

CHAPTER IV.

THE CLICK OF THE TELEGRAPH.

On the contrary, from the very words he had let drop, he undoubtedly believed death due to heart disease. I could not, however, rid myself of a vague suspicion that Ella's mother feared analysis of the remains of the dinner, and that the presence of the police unnerved her, as it invariably does those who are guilty.

Until the sun shone out, casting a long bright beam across the dingy carpet, I pondered over these curious facts in their sequence, unable to elucidate the deep mystery underlying them. After a dismal, sleepless night, haunted by a nameless, spectral fear, the ray of sunshine brought back hope and banished despair. I found myself at last reflecting that, after all, Dudley had expired suddenly from a cause to which any of us might be liable, and it was probable that I had been scenting mystery and tragedy where there were none.

I rose and actually smiled at the weird and horrible nature of the thoughts that throughout the wearying night had held me spellbound in indescribable dread and terror.

When at noon, in accordance with the urgent and strangely worded telegram I had received from the Earl of Warnham, I alighted at Horsham station, in Sussex, I found one of the carriages from the Hall awaiting me. As I entered it I was followed by a man I knew slightly—Superintendent Frayling, chief of the Criminal Investigation Department at Scotland Yard, who had apparently travelled down by the same train from Victoria.

Greeting me, he took the place beside me, and a moment later the footman sprang upon the box and we sped away toward the open country. To my question as to his business with the Earl, he made an evasive reply, merely stating that he had received a telegram requesting an immediate interview.

"This summons is rather unusual," he added, smiling. "Has anything serious occurred, do you know?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Perhaps there's been a burglary at the Hall?" I suggested.

"Hardly that, I think," he replied with a knowing look, stroking his pointed brown beard. "If burglars visited the place he would have [illegible] for a clever officer or two, not personal interview with me."

[illegible] this view I was compelled to [illegible], then, lighting cigarettes, we sat back calmly contemplating the beautiful, fertile country through which we were driving. The road, leaving the quaint old town, descended sharply for a short distance, then wound uphill through cornfields lined by high hedges of hawthorne and holly. Past a quaint old watermill we skirted Warnham Pond, whereon Shelley in his youthful days sailed paper boats, then half a mile further entered the handsome lodge gates of Warnham Park. Through a fine avenue, with a broad sweep of park on either side, well stocked with deer, emus and many zoological specimens, we ascended until at last, after negotiating the long winding drive in front of the Hall, the carriage pulled up with a sudden jerk before its handsome portico.

As I alighted old Stanford, the white-haired butler, came forward hurriedly, saying:

"His Lordship is in the library awaiting you, sir. He told me to bring you to him the moment you arrived."

"Very well," I said, and the aged retainer, leading the way along a spacious but rather cheerless corridor, stopped before the door of the great library, and throwing it suddenly open, announced me.

"At last, Deedes," I heard the Earl exclaim in a tone that showed him to be in no amiable mood; and as I entered the long handsome chamber, lined from floor to ceiling with books, I did not at first notice him until he rose slowly from a large writing table, behind which he had been hidden. His face, usually wizened and pale, was absolutely bloodless. Its appearance startled me.

"I wired last night, and expected you by the 9:18 this morning. Why did you not come?" was his first question, uttered in a sharp tone of annoyance.

"The sudden death of a friend caused me to lose the train I intended to catch," I explained.

"Death!" he snapped, in the manner habitual to him when impatient. "Is the death of a friend any account when the interests of our country are at stake? On the night my wife was dying I was compelled to leave her bedside to travel to Balmoral to have audience of Her Majesty regarding a document I had sent for the royal assent. When I returned Lady Warnham had been dead fourteen hours. In the successful diplomat there must be no sentiment—none."

"The five minutes I lost when I discovered my friend dead caused me to miss my train from Staines to London," I explained.

"But you received my telegram, and should have strictly regarded its urgency," he answered, with an air of extreme dissatisfaction. "The fact of its being in cipher was sufficient to show its importance."

"I was out dining, and my man brought it along to me," I said.

"Why did he do so?" he inquired quickly.

