

CHAPTER X.

ENGLAND'S PERIL.

We spent the afternoon and evening in reading through heaps of letters, but discovered nothing that would lead us to any suspicion of foul play. The detective made notes of one or two of the addresses of the writers, and took charge of several letters relating to money matters. When, however, we had removed all the correspondence from the small wooden box in which it had been kept the detective ascertained that there was a false bottom, and, unable to find out the secret whereby it might be opened, we forced it with a chisel.

At first we were disappointed, only one insignificant-looking paper being therein concealed, but when the officer eagerly opened it I at once recognized its extreme importance, although I preserved silence. The paper was nothing less than a Russian passport of a special character signed by the Chief of Secret Police in St. Petersburg, and countersigned by the Minister of the Interior himself. It was not a formally printed document, but, written in Russian upon official paper stamped with the double-headed eagle, it was made out in the name of Dudley Ogle, and after explaining that he was an official engaged on secret service, gave him complete immunity from arrest within the Russian Empire.

"What's this, I wonder?" the detective said, puzzled by the unfamiliar characters in the writing.

Taking it from him I glanced through it, and without betraying the slightest surprise, answered, "Merely a passport for Russia."

"That doesn't lead us to anything," he replied, taking it from my hand, glancing at it again for an instant, and tossing it back carelessly into the box.

But when he had completed his investigations, removed whatever letters and papers he thought might be of use and departed, I secured the passport and the crumpled foolscap, and giving Juckes orders to remove my belongings back to London and give up possession of the cottage, I returned to Rossetti Mansions.

With these undeniable evidences of Ogle's activity as a spy I was sitting alone next morning pondering over the best course to pursue, at last resolving to go to the Foreign Office and bodily place the startling facts before Lord Warnham.

About noon I knocked at the door of the Minister's private room and received in his deep hoarse voice permission to enter. He was alone, seated at his big writing table, engrossed in a long, closely written document he was studying.

"Well, sir," he exclaimed, with an expression of displeasure when he saw me. "To what, pray, do I owe this intrusion?"

"I have come," I said, "to clear myself of the charge you have made against me.

"To clear yourself! Bah!" he cried in disgust, returning to his papers. "My time is too valuable for further discussion," and he made a movement to ring the bell for a messenger to conduct me out.

But I placed my hand upon his bony fingers firmly, and stayed it, saying:

"It is to your interest, Lord Warnham, as well as to my own, that you should know the truth."

"A traitor who will sell his country's honor is capable of any falsehood whereby to justify himself," he snapped, savagely.

"I am no traitor," I protested in anger.

His thin, white face relaxed into a bitterly sarcastic smile, and his lip curled in withering contempt.

"The efforts of ten years' delicate diplomacy with Berlin have been rendered futile by your treachery or culpable negligence. Now you come to me with some lame, paltry tale or other in an endeavor to convince me that you are neither thief nor spy! Each word of yours only aggravates your offence. I have dismissed you, and I tell you I decline to reopen the question."

"But you have accused me of a crime, and I demand to be judged," I cried.

"I have already judged you," he said, after a pause, laying down his pen with a sudden calmness, and fixing his gray eyes keenly upon me.

"Yes, falsely."

"You have come to me to prove that I have misjudged you," he said at last, leaning back in his chair. "Very well. Let me hear your story."

"I have no story, further than what I have already told you," I answered. "You have made a charge against me; I have come to you to refute it."

"By what means?"

"By documentary evidence."

"Documentary evidence?" he exclaimed. "Of what kind?"

"You will remember that I told you of the death of the only man who could speak regarding my absence from the office, and my return?"

"Yes. He died mysteriously. The inquest was held yesterday," and, taking up a letter from his table, the Earl added: "The report from Scotland Yard that an open verdict was returned, although one witness, a woman, alleged murder. Well, what was the allegation? Against yourself?" he asked, raising his gray, shaggy brows.

"No," I said with emphasis. "I am not a murderer."

"Then why did this woman—what's her name—Ella Laing"—he said, referring to the letter, "why did she allege foul play?"

"I cannot tell; but all the facts I have ascertained point to the same conclusion, although the medical evidence negatived my suggestion."

