doubled; tripped the second; caught the third under his Gallic ear, and made off up the street and into the protecting darkness.

For half a minute I could hear nothing but my own foot-falls pounding on the stones. Then there were yells — or rather shrieks — from my new enemies, and then came the rush of pursuit. Blindly I turned off at the first corner, rounded

another, came panting into a more busy thoroughfare and, by good luck, found myself almost dashing into a taximetre that displayed the welcome sign: "*Libre.*"

"*Place Pigalle! L'Abbaye! Vite!*" I managed barely to gasp, and instantly the automobile was moving, at a goodly pace, away from the danger that I feared and toward the peril that I courted.

But I had lost much valuable time. As we rolled into the Place Pigalle, I looked for the first time at my watch: it was two minutes after ten.

I paid my cabman and, on the curb, stood hesitant. Should I wait outside of Albert's on the chance that the Countess might be late? If I entered, I should be sure to find Czibulka, because it is certain that a man with his life at stake will take care to be prompt. On the other hand, if the Countess had already arrived, the least delay on my part might prove fatal. I resolved to go in at once and play whatever game seemed best.

It was still an early hour for L'Abbaye. The red-coated band had but just begun its evening concert; half the waiters stood somnolent, oblivious statues about the brilliant green and white room; and scarce a dozen tables were

taken. But the good goddess had not altogether forsaken me: at the place where I had come upon the Countess the night before, her back to the same low partition over which my view on the preceding evening had been obscured by her large, black hat, she was now just in the act of seating herself beside the waiting Czibulka.

I was still in time! She had but by one moment preceded me. The traitor could not yet have learned her address, and, since it was impossible for me to forewarn her, I might yet play Frances's last card.

With all the smiling unconcern that I could muster, I greeted them both.

"Mademoiselle la Comtesse," said I bowing, and then, as if just catching sight of her companion: "Ah, and Monsieur Czibulka also? This is indeed charming! I had no idea that my two friends were acquainted."

Czibulka was frankly annoyed, as, of course, who would not be in his place? And the Countess, I am bound to say, was quite as frankly surprised.

"I had scarcely expected you so soon, Mr. Burton," she said to me in a tone of restrained annoyance, her eyebrows raised in something not unlike a cold displeasure.

"And I," growled Czibulka, trying hard to

smile and not succeeding except so far as to display his teeth, "I had not expected you at all."

They had neither of them asked me to join them, but I overlooked the absence of an invitation and sat down anyhow.

"All the better," I laughed. "These little fêtes are never so pleasant as when impromptu. Permit me to call a waiter."

I did it, too. Mademoiselle grew more and more haughty and Czibulka more and more nervous, but I played to its end the unsympathetic rôle of the fool that doesn't have the merest notion that he is the third person who is making a crowd. I ordered the supper and the wine, and made them eat and drink; I filled their silences with inane chatter; I was totally blind to their anger and stone deaf to their innuendoes.

But, in the end, it was the Countess that won. Implicitly confident that Czibulka was her ally and not ready to take me into her confidence, she remained resolved upon getting rid of me in order to have her appointed talk with the traitor, and, at last, when every other means had been exhausted, she began an outrageous flirtation with the fellow, who, noticing that she had found the flaw in my armour and absurdly flattered even by the attention of the woman he was

about to betray, turned upon me with his ugliest frown.

“Monsieur,” he said, “this farce has proceeded far enough. The hour grows late, and mademoiselle has a word or two to say to me in private.”

My fingers closed tight about the stem of my wine-glass and I felt receding from my cheeks all the blood that Stephanie’s ruse had sent there. But I was still sane enough to conquer my anger and to realize that my only hope and hers lay in the retention of my calm.

“A thousand pardons!” I exclaimed, still true — though by what an effort! — to my clownish rôle. “I had no idea that I was intruding!” — And I rose to my feet.

Czibulka’s hard face cracked into a grin that I am sure was meant to express genuine good-nature.

“Oh, not an intrusion, Mr. Burton!” he protested. “It has been a most merry evening — ”

“Very merry,” murmured Stephanie politely.

“But,” continued her companion, “I have indeed that little word or so to say, and if monsieur will but do me the honour to be my guest here, with mademoiselle, to-morrow evening — ”

“With pleasure,” I interrupted. “And I

now go." — I fumbled in my waistcoat pocket. — "My hotel address is written there," I said, and held out to him a card.

Still grinning with pride at the triumph of what he must have considered his masterful diplomacy, Czibulka graciously held out his left hand and took the bit of cardboard between his thumb and his forefinger.

I glanced down.

"Oh!" I cried. "I beg your pardon. How stupid of me! I must have given you the wrong card."

But Czibulka, though somewhat tardily, had recognized the trick. His face went ashen and, as I made a movement to recover the card, he too sprang to his feet. As he did so, my fingers closed about his wrist; I gave it a quick twist and, as a low cry broke from my enemy, the bit of pasteboard fluttered from his aching fingers and fell before Stephanie's plate.

"Why," she exclaimed, picking up the card, "it is waxed!"

I looked at Czibulka. He stood across the table from me, his eyes like a frog's in his pasty face; his bristling hair more erect than ever and the strange scar flashing from red to purple upon his low brow.

"Yes, mademoiselle," said I; "the card is

waxed, and it shows the imprint of this gentleman's left thumb. You may know that, in all the world, there are no two men that have thumbs similarly marked. Do me the honour then," — and I crossed to them, still smiling — "do me the honour, mademoiselle, pray — while I stand between you and your friend here — of comparing that imprint in the waxed card with this one in blood, which I found in the house at Mountville beside the dead body of Hans Jaeger."

With that, I again caught Czibulka's wrist in a tight grip and, never so much as looking toward him, presented to Stephanie the bit of crimsoned newspaper, which we had secured at the scene of the murder and which Frances had, only a few hours before, turned over to me for this purpose.

It was a chance shot. For all we knew that madman, Wilhelm Jaeger, now, evidently, the much-desired Prince, might also be left-handed and the blood that the Rhorerstown ticker-seller had seen on Czibulka's fingers might have got there after the actual murder, but, though its results were far from what I had expected, it was a true shot nevertheless.

Stephanie looked first at one impression and then at the other. My eyes devoured her, hungry for the expression of horror that I momen-

tarily expected to see painted upon her face. But nothing of the sort appeared. A slight line — the mere symbol of puzzled concentration — was drawn between her brows and then, looking up at me, she said very quietly:

“ Monsieur, it is the same.”

“ Well, then,” I cried in triumph, “ can’t you see? This man is the murderer of Hans Jaeger! ”

And just there my tremendous melodrama fell to bits.

Stephanie smiled.

“ My dear friend,” she said, “ I did not require this card to convince me of it. Monsieur Czibulka’s word was sufficient.”

“ His word? ” I repeated in utter bewilderment.

“ Yes, Mr. Burton,” she nodded. “ I have for some weeks known that Monsieur Czibulka killed that villain.”

CHAPTER XV

THE TRUTH ABOUT JAEGER

“Woe to thee . . . when thy king is a child.”

IF it had not been for Czibulka himself, I think that I should have quit right there. But when I shot a glance at him and saw that ugly face of his again wreathed in an unholy grin, I made up my mind in that moment to try still one more trump.

“Sir,” I said, my voice steady again, “a moment ago you remarked that the hour grew late, and I acquiesced with you. I still agree. — But it is now I who have a word to say to mademoiselle in private.”

He gave a sudden start that shook him free of my hold.

“You amuse me, Mr. Burton,” he growled, though his face was not precisely what one might call the picture of pleasure.

“I thank you for the praise,” I replied somewhat icily. “I should not have guessed it had you not told it to me yourself. But that is not at

all to the point. I wish, Monsieur Czibulka, to speak to mademoiselle alone."