"Because he thought it might be urgent."

"Did he open it?"

"No. Even if he had it was in cipher."

"Is your man absolutely trustworthy?" he asked.

"He has been in the service of my family for fifteen years. He was my father's valet at The Hague."

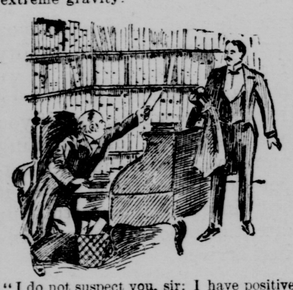
"Is his name Juckes?" he inquired.

"Yes."

"Ah, I know him. He is absolutely trustworthy; a most excellent man."

The Earl's manner surprised me. His face, usually calm, Sphinx-like and expressionless, betrayed the most intense anxiety and suspicion. That my delay had caused him great annoyance was apparent, but the anxious expression upon his ashen, almost haggard face was such that even in moments of extreme perplexity when dealing with one or other of the many complex questions of foreign policy it had never been so intense.

Standing with his back to one of the great bay windows that commanded extensive views of the picturesque park, he was silent for a moment, then turning his keen, gray eyes upon me, he suddenly exclaimed in a tone of extreme gravity:



"I do not suspect you, sir; I have positive proof of it."

"Since yesterday, Deedes, a catastrophe has occurred."

"You briefly hinted at it in your telegram," I answered. "What is its nature?"

"The most serious that has happened during the whole of my administration," he said, in a voice that plainly betrayed his agitation. "The clauses of the secret defensive alliance which Hammerton brought from Berlin yesterday are known in St. Petersburg."

"What!" I cried, in alarm, remembering the Earl's words, and his elaborate precautions to preserve its secrecy. Surely they cannot be already known?"

"We have been tricked by spies, Deedes," he answered, sternly. "Read this," and he handed me a telegram in the private cipher known only to the Minister himself. Its transcript was written beneath, and at a glance I saw it was from a Russian official in the Foreign Office at St. Petersburg, who acted as our secret agent there and received a large sum yearly for his services. The dispatch, which showed that it had been handed in at Hamburg at 6 o'clock on the previous evening—all secret messages being sent in the first instance to that city, and retransmitted—read as follows:

"Greatest excitement caused here by receipt an hour ago of verbatim copy of secret defensive alliance between England and Germany. Have seen telegram, which was handed in at No. 369 Strand, London, at 3:30. Just called at Embassy and informed Lord Strathavon. Council of Ministers has been summoned."

"It is amazing," I gasped, when I had read the dispatch. "How could our enemies have learned the truth?"

Without replying he took from his writing table another message, which read:

"From Strathavon, St. Petersburg. To the Earl of Warnham, London. Defensive alliance known here. Hostilities feared. French ambassador has had audience at Winter Palace, and telegraphed to Paris for instructions. Shall wire hourly."

One by one he took up the telegraphic dispatches that during the night had been re-transmitted from the the Foreign Office over the private wire to the instrument that stood upon a small table opposite us. As I read each of them eagerly I saw plainly that Russia and France were in complete accord, and that we were on the verge of a national disaster, sudden and terrible. With such secrecy and rapidity were negotiations being carried on between Paris and St. Petersburg that in Berlin, a city always well-informed in all matters of diplomacy, nothing unusual was suspected.

A telegram from our secret agent in the Russian Foreign Office, received an hour before my arrival at Warnham, read:

"The secret is gradually leaking out. The Novosti has just issued a special edition hinting at the possibility of war with England, and this has caused the most intense excitement everywhere. The journal, evidently inspired, gives no authority for its statement, nor does it give any reason for the startling rumor."

I laid down the dispatch in silence, and as I raised my head the Minister's keen, penetrating eyes met mine.

"Well," he exclaimed, in a dry, harsh tone. "What is your explanation, sir?"

"My explanation?" I cried, in amazement, noticing his determined demeanor. "I know nothing of the affair, except the telegrams you have shown me."