"Then what is your contention?"

"That the man who was my friend was a spy," I said.

"You would shift the responsibility upon one who, being dead, can tell us nothing," he said in a tone of reproachful contempt." I suspected this. It was but what might have been expected."

"But I have evidence indisputable that he was a spy," I exclaimed excitedly. "Read this," and I handed to him Dudley's passport.

"Spreading it out before him, he carefully adjusted his gold pince-nez, and after a little difficulty translated it. Then, without expressing any surprise, he turned it over and held the paper to the light of the window, examining the water-mark.

"Well," he exclaimed calmly at last. "What else?"



"What's this, I wonder?" said the detective.

I placed before him the crumpled sheets of foolscap whereon attempts had been made, and successfully, too, to imitate my handwriting, explaining where I had discovered them. These he also examined very minutely, giving vent to a low grunt as was habitual to him when reassured.

"Anything more?" he asked impatiently. "I can't waste time. The outlook is too serious."

"But you must—you shall spare time to fully investigate this mystery," I cried. "You will remember that the dummy envelope you took from your safe bore an imitation of your private seal?"

"Yes. What of that?"

"Here is the seal with which that impression was made," I replied in triumph, handing to him the little brass stamp. "I have had the portions of wax microscopically examined, and they are of the same wax as was used to seal the dummy."

He took it between his thin fingers, that now trembled with excitement. The production of this object, was I saw, entirely unexpected. Suddenly rising from his chair he unlocked his great safe and took therefrom the dummy envelope. Then, returning to his table, he lit a taper and carefully made an impression in wax of the seal I had given him, afterward taking it to the light, and by the aid of a large magnifying glass compared it closely with the seal upon the dummy.

"And where did you find this seal?" he inquired, glancing across to me.

"Among the contents of the dead man's pockets," I answered.

"Impossible," he retorted. "The police have possession of everything found on the man."

"Yes, they had, but this came into my possession yesterday at the inquest."

"How?"

I hesitated, then, determined to conceal no fact from the great statesman, I answered boldly: "I stole it from the table whereon it was displayed."

"Stole it!" he echoed. Slowly he turned the brass stamp over in his hand, as if deep in thought; then, with brows knit in anger, he looked me straight in the face, exclaiming bluntly:

"Your story is an absolute tissue of lies from beginning to end."

His words startled me. I had expected him to be eager to further probe the mystery, and try and elucidate the manner in which Dudley had manufactured the dummy and exchanged it for the secret convention. Instead of this he was distrustful and suspicious; indeed, he boldly accused me of attempting to wilfully mislead him and conceal the truth.

"I have told you no lies. Every word I have uttered is the truth," I answered, with fierce indignation.

"You certainly never obtained possession of this seal in the manner in which you would have me believe, for the detectives sent to Staines had strict instructions to search for any object that would lead them to suppose the dead man was not what he represented himself to be, and I made a special request that any seals discovered might be submitted to me for examination. If this had been in the dead man's pockets it would have been brought to me."

"But I tell you it was among the articles found upon him. I picked it up from the Coroner's table, and, finding it was not missed, brought it to you, rather than inform the police of our suspicions, which I understood you desired should, for the present, be kept secret."

"I do not believe you," he retorted, angrily.

"Ask whoever searched the body, and they will no doubt remember finding the seal," I answered.

"It is quite unnecessary," he exclaimed.

"Unnecessary? Why?"

"Because I don't believe one word of this elegantly romantic story of yours."

"But I have brought you evidence in black and white that Ogle was a spy," I cried.

"Evidence of a sort," he answered carelessly, returning to his table and sinking into his arm chair. "You have brought these things to me in order to induce me to believe that they were in the dead man's possession instead of where they really were, in your own."

"It is false," I protested, flushing at his base and dogged insinuations.

"So is this elaborate so-called evidence you have brought me," he answered.

"In what way?" I demanded.

"You wish to know," he cried. "Well, I will tell you. First, the passport is a forged one, and was never written in St. Petersburg."

"Why?" I cried in dismay. "How can you tell?"