"What?" he stammered excitedly. "When you have heard what she just said?"

I looked again at Stephanie. I strained all my heart to my eyes and pleaded silently.

"Mademoiselle?" I asked.

She studied me with that calm, cool glance of hers, which I had felt the night before. Both my fate and hers were hanging, for her second of hesitation, in the balance, and then:

"I can see no harm," she murmured slowly, her dark eyes clouding to bewilderment, "I can see no harm for a few minutes —"

I turned to Czibulka.

"You hear mademoiselle?" I demanded.

"And, if I should not choose to obey," he blustered.

"If you should not choose to obey, Monsieur Czibulka, I should at once hand you over to the police."

Whether it was from a fear of my effecting that threat, or a sense that he must meet her confidence in him with a seemingly corresponding confidence, or whether, again, it was the man's sublime faith in the position in which she had just placed him, I cannot, for my own part, determine, but, for whatever reason, he finally shrugged

his shoulders and even achieved another vacuous grin.

“Very well, monsieur,” he agreed. “I shall do better for you than a ‘few minutes.’ I shall go and not return for half an hour.”

He frowned with unconcealed hostility at me, smiled at Stephanie, bowed over her extended hand and made for the door.

I watched his little figure with its crown of bristling black until I had made sure that he was really gone. Then I took the place that he had left vacant beside Stephanie.

“Mademoiselle,” said I, “you must listen to me, and, if you would save your life, or, at all events, your cause — whatever that cause may be — you must believe me. That man considers he is safe in leaving you with me, because he believes you think that he killed this man Jaeger in your service.”

Stephanie smiled strangely.

“He did,” she said.

“You do not at all doubt this?” I asked.

“He could have had no other reason.”

“Be that as it may, mademoiselle, but let me tell you something that may make you doubt his loyalty to your cause. My friend, the detective, last night overheard a confession which this Czibulka made to the Baron de Hetzendorf, and

as a result of that enforced confession, the ambassador has promised to spare Bolfras Czibulka's life only on condition that he this evening get your address from you and deliver you and your friends into the ambassador's hands."

Her marble face paled whiter, if possible, and then flushed to crimson.

"Monsieur," she demanded, her head very high and her eyes aflame, "how do you dare to ask me to believe so vile a story?"

"Mademoiselle," I answered, "how else did I know that you were to be here at ten o'clock to meet the Austrian?"

She looked at me searchingly for a long moment, and then, suddenly, her eyes fell. She half rose.

Gently, I forced her back to her chair.

"Sit down," I ordered.

"Why do you try to detain me?" she demanded. "If what you tell me is true, there is not a moment to be lost here: I must go from this place immediately."

"You cannot leave here," I made answer. "The ambassador has spies near at hand to watch Czibulka and force him to allegiance, and this place is undoubtedly surrounded."

"Ah!" she tossed her head like a restrained wild animal. Her eyes were blazing again — blazing with the ancient hate that the eyes of

her ancestors must have known. "In that case, there remains but one thing for us to do."

She took my hand between her hot palms.

"Monsieur," she continued, "you say that you are my friend; you have told me that you would serve me. Come, then: will you kill this viper — for me?"

I don't think that I was ever nearer promising to do murder: I met her gaze with all the heart of me afire, but I knew that murder is always the last resort, and then, frequently, but the resort of a coward, and I was not yet prepared to admit that all my fund of ingenuity had been exhausted.

"Mademoiselle," I swore, returning the pressure of her hands, "I will serve you even to that, if it becomes best. But I should serve you ill indeed if I ruined both of us while there is still a chance of outwitting our enemies. At least so long as we remain in this café, we shall be safe, and Czibulka, ignorant of my knowledge of his treachery, will surely give us the half hour that he promised. We may, then, take a reasonable amount of time in forming our plans. But before I can advise you, I must know the truth of this project upon which you are engaged: you must tell me the whole truth."

Slowly she released her hands from mine and, placing them on my shoulders, drew my face close

to hers. I don't know what the other customers of Monsieur Albert were thinking — the tables were almost filled with them by this time — but they were not unused to such actions, prompted by whatever motive, and, at any rate, I didn't care. It was, and is, enough for me that she did it.

“ My friend,” she whispered slowly — “ You are indeed my friend? ”

My heart gave a great bound at her question.

“ Now and for always I am your friend,” I vowed.

She unloosed me gently and, her eyes still fixed, gave her decision :

“ I shall tell you all.”

“ Then,” said I, with difficulty getting down to practicalities, “ who is Wilhelm Jaeger, anyhow? ”

She replied quietly :

“ He is the only legitimate son of Franz-Josef ; he is the heir to the throne of all Austria ; he is Rudolf, the Prince Imperial.”

CHAPTER XVI

SUPPRESSED HISTORY

“For the lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil:

“But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword.

“Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell.”

THE room seemed suddenly aglow with more brilliant lights. I had been thinking only of my own part in this farce — or tragedy — that was being enacted in one corner of L'Abbaye's green and white room, but somehow at the sound of that one word, I looked up to see the gay colours — mostly reds it seemed — that now nearly crowded the *salon*.

“Rudolf!” I echoed.

“Hush!” she cautioned. “Do not speak so loud. You do not know who may overhear you in such a place as this.”

“But,” I protested, “surely it was Rudolf who killed his sweetheart and blew out his own brains at Mayerling in 1889.”

Stephanie shook her burnished head.

“ No one at court,” she began, “ ever believed the published accounts of the tragedy at Mayerling. The Prince’s love-affair was common knowledge, and his marriage to the proud, shallow, bad-tempered daughter of King Leopold had nearly wrecked his reason, but, although these facts would account for much of the story, they could hardly account for the discrepancies in the official narrative.

“ Much of the truth you must already know, Mr. Burton. How the Princess sent word to her father that she intended to leave her royal husband; how Leopold telegraphed to her, in reply, ordering her to remain; how Rudolf, mad in his love for Marie Vetsera, wrote to the Holy Father, asking an annulment of his marriage in order that he might give up his claim to the throne, and retire, with his new wife, into private life, and how Leo XIII sent the Prince’s letter to Franz-Josef — of these things, at least, the entire world has long since been aware. Here, throughout Europe, whatever you may have heard in the United States, we know, too, that, the night after this letter reached the Emperor, he summoned to him Rudolf, the Archduke Charles-Louis and the Prince-Archbishop of Vienna. We know that a scene of storm followed, but that the Prince Imperial refused flatly to retreat from his position; that, when the father and the son were

left together alone, the dispute must have waxed still warmer, because Rudi came out of the room as white as a ghost and the Emperor's valet, entering later, found his master in a faint. Anyone that was then at the court will tell you that, the next morning, Franz-Josef, as soon as he awakened, sent for his son only to learn that the Prince had left still earlier for Mayerling, where his friends, Count Hoyos and Prince Philip of Coburg, were shooting, and even the Viennese newspapers printed the fact that, on that very evening, there came a brief note from Rudolf saying that he was slightly indisposed and that he would not return for the dinner in honour of the Archduchess Marie-Valerie and her fiancé, the Archduke Francis-Salvator."

Stephanie paused.

"Yes," I said; "most of those facts we heard, even in America."

"And how Marie Vetsera went to Mayerling — did your American papers print that too?"

I began to remember.

"I think," said I, "that they said that she had received, that day, a note that she immediately destroyed, at once leaving her home and going afoot to the florist's shop, which she was in the habit of patronizing."

"Precisely so, my friend. And there, at the florist shop, she purchased an unusually large

bunch of violets. These served as a badge of identification to a cab-driver that was waiting at that time for a woman so decorated — Bratfisch, the Crown Prince's favourite *cocher*, into whose carriage she was seen by passersby to enter, driving rapidly away."