"Upon you alone the responsibility of this catastrophe rests," he said, angrily. "It is useless to deny all knowledge of it and only aggravate your offence. Because you come of a diplomatic family, I have trusted you implicity, but it is evident that my confidence has been utterly misplaced."

"I deny that I have ever for a single instant betrayed the trust you have placed in me," I replied, hotly. "I know nothing of the means by which the Czar's army of spies have obtained knowledge of our secret."

He snapped his bony fingers impatiently, saying:

"It is not to be expected that you will acknowledge yourself a traitor to your country, sir; therefore we must prove your guilt."

"You are at liberty, of course, to act in what manner you please," I answered. "I tell you frankly, however, that this terrible charge you bring against me is as startling as the information that I have just read. I can only say that I am entirely innocent."

"Bah!" he cried, turning on his heel with a gesture of disgust. Then, facing me again, his eyes flashing with anger, he added: "If you are innocent, tell me why you were so long absent yesterday when registering the dispatch; tell me why, when such an important document was in your possession, you did not remain in the office instead of being absent over an hour."

"I went out to lunch," I said.

"With the document in your pocket?"

"Yes. But surely you do not suspect me of being a spy?" I cried.

"I do not suspect you, sir I have positive proof of it."

"Proof!" I gasped. "Show it to me!"

"It is here," he answered, his thin, nervous hands turning over the mass of papers littering his writing table, and taking from among them an official envelope. In an instant I recognized it as the one containing the treaty.

"This remains exactly as I took it from the safe with my own hands and cut it open."

With trembling fingers I drew the document from its envelope and opened it.

The paper was blank!

I glanced at him in abject dismay, unable to utter a word.

"That is what you handed me on my return from the Cabinet Council," he said, with knit brows. "Now, what explanation have you to offer?"

"What can I offer?" I cried. "The envelope I gave you was the same that you handed to me. I could swear to it."

"No, it was not," he replied quickly. Glance at the seal."

Taking it to the light, I examined the seal carefully, but failed to detect anything unusual. It bore in black wax the Warnham coat of arms impressed by the large, beautifully cut amethyst that the Earl wore attached to the piece of rusty silk ribbon that served him as a watch chain.

"I can see nothing wrong with this," I said, glancing up at him.

"I admit that the imitation is so carefully executed that it is calculated to deceive any eye except my own." Then, putting on his pincenez, he made an impression in wax with his own seal and pointed out a slight flaw which, in the impression upon the envelope, did not exist.

"And your endorsement? Is it not in your own hand?" he inquired.

I turned over the envelope and looked. It bore the designation, "B, 27,893," just as I had written it, and the writing was either my own or such a marvellously accurate imitation that I was compelled to confess my inability to point out any discrepancy.

"Then the writing is yours, eh?" the Earl asked abruptly. "If it is, you must be aware who forged the seal."

"The writing certainly contains all the characteristics of mine, but I am not absolutely sure it is not a forgery. In any case I am confident that the document you gave me I handed back to you." Then I explained carefully, and in detail, the events which occurred from the time he gave the treaty into my possession, up to the moment I handed it back to him.

"But how can you account for giving back to me a blank sheet of paper in an envelope secured by a forged seal?" he asked, regarding me with undisguised suspicion. "You do not admit even taking it from your pocket, neither have you any suspicion of the friend with whom you lunched. I should like to hear his independent version."

"That is impossible," I answered.

"Why?" he asked, pricking up his ears and scenting a mystery.

"Because he is dead."

At that moment our conversation was interrupted by the sharp ringing of the bell of the telegraph instrument near us, and an instant later the telegraphist in charge entered and seated himself at the table.

Click—click, click, click, click began the needle, and next moment the clerk, turning to the Earl, exclaimed:

"An important message from St. Petersburg, your lordship."

"Read it as it comes through," the Earl replied, breathlessly, walking toward the instrument and bending eagerly over it.