"Because its water-mark shows it to be English paper, whereas all Russian official paper, as this is supposed to be, is manufactured by Yaronovski, of Moscow, and bears his name."

This fact had never occurred to me, and taking up the paper I examined the water-mark, finding to my surprise the name of a well-known English mill.

"Then the attempts at imitating your handwriting are quite as unsatisfactory," he went on. "Indeed, I have no proof that all those letters and words have not been made by yourself."

"They have not," I protested. "You seem determined not to believe in my innocence."

"And the seal," he continued, heedless of my interruption. "You expected that it would be regarded as irresistible proof. Well, in the first place, I do not believe it was discovered on the body, as you allege; and, secondly, even if it had been, it is no absolute proof that the dead man was the culprit."

"Why?" I inquired eagerly.

"Because it was not with that seal that the dummy envelope was secured," he answered slowly, at the same time handing me the two impressions and inviting me to compare them.

This I did with breathless eagerness, by the aid of the magnifying glass, and in astonishment was compelled to admit that he spoke the truth. There were several discrepancies in the quarterings of the arms that I had not before noticed, and I saw instantly that they did not correspond with those impressed upon the envelope. The amazing worthlessness of my discoveries held me embarrassed, and I stood helpless and in silence as the Minister hurled at me some bitter invectives, declaring that I had come to him with an ingenious story and evidence that might have convinced a man less shrewd.



"I stole it from the table whereon it was displayed."

"Take your clumsily forged documents and your attempt to reproduce my seal, and leave me at once!" he cried in a terrible ebulition of wrath, gathering up the objects I had brought and tossing them back to me. "Your dastardly conduct is too despicable for words, but remember that to you and you alone, your country owes the overwhelming catastrophe that must now inevitably fall upon it."

With these ominous words ringing in my ears I stumbled out, knowing not whither I went, and scarcely responding to the greetings of the men I knew who regarded me in askance. The great central staircase, up which climbed the brilliantly uniformed representatives of all civilized countries on the face of the earth whenever the Minister held his receptions, I descended with heavy heart, and, crossing the gray, silent courtyard, soon found myself amid the bustle of Parliament street.

I saw with chagrin how utterly I had failed in my endeavor to elucidate the mystery, for not only had I been unable to throw any further light upon the theft of the treaty or the tragic end of the man I suspected, but I had actually heaped increased suspicion upon myself. On reflection I found myself in accord with the Minister's declaration that the passport was a forgery, and that the brass stamp was not the seal used by the spy. These facts were absolutely incontestable. The only thing remaining was the paper whereon attempts had been made to imitate my writing. I tried to explain this fact away and clear the memory of the dead man of all suspicion, but, alas! could act bring myself to believe in his innocence. There rankled in my breast the bitter thought that he had uttered words of love to Ella and had tried to induce her to break off her engagement to me. She herself had acknowledged on oath before the Coroner, that they had quarrelled because she loved me. No. Although this passport was a clumsy imitation and the seal had been cut without due regard to the Warnham quarterings, the plain, incontestable evidence of his forgery remained.

He was, after all, a cunning, despicable scoundrel, who had brought dishonor upon my name and ruined me both socially and financially. I found myself smiling grimly at the thought of how quickly retribution had fallen upon him. If he had died from natural causes it was but a judgment for his misdeeds; if struck down by an unknown hand it was but vengeance for his treachery toward his Queen, his country and his bosom friend.

Heedless of where I went, I walked on, called at my club, I remember, and thrust my letters into my pocket unopened; then, pursuing my way, arrived home late in the afternoon. As I entered Juckes handed me a note from Ella, telling me that they had left Staines, owing to the tragic affair, and asking me to call that evening at Pont street, adding that she wished to see me upon a very important matter. For a long time I sat alone, smoking and thinking, trying to devise some means by which I could bring the Earl to believe in my loyalty, but at last, in desperation, I rose, dressed, and took a cab to Mrs. Laing's.