"I remember all that, mademoiselle. I recall, too, that Rudolf had said that he suffered from a cold and would, therefore, remain indoors while the Prince of Coburg and the Count Hoyos went shooting; that, at Mayerling, Rudolf himself, it was currently reported, met Bratfisch's carriage, and conducted its occupant to a *salon* in his private suite of apartments in the palace; that his friends, returning home, found a note from him, saying that he would not wait up for them; that he dined alone and went to bed early. — The next morning, Rudolf was found shot through the head and Marie Vetsera was dead from poison."

"That, my friend, was the general belief. At first the official announcements had it that the Prince had died 'from an aneurism of the heart.' But, frankly, did you never stop to think that no persons, save the court doctors and Rudolf's friends, Coburg and Hoyos, ever actually saw the body; that the dead Prince Imperial was taken secretly from Mayerling, and that only when people began to gossip was the suicide-story

brought forward at the suggestion of the Duchess Ludovica of Bavaria, mother of the Empress Elizabeth? ”

“ I never did, but, even so — ”

“ Attend a moment. As for the body of Marie Vetsera, no one at all saw that. In the final version of the narrative, after the suicide-story had been given out, it was said that this body was by night smuggled out a back door at Mayerling, twenty-four hours after the Prince’s had been removed for burial. They said also that it had been taken into the forest, put on a wagon, concealed for a day or more in the chapel of Heiligenkreutz and then carried to some remote railway station, whence it was hurried to Trieste and so to Venice, where, later, it was reported that the girl had died.”

“ If I remember correctly, we heard nearly all of these details at home,” I said.

“ Yes,” she made answer, “ it was quite possible. But we — some of us in Vienna — did not believe them. Bit by bit we found first one flaw and then another until we became convinced that the Prince was still alive. Me — I am an Hungarian. My father died for the liberty of my native land, and I, the only child of his house, had given my life to such service as a woman might render in the Cause. I was willing — I was anxious — to give my very heart’s blood for it. Now, at last, after long

searching, I was sure that I had come upon something that might be turned to the purpose of freedom. I need not go into all the details. Russia, I was aware, had her own ends to gain and I and my friends made a bargain with her by which we obtained for our aid the wonderful secret service of that most wonderful empire. It was in this manner that we verified our suspicions concerning Rudolf's death and, in the end, learned the truth."

"And that was — ?" I prompted.

"The truth was that Prince Rudolf had indeed declared to his father and to his other advisers that he had determined to marry the woman he loved; he had announced that he was a free man and would give up all claim to the throne and live his own life as he chose to live it. With this intention firm in his mind, he went to Mayerling and sent for Marie in the manner in which all the world now knows. — You know well, by reputation at least, the Austrian pride — greater far than their paternal love — and especially the pride of the Hapsburgs. *Eh bien*. The Archdukes, being immediately informed of Rudolf's attitude, and having been told by the Emperor himself of the impossibility of swerving the Prince from his purpose, resolved — oh, without, I grant you, the knowledge of Franz-Josef! — to nip the scandal in the bud by the ancient and effective method of assas-

sination. They determined to kill the heir to the throne and give it out publicly that he had died of heart disease. They bribed the Prince's body-servant, Loschek, to do the killing. This Loschek entered the room in which were Rudi and Marie and endeavoured to earn his reward, but the Prince, who was powerfully strong, was too quick for his would-be murderer, and overcame him, driving into the servant's heart the knife that had sought his own. At once — that night — Rudolf and his sweetheart fled from Mayerling and completely disappeared."

"But the newspapers," I insisted. "How were they silenced?"

Stephanie shrugged her supple shoulders.

"You must know that Austria is not America," she sufficiently explained. "And," she added, "you must remember that the body was not exposed to general view. The conspirators, in order to protect themselves and seeing that they might use as well one dead man as another, worked upon Franz-Josef's fear of scandal and ended in bringing the Emperor around to their way of thinking. They simply substituted the body of Loschek for that of Rudolf and gave out that the Prince Imperial had died of heart disease, just as they had originally planned to do. It was only when their secrecy about the funeral nearly started

riots in Vienna that the suicide story was adopted, and then, as you may recall, it was further stated that Loschek had been pensioned and sent abroad."

"And the Prince," I asked, "came to the United States?"

Stephanie nodded assent.

"In the meantime," she pursued, "Rudolf had, of course, disappeared. He was, after much time and trouble, traced, by Austrian agents, to a small town in the state of Iowa, where, for some time, he was quietly supported by a pension. Then, suddenly, it was learned by the government that Marie had died, that his loss had completely unseated Rudi's reason and that he had been altogether lost track of. It was at this time that my allies and I began our own investigations."

"You found him?"

"Not at once. Our plan was to get possession of his person, and then, either use that possession as a threat against the Austrian government in order to gain concessions for Hungary, or else, to turn Rudolf over to Russia, and, upon the death of the Emperor, Franz-Josef, to produce him and bring him to the throne, mad as he was, controlled, of course, by Russian advisers, who would at once set my country free. This was good, but, unfortunately, the Austrian agents, from

Washington, were ahead of us in the field. They chose a clever man for their task, and, when he had found the Prince again, they ordered him to maintain the ascendancy he had gained over that enfeebled intellect. These orders the Austrian agent executed to the letter. He took Rudolf to that little farm in Mountville, where the two of them lived as brothers under the assumed name of Jaeger — Wilhelm and Hans Jaeger."

"I begin to see," I said smiling grimly, "in what deep waters I have been trying to swim."

"Deep indeed," admitted Stephanie, with a rueful curve upon her scarlet lips, "I understand, for I have been swimming in them, too. When the Russian spies informed us of this new turn of events, I was sent to America, but, meanwhile, it seems, the Prince had begun to show glimmers of returning reason and the archdukes, learning of our activities — I now can guess from what quarter — became alarmed. Unknown to the Emperor, they once again determined to attempt to assassinate the Prince. Czibulka was to go to Lancaster and oversee the affair. As Rudolf's returning reason had given him some suspicions of the truth, any ransacking of the premises such as was necessary — for, in a dispatch-box the Prince kept many papers that would prove his identity — would have to be done during his

absence or after his death, and, as the murderer must escape in order that the secret be preserved, it was decided that Czibulka should begin his search while the spy was accompanying the Prince to the village post-office."

With every word the mystery was becoming clearer.

"I see," I said, and rapidly explained how I came to know why the plan had been delayed twenty-four hours, and why Stephanie had made her appeal to Frances Baird.

"On the whole, this is right enough," she admitted. "I was advised to seek Miss Baird for the recovery of the Prince's papers, because, it was told me, in a local murder-case, she would have more freedom of action than our Russian spies. This Czibulka seems to have made a comparatively true confession to the ambassador, but of course such a dog as he is could not tell the whole truth to anyone, and he has omitted one important detail. He himself has told me — and the Prince has confirmed it — that, when he heard the struggle below-stairs in the farmhouse, he ran down, discovered the men locked in a death-grasp, picked up a knife and then, deciding quickly that Rudolf was the more valuable piece of property, killed the hired assassin. — Oh," she went on, "he of course explained to me that

he meant all along to serve us, but I know now what his mental process must have been and why, after he had killed one man whom he had never even seen before, he saved another, not for love of that man or love of our Cause, but merely for the money that he might gain. As soon as he had accomplished his deed, he telegraphed to me and, finally, gave the Prince into my keeping to be brought to Paris. It was my first sight of His Highness, and I almost wish it had been my last. But — well, at all events, that ends my story.”

She leaned back in her seat, over her marble face the veil of a great weariness.