Then, as the rapid metallic click again broke the silence, the clerk, in monotonous tones, exclaimed:

"From Lobetski, St. Petersburg, via Hamburg.—To Earl of Warnham: A proclamation signed by the Czar declaring war against England has just been received at the Foreign Office, but it is as yet kept secret. It will probably be posted in the streets this evening. Greatest activity prevails at the War Office and Admirality. Regiments in the military districts of Charkoff, Odessa, Warsaw and Kieff have received orders to complete their cadres of officers to war strength, recalling to the colors all officers on the retired list and on leave. This is a primary step to the complete mobilization of the Russian forces. All cipher messages now refused."

The Earl with frantic effort grasped at the edge of the table, then staggered unevenly and sank back into a chair rigid and speechless.

CHAPTER V.

LORD WARNHAM'S ADMISSION.

"Anything further?" inquired the great statesman in a low mechanical tone, his gaze fixed straight before him as he sat.

"Nothing further, Your Lordship," answered the telegraphist.

The Earl of Warnham sighed deeply, his thin hands twitching with a nervous excitement he strove in vain to suppress.

"Ask if Lord Maybury is in town," he said, hoarsely, suddenly rousing himself.

Again the instrument clicked, and a few moments later the telegraphist, turning to the Foreign Minister, said:

"The Premier is in town, Your Lordship."

The Earl glanced at his watch a few seconds in silence, then exclaimed:

"Tell Gaysford to inform Lord Maybury at once of the contents of this last dispatch from St. Petersburg, and say that I will meet the Premier at 5:30 at the Foreign Office."

The telegraphist touched the key, and in a few moments the Minister's orders were obeyed. Then, taking a sheet of note paper and a pencil he wrote in a private cipher a telegram, which he addressed to Her Majesty at Osborne. This, too, the clerk dispatched at once over the wire, followed by urgent messages to members of the Cabinet Council and to Lord Kingsbury, Commander-in-Chief of the British army, asking them to meet informally at 6 o'clock that evening at the Foreign Office.

When all these messages had been transmitted, with a rapidity that was astonishing, the telegraphist turned in his chair and asked:

"Anything more, Your Lordship?"

"No, nothing for the present," he answered. "Leave us."

Then, when he had gone, the Earl rose slowly, and with bent head and hands clasped behind his back, strode up and down the library in silent contemplation. Suddenly he halted before me where I stood, and abruptly asked:

"What did you say was the name of that friend who lunched with you yesterday?"

"Ogle," I answered. "Dudley Ogle."

"And his profession?"

"He had none. His father left him with enough to live on comfortably."

"Who was his father?" he inquired, with a sharp look of doubt.

"A landowner."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

The Earl slightly raised his shaggy gray brows, then continued:

"How long have you known this friend?"

"Several years."

"You told me that he has died since yesterday," His Lordship said. "Is not that a rather curious fact—if true?"

"True!" I cried. "You apparently doubt me. A telegram to the police at Staines will confirm my statement."

"Yes, I never disguise my doubts, Deedes," the Earl snapped, fixing his gray eyes upon mine. "I suspect very strongly that you have sold the secret to our enemies; you have, to put it plainly, betrayed your country."

"I deny it," I replied with fierce anger. "I care not for any of your alleged proofs. True, the man who was with me during the whole time I was absent is dead. Nevertheless, I am prepared to meet and refute all the accusations you may bring against me."

"Well, we shall see. We shall see," he answered dryly, snapping his fingers, and again commencing to pace the great library from end to end with steps a trifle more hurried than before. "We have—nay, I personally—have been the victim of dastardly spies, but I will not rest until I clear up the mystery and bring upon the guilty one the punishment he deserves. Think," he cried. "Think what this means! England's prestige is ruined, her power is challenged, and ere long the great armies of Russia and France will be swarming upon our shores. In the fights at sea and the fights on land with modern armaments the results must be too terrible to contemplate. The disaster that we must face will, I fear, be crushing and complete. I am not, I have never been, one of those over-confident idiots who believe our island impregnable; but am old-fashioned enough to incline toward Napoleon's opinion. We are apt to rely upon our naval strength, a strength that may or may not be up to the standard of power we believe. If it is a rotten reed, what remains? England must be trodden beneath the iron heel of the invader, and the Russian eagle will float beside the tricolor in Whitehall."