The house was not large, but well ordered, exquisitely furnished, and there was about everything an air of elegant refinement that betokened wealth, taste and culture. It was nearly 7 when I arrived, and I was gratified to learn that with the exception of Beck, who came later, I was the only guest. Dinner was a much more stately meal at Pont street than it had been at Staines, where very often we sat down in flannels, and I was not sorry when it was over and I found myself free to talk alone with Ella. It was plain, from the dark rings about her eyes, that she had passed a sleepless night, and that her terrible and mysterious secret bore her down beneath its oppressive weight. Yet she had greeted me with the same joyous smile, the same hearty handshake as of old, and I had, while sitting at dinner chatting with her, felt myself wondering how I could ever have brought myself to utter such bitter reproaches and recriminations as I had done on the previous day. Her kiss, now that we were alone, thrilled me; her speech, soft and musical, held me enraptured by its charm.

She told me, in answer to my questions, how she had fared after I left the Nook; how dismal the place had appeared, and how many bitter memories it would always possess for her. Then, in response to her suggestion, we walked out upon the balcony, where, under the striped awning, a table and chairs were set. Here, in the cool night air, the quiet only broken by an occasional footfall, or the tinkle of a passing cab bell, we sipped our coffee and gossiped on as lovers will.

Suddenly, while she was telling me of the plans her mother had prepared for their sojourn for a couple of months at the seaside, the loud, strident cry of a running newsman broke upon our ears. At first, in the distance, the voice did not attract our attention, but when it neared us the words, hoarse, yet indistinct, held me speechless. I sat stunned.

Ella herself sprang from her chair and leaned over the balcony, straining her eyes to catch every sound of the rough, coarse voice. The man had paused for breath before the house, a bundle of papers across his shoulder and the ominous words he shouted were:

"Extra spe-shall! War declared against England! Spe-shall! War against England! Startling statement! Spe-shall!"

CHAPTER XI.

BECK'S PROPHECY.

Again the hoarse voice broke the silence, clear, distinct, ominous:

"War declared against England! Spe-shall!"

"Surely it must be some absurd story that the papers have got hold of," Ella exclaimed.

"I have every reason, unfortunately, to believe in the truth of this sudden declaration of war."

"You believe it's true!" she cried. "How do you know? Has Russia actually dared to challenge us?"

"Yes," I replied. "But how were you aware that Russia was our enemy?"

"I—I merely guessed it," she answered, lamely, with a forced smile a moment later. "I've been reading the papers lately."

"You asked me to come here this evening because you had something particular to say to me, Ella. You have not yet referred to it."

"I wanted to ask you a question," she exclaimed.

"I know you have investigated Dudley's belongings, and I wanted to know whether you discovered among them some scraps of paper bearing imitations of your own writing."

I regarded her in surprise; her question amazed me. In her eyes I noticed a look of intense earnestness and appeal for sympathy.

"Well, what if I have?" I inquired.

"If you have, they will, I know be regarded by you as evidence that Dudley was a forger."

"That is what I believe him to have been," I said, with bitterness.

"You judge him wrongly," she replied, quite calmly, her face nevertheless as white as the simply-made dinner gown she wore. "I have already seen those papers, and know their authorship."

"For what reason was it desired to imitate my handwriting?" I asked, pressing her hand tenderly.

"I—I really don't know," she replied. "All I am aware is that your writing was most carefully traced and imitated, and for that purpose two of your letters to me were stolen."

"By whom?"

"I have never been able to discover."

At that moment our conversation was interrupted by a voice crying, "Here, Deedes! Have you seen this alarming news?" and, turning, I saw Beck standing beside the tall, amber shaded lamp in the drawing room, a news sheet in his hand.

"It's extraordinary!" cried Beck, intensely excited, as became a patriotic legislator. "We have not had the slightest inkling of any diplomatic deadlock, or any disagreement with Russia. The whole thing is absolutely amazing."



"Here, Deedes, have you seen this alarming news?"

"But what will happen?" asked Ella, eagerly, with white, scared face. "Will England be invaded and battles fought here in the manner prophetic writers have foretold?"

"No doubt," Beck replied promptly. "The opinions of our greatest strategists are unanimous that under certain conditions France and Russia combined could invade our island. It is all very well for people to talk about England's maritime power; but is it what we believe it to be? I think not. We have built huge and unwieldy battle ships while our enemies constructed the fastest cruisers and torpedo boat destroyers afloat, thereby sweeping away our hitherto undisputed mastery of the sea."