“That ends my story,” she repeated, “and my work as well, I believe. The book is now closed for ever, my friend. Hungary, but a moment ago so near to freedom, must remain in servitude, and Prince Rudolf must be delivered over to death.”

But I could not share her mood. My own blood was fired with the final knowledge of the big stakes for which we were playing.

“I should not bet on that, mademoiselle,” I said. “I have still a few more trumps left in my hand, thank you. Come with me.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE LOG OF A DEEP-SEAGOING HANSOM

“Behold, such is our expectation, whither we flee for help to be delivered from the King of Assyria: and how shall we escape?”

FOR a quick instant her black eyes flashed with hope, but as soon again clouded to doubt.

“Go?” she repeated. “My friend, with all my heart. But where and” — her scarlet lips parted in a little spiritless smile — “in Heaven’s name, how?”

“Only one question at a time, mademoiselle,” I answered. “As to our destination, that is simple enough: we must go, as fast as carriage or taxi will drive us, to your address and warn your allies.”

“But, surely this place is now being watched both front and back.”

“Of course it is,” I replied.

“And, if we leave it, we are sure to be followed.”

“I think not, mademoiselle. You have asked me also as to the means of our escape: didn’t

I, last night, notice another restaurant almost next door to this one?"

She nodded: "The Rat Mort."

"Good. And don't you happen to know the proprietor of this place — L'Abbaye?"

"I know the proprietors of both places. My aunt married a Frenchman and both of these men were once on my uncle's estate in Normandy."

"You can trust them?"

"I can trust them absolutely."

Blond Albert, our host of L'Abbaye, was, just as she said this, passing between the narrow aisles in our direction. I beckoned to him.

"Monsieur, it is necessary," I rapidly explained, "that mademoiselle leave here speedily and altogether unobserved. Neither of your exits will serve her purpose. I wish to conduct her across the roofs to the 'Rat Mort.' Can you not arrange this?"

Albert's pleasant, thin face wrinkled perplexedly, and he looked at Stephanie for a further explanation.

"Is mademoiselle the Comtesse sure —," he began.

"Quite sure," she insisted.

Her word and tone were enough to convince the proprietor. The smile leaped back to his lips.

“ At once, monsieur, mademoiselle,” he beamed, “ if you will but be so good as to follow me.”

We lost not a moment. As we hurried by the *salle d'attente*, a bowing waiter handed us our wraps, and, after a sharp turn to the right and a quick passage up a narrow stairway, the Norman, from the darkness, flung wide a hidden trap-door. The cool air of the night caressed our faces. Overhead shone the stars in myriads and underfoot clanked the tiles. We were on the roof.

Nor did Albert's good offices fail us there. It must have been a journey that the exigencies of his business had previously demanded of him, for he guided us rapidly about the many chimney-pots and dexterously led us across to the next house, Stephanie's right hand in his and her left thrilling in my own, until, by what, but for his warnings, would have been a perilous route, he brought us again to a door, which swung slowly open to a light tap from his knuckles.

“ Pierre,” he whispered to the cautious head that was thrust out to inspect us, “ it is I — Albert. It is all right. These are my friends and the friends of your master's. It is as a favour to me that I ask you to permit them to descend.”

Pierre gave a grunt that I took to mean assent. At any rate, I stepped inside, leading Stephanie

carefully after me, and then, before we could even turn to thank Albert, the door had closed upon him and our new guide showed us down other flights of stairs and brought us to the shadowy hallway on the ground floor of the "Rat Mort," where, without a word, he turned away as rapidly as had Albert upon the roof, and left us to our own devices.

I faced my companion. A single dim and flickering gas-jet shone upon the tall figure of the Countess Stephanie and played tricks with the red hair beneath the big black hat, and seemed, I almost thought breathlessly, to make her sway a little toward me as I put out the hand that she took in both of hers.

"Now," I said confidently, "we are about to make our attempt at freedom."

"I am ready," she answered.

"But," I insisted, hesitating a little, "you must not give yourself into my care unless you are sure of me. Thirty-six hours ago you thought me your enemy; even earlier this evening, less than an hour ago, you doubted me."

I felt the slightest pressure of her hand.

"But now," she whispered, "I know you are my friend."

"I am about to leave you here for a moment," I explained. "I am about to step into the street.

For all you know, I may be going to play the traitor and sell your secret. I may be tempted, you know, just as Czibulka was."

She slipped one hand from mine and raised it to my lips. Her face had flushed to crimson, but she spoke calmly.

"You shall not talk so," she said. "I trust you, my friend — entirely. Do you believe me — now?"

And then, with a sudden movement, the first hand passed to my cheek, the other followed, and, lifting her head, she kissed me lightly on the mouth.

"Stephanie!" I cried — and flung wide my arms to catch her.

But she leaped back, laughing.

"Monsieur Quixote," she replied, "when seconds were golden, it seemed the only way to convince you."

My heart sank lower than it had risen.

"Then," I babbled, "you didn't mean it?"

"Oh, you silly, silly boy! Don't you understand that we must hurry? Here, take this little talisman and believe that I meant that I trust you!"

From one of those mysterious recesses where women carry the most surprising of accoutrements, she took a pair of small shining scissors

and, with apparent abandon, clipped free a lock of her glòrious hair.

“ Now,” she said, still laughing as she pressed it into my palm, “ go — go — go! ”

I caught and kissed her hand, but she pushed me forward to the door and I stepped into the street. It was my purpose to go leisurely, as if alone, and, with heart athrob, I think I managed it pretty well.

The hour was early — for Montmartre — and, to my delight, there were only four cabs in evidence. To the driver of one of these — the one just before the door of the Rat Mort — I carelessly beckoned. The *cocher* sprang nimbly forward and I pressed a twenty-franc piece into his hand.

“ Obey orders,” I whispered rapidly. “ Go where you like until told a definite address — but go far and fast! ”

The fellow grinned comprehendingly, touched his gleaming white celluloid hat, leaped into the box, and, as I flung open the door of the cab, seized the reins.

Then I spun about upon my heel and, in the dark shadow of the doorway, laid hold upon Stephanie.

“ Come! ” I cried.

I almost lifted her in my two arms, literally

tossed her into the cab, banged shut its door, sprang to the curb and smacked the horse with a stinging palm.

“*Allez!*” I yelled — and, its driver lashing out with his whip, the crazy vehicle jumped into the darkness.

Then things began to happen like incidents in a cinematograph entertainment. From nowhere and everywhere, the surrounding shadows belched up and spewed forth running men. The street rang with banging feet and shouted curses, and one figure, which I took for Czibulka’s, dashed into the handiest of the three remaining cabs.

But I was too quick to let him accomplish his purpose. In fact, I had counted on just this move by him, and I had my knife in readiness. It was merely a question of one turn of my hand to slash the near trace and put that cab out of business, and then, with a swift blow between the eyes, it was only a matter of tossing aside another spy to get the second cab for myself, to shout to the driver to follow closely that in which Stephanie had just set forth — and so to get clean away.

I fell back, panting heavily, upon the tossing cushions of the cab as we plunged madly, with frightful clamour and terrifying lurchings, down the precipitous street in pursuit of the Countess. The blood was beating in my ears, my heart was

knocking against my ribs. But rest I knew to be entirely out of all question, for I had left one good vehicle behind me and it was certain that it would, at any moment now, be close upon our traces. Nor had I long to wait for the sound of it. We had gone scarcely two blocks when, above the racket of my own cab, I heard the thundering clatter of that other.

And Stephanie's coach was in full view just ahead!

I sat up, my arms stretched wide to save me from beating out my brains against the side of the *taximetre*, and listened with ears strained. There could be no doubt about it: my enemies were gaining on us; they had secured a better horse — the pursuit was gaining steadily.