"But can diplomacy do nothing to avert the catastrophe?" I suggested.

"Not when it is defeated by the devilish machinations of spies," he replied, meaningly, flashing a glance at me, the fierceness of which I did not fail to observe.

"But Russia dare not take the initiative," I blurted out.

"Permit me, sir, to express my own opinion upon our relations with St. Petersburg," he roared. "I tell you that for years Russia has held herself in readiness to attack us at the moment when she received sufficient provocation, and for that very object she contracted an alliance with France. The Czar's recent visit to England was a mere farce to disarm suspicion, a proceeding in which, thank heaven! I refused to play any part whatever. The blow that I have long anticipated, and have sought to ward off all these long years of my administration as Premier and as Foreign Secretary, has fallen. To-day is the most sorry day that England has ever known. The death knell of her power has sounded," and he walked down the room toward me, pale-faced and bent, his countenance wearing an expression of unutterable gloominess. He was, I knew, a patriot who would have sacrificed his life for his country's honor, and that every word he uttered came straight from his heart.

"How the secret agents of the Czar obtained knowledge of the treaty surpasses comprehension," I exclaimed.

"The catastrophe is due to you—to you alone!" he cried. "You knew of what vital importance to our honor it was that the contents of that document should be kept absolutely secret. I told you with my own lips. You have no excuse whatever; none. Your conduct is culpable in the highest degree, and you deserve, sir, instant dismissal and the publication in the 'Gazette' of a statement that you have been discharged from Her Majesty's service because you were a thief and a spy!"

"I am neither," I shouted in a frenzy of rage, interrupting him. "If you were a younger man I'd—by heavens! I'd knock you down. But I respect your age, Lord Warnham, and I am not forgetful of the fact that to you I owe more than I can ever repay. My family have faithfully served their country through generations, and I will never allow a false accusation to be brought upon it, even though you, Her Majesty's Foreign Secretary, may choose to make it."

He halted, glancing at me with an expression of unfeigned surprise.

"You forget yourself, sir," he answered, with that calm, unruffled dignity that he could assume at will. "I repeat my accusation, and it is for you to refute it."

"I can! I will!" I cried.

"Then explain the reason you handed me a sheet of blank paper in exchange for the instrument."

"I cannot, I"—

He laughed a hard, cynical laugh, and, turning upon his heel, paced toward the opposite window.

"All I know is that the envelope I gave you was the same you handed to me," I protested.

"It's a deliberate lie," he cried as he turned in anger to face me again. "I opened the dispatch, read it through to ascertain there was no mistake, and after sealing it with my own hands, gave it to you. Yet in return you hand me this!" and he took from the table the ingeniously forged duplicate envelope and held it up.

Then, casting it down again passionately, he added:

"The document I handed to you was exchanged for that dummy, and an hour later the whole thing was telegraphed in extenso to Russia. The original was in your possession, and even if you are not actually in the pay of our enemies, you were so negligent of your duty towards your Queen and country that you are undeserving the name of Englishman."

"But does not London swarm with Russian agents?" I asked. "Have we not had ample evidence of that lately?"

"I admit it," he answered. "But what proof is there to show that you yourself did not hand the original document to one of these enterprising gentlemen who take such a keen interest in our affairs?"

"There is no proof that I am a spy," I cried hotly. "There never will be, for I am entirely innocent of this disgraceful charge. You overlook the fact that after it had been deposited in the safe it may have been tampered with."

"I have overlooked no detail," he answered, with calmness. "Your suggestion is an admirable form of excuse, but unfortunately for you, it will not hold water. First, because, as you must be aware, there is but one key to that safe, and that never leaves my person; secondly, no one but you and I are possessed of the secret whereby the safe may be opened or closed; thirdly, the packet you gave me did not remain in the safe. In order that you should believe that the document was deposited there I put it in in your presence, but when you left my room I took it out again and carried it home with me to Berkeley square, intending to show it to Lord Maybury. The Premier did not call as he had promised, but I kept the document in my pocket the whole time, and at six o'clock returned to the Foreign Office and deposited it again in the safe. Almost next moment—I had not left the room, remember—some thought prompted me to re-open the envelope and reassure myself of the wording of one of the clauses. Walking to the safe I took out the envelope and cut it open, only to discover that I had been tricked. The paper was blank!"