What to do? It was obvious that I was not the prey they were after. But if they stuck tight behind me, and if I continued to follow Stephanie, I should actually be directing them to her hiding-place. If I turned aside, they would be too keen to strike away from the main trail to nose after any false scent, but, so close were we both to the real quarry, that, if I dashed around the corner at some side street, I should merely be leaving my Countess unguarded. — And yet, there was not an instant to be lost in debate.

At the joyful risk of my neck, I flung wide the

door and yelled until the driver, without any appreciable decrease in our speed, gave husky answer.

“ Turn quickly, straight across the street,” I commanded him loudly — “ and stop! ”

With such a jerk that it tossed me out of the cab and into the gutter, he obeyed me. We were just midway down the steepest hill that I had as yet encountered in all Paris; my enemy, at a break-neck gait, was tumbling not twenty feet behind us, and the thoroughfare was so narrow that we completely blocked the way.

Just as I got to my feet and staggered under my own cab's lamp, the rival driver pulled up his gasping beast until I thought — and hoped! — that the horse with its hurrying carriage containing my enemy would fall against the blockade and be crushed out of existence.

I turned to my man.

“ I have here a hundred-franc note,” I almost shouted. “ It is yours if you follow my orders and keep quiet.”

Then I faced the pursuing cab. My plan was, thus far, working perfectly: with a little more courage, I should be able to hold up the enemy until Stephanie had fled beyond the possibility of being captured by him.

“ You there! ” I shouted.

But I got no answer. The driver sat stolidly upon his box and no face showed itself at the window beneath him.

“Come out of that cab!” I continued.

Still there was no reply.

I took out my watch, placed it, open, in my left hand, glanced at it by the carriage-lamp, and, with my right hand, levelled with a steadiness that almost surprised me at that moment, my revolver at the stolid driver.

“Very well,” I said distinctly. “One of you will do quite as well as the other. I shall hold you here for precisely one minute. At the end of that time, you may go ahead, but, if you dare to move before I shall give you permission, I promise you that I shall first shoot your horse and then blow out your brains.”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE VOICE OF THE PRINCE

“ My lips quivered at the voice: . . . and I trembled in myself.”

You would expect, wouldn't you, something melodramatic by way of reply to a command of that sort? Your civilized literary sense would demand it. And when you didn't get it, you would be apt to alight upon gross earth with what the young reporter describes as “ a dull thud.”

That is precisely what I did. I looked for oaths and protestations from an ever-stolid, ever-silent driver; I was ready for an attack from his thus far invisible passenger. And I received not a sound from either.

It was a strange duel of silence that followed, and far more disconcerting than anything upon which I had counted, but I held my ground grimly and stood prepared for any show of a demonstration, with one eye on the enemy and the other on the watch. Then, when the allotted time had expired, I gave them just a few seconds more of enforced rest for good measure and,

calmly climbing once more into my cab, bade the driver go ahead.

“Where now, monsieur?” he demanded.

I looked up the street — there was not a sign of reinforcements for the pursuer; I looked down — and Stephanie’s cab had vanished into the night.

“Anywhere,” I answered, and closed the door.

At that we began the procession. We went straight along the streets before us and the silent *fiacre* followed us. We turned to the right, and it also turned. We took a chance to the left, and it kept close behind.

The thing began to get on my nerves. I determined to see to whom I was indebted for these faithful attentions and, again at the risk of life or limb, I directed my driver to whip up for a bit and then to stop quickly on the near side of the next strong street-light. He did it — he did it so well that the dumb pursuer could not draw up before he had passed us. And I, leaning far out from my window, caught my desired glimpse of my enemy’s face.

It was Bolfras Czibulka

I got, of course, only that flying glance, but that was quite sufficient to show me that I had to do with a desperate man. Czibulka must have lost his hat in that race for a cab at the entrance to

the Rat Mort: his bristling black hair seemed quivering in its uprightness; his bullet-head was thrust far forward by his thick neck; his heavy face was a vivid white patch against the window, and his little mouse-eyes were almost leaping from their sockets. Czibulka, plainly, was making his last desperate play for life.

Once ahead of me, the man seemed to realize that I had succeeded in losing the scent for him. I suppose he then and there resolved to drop me altogether and make a wild dash forward in some sort of crazy pursuit for the vanished needle in the enormous Parisian haystack. At all events, he gave a shouting order to his driver, and the cab shot forward in front of us.

This reversed our positions. It was I who was now the pursuer, and I didn't fancy my new rôle. The sight of the fellow had, in fact, re-awakened all the hatred of him which I had felt in L'Abbaye, especially during his open delight at the Countess's supposedly strategic flirtation with him, and I made another sudden resolve.

My driver was both a thrifty soul and an adventurer. He agreed — for a price — to carry out my suggestion. He lashed his horse into a quick fury and, as we spun by Monsieur Czibulka's equipage, he obeyed my orders by neatly ripping off its near wheel and spilling its raging

occupant upon the street. It was all perfectly done — save for one small drawback: our own horse went down and I found myself ramming my head into the front cushions.

I picked myself up and surveyed the damage. My beast, between the broken shafts, was lying ahead of us with that terrifying quiescence that the experienced horse offers to every fall. The one driver — mine — was bending over him; the other — my enemy's — was running forward — cursing loudly enough this time — to visit vengeance on the rival that had caused the wreckage. Close behind, Czibulka, his clothes torn, his ashen face a little bloody, and a revolver glinting in his clenched hand, was advancing, presumably upon me.

I didn't fancy being caged in a smashed cab, so I jumped out instead and, as there is no use in waiting for trouble to lay hold on one, I rushed toward Czibulka quite as swiftly as he was rushing my way. Then I stepped politely aside as he was about to reach me and tripped him as he passed.

He went down hard, and I dropped on him like a full-back on the pig-skin, which, indeed, he did, in some measure, resemble. I rammed my knee into his spine, grabbed his throat with my right hand and was just about to wrench away his revolver with the other, when I heard in the dis-

tance a now familiar sound, and decided to hold the fellow's wrist in such a manner that he would not be able to let go that gun even if he wanted to.

For the sound was that of running feet and clattering swords. I had again before me the prospect of an interview with the police of Paris.

They were there, shouting unintelligibly, in an instant, — three of them — and, in another instant, were tugging hard at my shoulders to release the spy.

“One moment, messieurs!” I cried. “One moment, if you please! I shall get up from here immediately, but I ask you first to notice that this man is armed.”

Then I did get up, and they jerked Czibulka after me. I looked them over quickly and thanked my stars to find that none, evidently, had figured in my previous experience with the French constabulary.

“What is the meaning of all this?” demanded their leader, a fiery little sergeant with an *imperial* and a lot of *chevrons*.

Czibulka, whom he addressed, was hurting his cause by struggling to get away from the two men that held him by the shoulders, and to pitch into me again.

Knowing well the value of the first presentation

of a case, I gladly seized the opportunity thus offered.

“ It means,” I lied glibly, “ that this fellow ran down my cab, and that, when I protested, he tried to murder me.”

“ You swine!” shouted Czibulka, shaking his captors until they danced about his twisting arms like twin tails to a kite. “ You swine, you Spanish cow, you duck of a liar! Messieurs, I tell you that it is *I* who am the victim of this outrage!”

“ You saw his revolver, messieurs,” I calmly reminded the puzzled-looking sergeant.

“ But you dare not to offer me the indignity of an arrest,” shrieked Czibulka, completely disregarding my luminous interruption. “ I am an attaché of the Austrian embassy!”

That, I admitted even then — to myself only, however — was a good shot. The men that had a hold on him dropped their grip without a second of hesitation, and the sergeant turned a sharp eye toward me.

“ Monsieur,” I replied in answer to that unspoken inquiry, “ this man may or may not be all that he says. But, for that matter, I may be the American ambassador. — However, does either one of us look our part?”

I saw the sergeant smile grimly.

“ Attend a moment, gentlemen,” said he, and,

beckoning the now panic-stricken drivers toward him, stepped over to his subordinates for a whispered consultation, leaving the now somewhat chastened Czibulka almost shoulder to shoulder with me.

“ Well,” I said pleasantly, “ this has been a ‘ merry evening,’ has it not, monsieur? ”

Czibulka glared.

“ You think yourself very clever — no? ” he growled. “ You have managed to get us both arrested; you have made of us a joke — and what have you gained? ”

“ Why, monsieur,” I responded, smiling a little triumphantly, “ as to that, a good deal, it seems to me. You understand, I have entirely spoiled your chance of learning the address of the Countess Routkovsky and her — friends. ”

But just here I brought myself up short, the smile frozen on my lips. For I saw what an ass I had been at the start of that wild ride: I had neglected to get from Stephanie that address, and now I was quite as ignorant of her whereabouts as was this double traitor Czibulka, who stood uncomfortably at my side!

Without a word, I turned and bolted up the street.

It was the earlier story over again, but with a good deal more emphasis. They yelled and rattled

after me, and one of the *gendarmes* — or, more likely, it was Czibulka — discharged a shot that whistled unpleasantly close to my head. Through the midnight streets I ran on and on — unstopped by the gay pleasure-lovers still enjoying themselves at the cafés — now with the shouts growing fainter, now with the pursuit waxing stronger as other night-prowling keepers of the peace took up the chase and swelled the army of my enemies. I rounded corner after corner, doubling, advancing, falling over curb-stones and dashing into alleys, but always, in a general way, working toward the heart of the city with some idea of mingling at last in the great crowds of the boulevards and gaining, perhaps, my own hotel. It was the blindest and maddest chase of all my checkered career, but it was a winning one, and, when I finally saw the rear of the Madeleine down the empty street before me, the ultimate echoes of pursuit had died away, and I was once more free.

Somehow I had preserved my hat — perhaps through the subconscious memory of how the loss of Czibulka's had injured his appearance and lessened the force of his claims to respectability. I was panting hard, of course, and dripping with sweat, but my light over-coat served to conceal the lamentable condition of my broad shirt front,

and I was concluding that I was at least in form to enter by the bar-door to the Chatham when I reflected that the Baron knew my stopping place and that, if Czibulka had been able by this time to get into communication with him, he would most likely have sent the *agents de ville* ahead of me there.

Nor, indeed, had I any mind to rest. Somewhere in this mad French city, Stephanie was in danger and despair, and somewhere I must find her.

My only clew lay in the corner where I had left her the night before: the junction of the Rue Vivienne and the Rue du 4 Septembre. Thither, after some blunders and much questioning of the people on the boulevards, I made my way, and there, on arriving, I found, what I had not noticed in the turmoil of my previous visit, but what complicated not a little my already almost hopelessly complicated quest: the corner was the meeting of not only two, but three streets: the Rues du 4 Septembre and Vivienne and the Rue St. Augustin.

Desperately I looked this way and that, but there was not a token to help me in my search. Even at so short a distance from the boulevards, there rested upon the streets about me the utter silence and the emptiness of an ancient church-yard. On either hand rose only tall, blank walls

or the heavy iron blinds of closed shops, and, as I began to wander aimlessly by corner after corner, turning hither and yon without purpose or plan, there was no company for my hesitant advances save the sound of my own steps on the clanging stone.

And then, suddenly, the silence was hideously broken.

I had passed a dim street-lamp and had seen, by a blue and white sign, that I was invading the Rue Colbert. All about me were still the blank walls or shuttered houses and just before me rose Number 8, a blind-faced duplicate of its dozen neighbours. But high above, from that very house — rang out and boomed forth and cried and blasphemously echoed and re-echoed a single high, discordant, uncanny voice — the ghost of a voice — singing wildly and breaking woefully on the high notes:

“ *Ma jolie Dircé Choux-Choux,
Elle fait —* ”

It was the voice I had heard the night before in L'Abbaye: the voice of the Mad Prince singing the *matchiche* out of tune from that high-barred window in the Rue Colbert.

CHAPTER XIX

EXIT THE COLONEL

“They all lie in wait for blood.”

THE voice ceased as suddenly as it had begun and left me standing there in the ghostly street, struck cold with a horror and yet wonder. For quite a minute I must have waited, gaping up at that distant barred window, like a statue of amazement, and then the next thing of which I was perfectly conscious was a hot rush of mad, unreasoning activity: I was pounding upon the oaken front door of Number 8 with both my bare fists, and kicking wildly at its base with the stubbed toes of my light patent-leather boots.

Of course, I got no answer to my efforts, and, as my strength thus fatuously expended itself, I realized the reason. — Whatever else of the unexpected my wild experiences of the past two days and nights might lead me now to look for, I surely could scarcely suppose that a house awaiting an attack would open to a violent hammering at its closed portal.

And yet I must enter. It was relatively certain

that my cross-eyed friend Revicta, who had twisted himself into a worm and ridden behind our cab on the night before, would see to it that the neighbourhood whither he had tracked us should be more or less continuously watched. It was even more certain that, if such a state of espionage existed, I had been observed and followed from the moment I had reached this locality. And it would have been betting on a certainty to wager that, had the Prince's voice and my rappings been noted by any spy, Stephanie and her little garrison would soon need all the assistance that I could give them.

In the last forty-eight hours I had completely forgotten how to haggle over niceties. Without further hesitation, I now produced my knife and quietly but systematically set about picking the lock of that door.

To my amazement, this was far more speedily effective than all my pounding had been. I was bending over, trying to see the lock, and inserting, for only the second time, the stoutest blade of my pocket-knife, when, apparently at some slight sound that had betrayed my purpose, a bolt was shot back and the door was flung open with such abruptness that I almost pitched headlong into the arms of the giant that was responsible for this unconventional welcome.

There was a low light in that vestibule and by it, as I staggered forward, I caught the gleam of a blade in the big man's heavy fist — caught it just in time to catch, also, the big man himself in the pit of the stomach with my flying hand, to shove him spluttering and gasping against the grim wall and, thereby, to save my own life.

The man was Colonel Lichtenstein.

I must have given him a harder dig than I had at the moment of action supposed, since, for quite an appreciable instant, he leaned there, unable to move, the shooting-jacket, which he wore, tossing over his great chest and, back of the jungle of his fierce moustaches, his angry eyes gone filmy and his rugged, weather-beaten face turned to a nasty white. For my own part, I, too, was sufficiently winded not to court immediate continuation of hostilities and entirely at sea as to how I should deal with a man that might insist upon fighting with me when I, as a matter of fact, had come there to enlist in his cause.

“ Well,” I smiled a little feebly, “ I can't call this greeting of yours a particularly cordial one, Colonel Lichtenstein.”

His answer was a thundering roar of rage and a bound forward with upraised knife.

Then, certainly, he would have had me: I had drawn no weapon, believing that my motive of

friendship was guard enough against attack, and was altogether taken by surprise. But, just as he was in the act of coming down on me with his pointed steel, I heard the scream of a woman and, from the inner hall, Stephanie dashed between us so quickly as almost to receive in her own heart the Austrian's descending blade.

"Stop!" she cried in a tone that demanded instant obedience. "Stop!" — And, pushing the Colonel back into his corner, she turned upon him, drawn up to her full height, her scarlet mouth curled in scorn. "Is this the way that you are accustomed to receive friends?" she demanded haughtily.

Lichtenstein snarled impotently.