"It might have been stolen while in your possession just as easily as while in mine," I exclaimed, experiencing some satisfaction at being thus able to turn his own argument against himself.

"Knowing its vital importance, I took the most elaborate precautions that such circumstances were rendered absolutely impossible."

"From your words when Hammerton arrived from Berlin it was plain that you suspected treachery. On what grounds were your suspicions founded?"

Upon his sphinx-like face there rested a heavy frown of displeasure, as he replied:

"I refuse to submit to any cross-examination, sir. That I entertained suspicions is enough."

"And you actually accuse me without the slightest foundation?" I cried with warmth.

"You are in error," he retorted, very calmly, returning to his writing table and taking up some papers. "I have here the original of the telegram handed in at the branch post office in the Strand yesterday afternoon."

"Well?"

"It has been examined by the calligraphic expert, employed by the police, and declared to be in your handwriting."

"What?" I gasped, almost snatching the yellow telegraph forms from his hand in my eagerness to examine the mysterious bundle of letters and figures composing the cipher. My heart sank within me when next instant I recognized they were in a hand so nearly resembling my own that I could scarcely detect any difference whatever.

As I stood gazing at this marvellous forgery open-mouthed, in abject dismay, there broke upon my ear a short,



"You are a thief, a spy and a liar! Leave me instantly."

harsh laugh, a laugh of triumph. Raising my head, the Earl's penetrating gaze met mine. "Now," he exclaimed, "come, acknowledge the truth. It is useless to prevaricate."

"I have told the truth," I answered. "I never wrote this."

For an instant his steely eyes flashed as his blanched face assumed an expression of unutterable hatred and disgust. Then he shouted:

"You are a thief, a spy and a liar, sir! Leave me instantly. Even in face of such evidence as this you protest your innocence with childish simplicity. You have betrayed your country into the hands of her enemies, and are even now seeking to throw blame and suspicion upon myself. You"——

"I have not done so. I merely suggested that the document might have been exchanged while in your possession. Surely"——

"And you actually come to me with a lame, absurd tale that the only man who can clear you is dead! The whole defence is too absurd," he thundered. "You have sold your country's honor and the lives of your fellowmen for Russian roubles. Go! Never let me see you again, except in a felon's dock."

"But surely I may be permitted to clear myself!" I cried.

"Your masters in St. Petersburg will no doubt arrange for your future. In London we require your faithless services no longer," the Earl answered, with intense bitterness. "Go."

Leaving the Earl's presence I refused Old Stanford's invitation to take some refreshment, and walking along the corridor on my way out came face to face with Frayling, who was being conducted to the library.

"Going?" he inquired.

"Yes," I answered, and passing on engrossed in bitter thoughts that overwhelmed me, strode out in the park, wandering aimlessly across the grass to where a well-kept footpath wound away among the trees. Taking it, heedless of my destination, I walked on mechanically, regardless of the brilliant sunshine and the songs of the birds, thinking only of the unjust accusation against me, and of my inability to clear myself. I saw that the stigma upon me meant ruin, both social and financial. Branded as a spy, I should be spurned by Ella, sneered at by Mrs. Laing, and avoided by Beck. Friends who had trusted me would no longer place any confidence in a man who had, according to their belief, sold his country into the hands of her enemies, while it was apparent from the Earl's words that he had no further faith in my words or actions.

Yet the only man who could have cleared me, who could have corroborated my statement as to how I spent my time during my absence at lunch, and shown plainly that I had never entered the Strand nor visited the branch post office next to Exeter Hall, was dead. His lips were forever sealed.

Knowing myself to be innocent, the Earl's terrible accusation stunned me, and I was like one in a dream.

I went forward, plunged deeply in thought, until passing a small gate I left the park and found myself in Warnham Churchyard.