"A friend? — You say, a friend?" he sneered.

But she disregarded the imputation.

"And is this the way that you protect our cause, Colonel Lichtenstein?" she continued.

"Mademoiselle," replied the Austrian, getting a better hold upon both his emotions and his French, "when a stranger to me has forced his way into this house, what, I pray you, would you have me to do?"

"I should not have you neglect the door, at any rate, Colonel," she replied.

She nodded toward it, and, taking her meaning, I stepped forward and shot into its socket the

forgotten bolt. But my very quickness in reading her wishes seemed only to shake what little reserve Colonel Lichtenstein had been able to muster.

“ You tell me, mademoiselle,” he cried in a voice of disbelief, “ that this man, whom I have never seen before, is a friend to our cause? ”

“ I tell you that he is a young American, whom I met when I was in Philadelphia and who, as I said when I returned here this evening, warned me of Czibulka’s treachery and saved me, at the risk of his own life, from my pursuers.”

“ But you may remember that you added, mademoiselle, that this young American was unaware of your address.”

Stephanie flushed.

“ Nor did I give it to him,” she declared.

“ Then how — ” began the Colonel.

But I now saw that it was time for me to take a hand in the game of words.

“ Monsieur,” said I, “ if you have any more insults to offer, you will be so good as to address them not to a woman, but to me.”

He turned quickly, still with his ugly answer.

“ With all my heart, monsieur,” he answered. “ Perhaps, then, you will be able to tell me how it was that, if the story mademoiselle told me earlier this evening is the truth — ”

“ Confine yourself to me, Colonel. The story is the truth.”

“ How then, monsieur, I say, did you find this house? ”

I knew at once that the facts would be about the most hurtful things I could lay before him, and yet my brain refused, for once, to invent the more convincing lie. All I could do was to say to him:

“ I remembered where I had left mademoiselle last night. I went there. I scoured the nearby streets. I chanced on the Rue Colbert and heard, from a window in this house, the voice that I had heard at L'Abbaye last evening, singing the *matichiche*.”

Under his great moustaches the giant's sneer broadened slowly into a grin of incredulity. He took one step toward me and raised again his knife, ready to pass it through my body at any second.

“ And, monsieur, you really expect me to believe a story as absurd as that? ” he demanded.

Stephanie laid a restraining hand upon his arm.

“ I expect you to believe it, Colonel Lichtenstein,” she calmly admonished him.

He looked at her hard and almost fiercely, it seemed in the shadows of the vestibule, but her

large black eyes returned his gaze without the slightest tremor.

There was a moment of absolute silence as they stood thus, and then I saw, with relief, his arm gently slipping to his side when, from somewhere out in that darkened street there came — low enough, no doubt, but to our strained ears distinct and piercing — the sound of a calling whistle.

It was a full moment more that we stood thus, looking at one another, wide-eyed, but then the Colonel broke the spell with a loud oath.

“ So! ” he cried, turning first to the Countess and then to me. “ A friend is he? — A friend are you? — That sounds like it, does it not, mademoiselle? — By God, you’ve trapped us, have you? You’ve — ”

But just at that time he could get no further, for now, again from outside, came another sound that drove the blood from our faces and stilled our hearts abruptly — the sound of many light foot-falls, of men running, with an effort at quiet, down the paved street.

Nearer and yet nearer they came, we three waiting like figures in a tableau. They reached the house. They reached the door. They stopped short before it.

And then came a gentle, but rapid and imperative, tapping on that great oaken barrier.

Two thoughts alone possessed my mind: first, that I was certain to die at the hands of either the Colonel or his enemies, and, second, that I deserved no better portion. My folly had brought this thing to pass. In my last desperation to find Stephanie, I had thrown caution to the four winds of Heaven and had been followed to this house by some spy — just as I had anticipated too late while I was pounding for entrance — left to guard the street corner at which Schram Revicta had seen the Countess and myself the night before.

The Colonel made another move forward.

“Why have you not answered me?” he bel-
lowed, his eyes red with flame, his face thrust
close to mine. “Are you a coward as well as a
spy?”

I straightened myself.

“Sir — ” I began.

But a second knocking, louder and more im-
perative than the first, drowned my coming words
and choked my voice to silence.

“Yes,” the Colonel roared on, “a spy and a
coward! A dirty spy in the pay of de Hetzen-
dorf; and a spy must die the death of a
spy!”

Stephanie caught his wrist.

“You shall not speak so!” she cried, her eyes

flashing, her face aglow and her whole body so athrill with anger that even then I knew I should bear the picture to my grave. "I tell you that he is my friend, who fails to defend himself only because he would not harm another friend of mine!"

"Oh, no!" laughed the Colonel at the height of passion. "Oh, no, mademoiselle!" — He tried to twist his hand free from her grip, and I watched steadily for a wavering of his glance from me so that I might run in upon him. "No longer am *I* a friend of yours! I see it all now! I know now where this American got his information and how and why he got it. You have sold us to him and to his master: *you love this boy!*"

That last phrase tore away any lingering shred of my discretion. I could not draw a weapon before he would have stabbed me. But my fists clenched instinctively and I drew back to strike.

Just as the knocking broke out once more and began to rain madly and openly upon the door, it was Stephanie who again interposed. I could see that it was costing her pride no little price, but she bit her lip and, standing bravely between, made her final plea.

"Messieurs," she whispered, her cheeks turned pale again, "desist — at least postpone this

quarrel! Consider our desperate straits! Remember the crisis! Listen, oh, listen to that knocking! We must act — at once — together! The life of the Prince and the freedom of Hungary are in our hands!”

She gave me one look — and I drew and handed her my revolver.

Then she turned to Lichtenstein.

“And you,” she pleaded, her other hand extended — “you, Colonel — for the Prince and Hungary?”

But the Colonel was past all power of persuasion. His rage seemed to swell hotter at the sight of my obedience.

“Not I!” he shouted. “My Prince and your country may rot for all of me! I ask you, mademoiselle, for the last time, do you love this boy?”

Then I should have made for him, but Stephanie waved me back. She looked the Colonel full in the face; her lip trembled, but her eyes were bright and her voice firm as she gave her answer.

“Yes,” she said proudly, “I love him.”

Before anyone could utter another word, the whole thing was over. With one sweep of his long, left arm, Lichtenstein tossed her against the farther wall and charged upon me, the keen knife uplifted. As, unarmed, I ducked to tackle him,

I saw Stephanie raise my revolver. There was a flash and a roar, and, through the strangling smoke that filled the vestibule, I saw the Colonel lying at my feet.

CHAPTER XX

THE FIGHT ON THE STAIRS

“And he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting.”

STEPHANIE did not faint. Instead, she only came over to the body, stooped, examined it, and, to my wide, inquiring eyes, nodded her answer:

“Yes,” she said, “he is quite dead” — and handing me my smoking revolver, proceeded to disarm the still form before her. “One less to fight for us,” she added, — “and it must be a fight now.”

It must indeed, I reflected. The sound of that shot had stilled momentarily the knocking, and the spies — themselves anxious to avoid the police — had apparently withdrawn for a council of war. But I knew that flight was impossible and that, with the powerful influences at their command, our enemies would not long hesitate before their final attack. There was a telephone in the hallway and, as my eye caught it, I ran that way.

“What now?” asked Stephanie.

“ My friend the detective,” I made answer over my shoulder. “ She is at the Chatham.”

And I took the receiver from its hook.

But my voice and my French gave way so completely that, had Stephanie not helped me out, I should never have given that number. At last, however, I did get the hotel and, after what seemed an interminable wait, heard Frances’s glad “ Hello! ”

“ This is Burton! ” I called.

“ Yes — yes,” she answered.

“ I am at No. 8, Rue Colbert. There is a fight due at any minute now.”

“ There is? ” came the exulting response. “ At Number 8, Rue Colbert. Very well, I shall — ”

And that ended it. There was a little snapping sound, followed by complete silence. I jolted the hook; I yelled into the transmitter; I swore roundly at the unresponsive exchange, and then, at last, the truth came to me: the wire had been cut.

Stephanie shrugged her shoulders.

“ It is all on the knees of the gods,” she said quietly. “ Attend here a moment while I go to arm the Prince. It is necessary that he should not risk his life by appearing until we shall have reached the last ditch.”

She ran speedily up the stairs, but soon returned

to the first landing where, dragging a table and a sofa from the nearest room, we made a rough barricade that commanded the first flight. Above us the steps coiled steeply, a wide well between them reaching from the first floor to the roof. As we paused in our labours, I looked first from the right side of our crazy breastwork and then turned to Stephanie.

“ There are but three of us? ” I asked.

“ But two — until the Prince’s room is reached.”

“ Then our only chance is to clean them up entirely and make away before the *gendarmes* arrive.”

She looked at me quizzically.

“ You think that chance a small one? ” she inquired.

“ I don’t quite see how they dare to force it on us.”

“ Ah, my friend, you do not realize the powers behind them. They would prefer not to shoot, but if they must shoot and bring upon themselves the *gendarmes*, then not a paper in Paris will dare to print a word of this, and they will be under arrest no longer than it takes their ambassador to call upon the Minister of Foreign Affairs.”

I thought things over.

“Look here,” I lied presently, “this is a strategic position: one man can easily hold it alone until the police arrive. There is no reason in the world why you —”

But she put both her little hands upon my shoulders.

“No, no!” she cried. “It is the other way, my friend — the other way! This is no cause of yours. You have risked enough already. Already you have served me so much better than I deserve! Leave me now! You have seen that I can shoot—”

“What?” I laughed. “My dear mademoiselle, I could not go if I wished to, and if I could at this moment walk out of this house unharmed, do you think so ill of me as to suppose that I should be willing to do it?”

Her hold slipped down my arms until our hands met. The only light was in the hall below, but out of the semi-darkness I saw her great eyes shining like the stars.

“It means death,” she said simply.

“With you,” I whispered.

And then I felt her arms about my neck, her breast to mine, and all the glory of her scarlet mouth responding to my kiss.

Almost roughly I tore myself away.

“Go, now!” I commanded. “You must go

up the stairs. They may be here at any moment and you *must* not stay!"

Her only answer was a peal of laughter — the assured laughter of a woman that has found that of which death cannot rob her — and, just as I began again my protests, with one loud crash the door was burst open and five men dashed into the vestibule and through that to the hall.

It had passed all discussion now: the red instant had arrived.

The attackers stumbled over Lichtenstein's dead body and, before they had recovered themselves, we two, from the darkness, fired upon them in the light. One man pitched headlong and lay still: my aim had been faulty, but Stephanie's had not missed.

Then came the whirlwind. Through the smoke I saw the flash of their replying fire: I saw the remaining four, Bolfras at their head and Revicta close behind, charge the stairs toward us; I saw my second shot tumble Schram backward down a half-dozen steps, but I also felt a sharp stab in my left shoulder and knew that Czibulka's first bullet had found a lodging-place.

Stephanie caught my hand and, kicking the table down upon the enemy, I followed her to the next landing, letting them have a few ineffective

shots *en route*. There we made another stand, but a brief one, and so, at last, with Stephanie's revolver empty and but one shot left in mine, we came to the top of the stairs.

It was a small space, scarce six feet square, the wall on one hand, the door to the Prince's room on the other, and the front divided between the opening to the steep stairs and a frail railing that gave upon the broad, deep well, a drop of three stories to the ground floor. Leaning down, I fired at the trio pounding upward, knocked over one of them and had the satisfaction of seeing a second turn and run.

Leaping upward through the suffocating smoke, Bolfras Czibulka, in the almost complete darkness, snapped his revolver in my face, and, when its only response was the click of the hammer on an empty shell, tossed it across the railing, so that I heard it crash far down below, and then, the last remaining member of the attacking party, sprang on to meet me, an unarmed man against a man unarmed.

It was a death grapple, and we both knew it. I felt his hot breath beating against my face, his iron-sinewed legs twisted about my own, and, while one corded hand gripped bitterly my wounded shoulder, the other sought my gasping throat to strangle me. I did my best. I got a

good wrestling hold, and tried to down him, but his strength was greater than my skill. Fro and to, and back and forth we swayed and struggled, in a horrid straining silence, now tottering over the stairs, and again tossing into a corner, where, helpless in the darkness to aid me, Stephanie was cowering. Fro and to and back and forth — and then we crashed against the frail railing, which alone stood between us and that awful descent.

The light woodwork creaked, and spoke a word that, all at once, I understood.

Holding the man there, I threw back my head and let his fingers at my throat.

The ruse worked. Both his hands flew to grasp my neck; to my sweating neck; in the joy of apparent victory his legs untwisted from my own — and I was free to put forth all my strength, to smash him through that railing, and to pitch him headlong down the well.

Stephanie's arms closed about me; her lips sought mine, and so we stood as, up the stairs, bounded Frances Baird, a lantern in her hand and, just behind her, the Baron de Hetzen-dorf.

“Are you all right?” she cried. “Are you — ”
Her violent query died unfinished.

The interruption came from behind the door

to the Prince's room. It was a single, high, discordant voice — the ghost of a voice, singing wildly, breaking woefully on the high notes, and echoing and blasphemously re-echoing through that dreadful house of carnage:

*“ Ma jolie Dircé Choux-Choux,
Elle fait — ”*

And then a single pistol shot — and silence.

We forced the door and found him — the man that I had known as Wilhelm Jaeger — lying before it, a warm revolver in his clenched hand and a bullet through his head.

Stephanie knelt beside the hunched body, over which Frances's lantern cast a steady, pallid glow.

She spoke quietly.

“ The Prince is dead,” she whispered.

“ The Prince? ” repeated the ambassador.
“ That is no more the Prince than I am. This is a crack-brained fellow named Keller, who used to be in our secret service. Why, it's the man that, I have just learned, our embassy sent out from Washington to look after the Prince! If that is the man you have been harbouring as the Prince, then — ”

It was Frances who finished his sentence.

“ Then,” said she, “ the Prince Imperial lies buried in the potter's field at Mountville.”

And that, I suppose, is the explanation. After the ambassador had pulled all sorts of hidden wires, and, by the aid and assistance of his whole empire, quieted the general slaughter of that last evening, we had time fully to confirm what he said. Keller, as Wilhelm Jaeger, had gone clean mad after he had seen the Prince killed and, mistaken by Czibulka for Rudolf, so thoroughly believed himself to have assumed the identity of the victim — whom he did, indeed, in some degree resemble — that he easily convinced the two other conspirators who, like Bolfras, had never seen the Prince at home.

But, for my part, it all seems to matter very little. The world has gone its way unguessing; the ready ear of gossip has caught no echo of our sword-play; the map of Europe is unchanged, and I, looking out from my study-window upon the silent April night in this quiet Philadelphia suburb, read and re-read the cable-message that tells me that Stephanie is coming by the next boat, dream of how she first kissed me upon the darkened stairway of the Rat Mort, and wonder vainly whether indeed I ever saw the great jewel gleaming in the death-house at Mountville; whether I was ever an accessory-after-the-fact to Frances Baird robbing the ambassador's safe in

Paris, and whether I ever heard the voice of the "Mad Prince" singing the *matthiche* out of tune behind that high-barred window in the Rue Colbert.

THE END.

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