"But not before we have engaged the enemy at sea and given them a taste of the lion's paw," I said.

"Of course. First, we must expect a great naval battle or battles, followed by a dash upon our territory and the landing of the hostile armies. If England received one serious reverse at sea, she could never recover from it. The loss of her maritime power would paralyze her."

"Then you declare that England is great no longer?" I observed, with a smile.

"No, I don't go so far as that; but I contend, as I did in my speech in the House a fortnight ago, that those charged with maintaining our defences in a proper state of efficiency have for years been culpably negligent. The power of England to-day is still the same as it has been—on paper. But, in ascertaining it, we always close our eyes wilfully to the true fact that other nations have awakened during the past ten years, and have now actually overtaken us."

"I don't think that," I answered. "Until our country is actually invested I shall still believe in its strength."

Presently Beck announced his intention of going down to the House of Commons to ascertain the latest news, and I, bidding Ella and her mother farewell, accompanied him. It was about 11 o'clock when we drove up, but the cab could not get much further than Broad Sanctuary, so dense was the crowd that had gathered at St. Stephen's on the startling news being spread. From the high summit of Big Ben the electric light was streaming westward, showing the excited thousands assembled there that Parliament was already deliberating upon the best course to pursue on the outbreak of hostilties, and as we elbowed our way through the turbulent concourse war was on everyone's tongue. Men and women of all classes of society, wildly excited, with pale, scared faces, discussed the probable course of events; many sang patriotic songs, the choruses of which were taken up and shouted lustily, while here and there, as we proceeded, loud invectives against the Czar and his French allies greeted our ears.

CHAPTER XII.

AN IMPORTANT DISPATCH.

Half an hour later as I stood at the door of the small post office in the Lobby Lord Warnham hastily approached and, seeing me, exclaimed:

"Ah! I want you, Deedes. An hour ago I sent telegrams everywhere for you. Come with me to my room."

We went along the corridors to his own private room, where, in an armchair, with some papers in his hand, sat the Marquis of Maybury, Prime Minister of England. We had met before many times when the burly elderly peer had been a guest at Warnham Hall, and on many occasions I had acted as his secretary when he had been alone.

"Well, Deedes," he exclaimed gravely, looking up suddenly from the papers. "Lord Warnham has explained to me the mysterious theft of the secret convention, and I am anxious to see you regarding it. Remember that England's honor and her future depend absolutely upon the issue of this serious complication. If you can furnish us with any information, it is just possible that diplomacy may do something even at the eleventh hour. You see we have lost the original of the convention, and this, if produced in Petersburg, is sufficient evidence against us to upset all our protestations."

"I have told Lord Warnham all I know," I answered calmly. "To him I have explained my suspicions."

"You believe, however, that Ogle was a spy?"

"At present, yes," I said. "And further, I have grave suspicions that he was murdered."

"Did you ever suspect him to be a spy?"

"Not for one moment. He had plenty of money of his own, and was in no sense an adventurer."

"Well," exclaimed the Premier, turning to his colleague at last, "it is extraordinary—most extraordinary."

Lord Warnham nodded acquiescence, and said: "Yes, there is a deep and extraordinary mystery somewhere; a mystery we must, for the sake of our own honor, penetrate and elucidate."

"I entirely agree," answered the other. "We have been victimized by clever spies."

"And all owing to Deedes' culpable negligence," added Lord Warnham, testily, glancing at me.

"No, I am inclined to differ," exclaimed the Premier.

"A little more than mere caution, or even shrewdness, is required to defeat the efforts of the Czar's spies."

"I am obliged for your lordship's words, I exclaimed fervently. "I assure you that your merciful view is entirely correct. I am innocent, and at this moment am utterly at a loss to account for any of the amazing events of the past few days."

Lord Warnham was silent in thought for a few moments, then, turning his sphinx-like face to me, he said, in a tone rather more conciliatory than before. "Very well. As it is Lord Maybury's wish I will reinstate you in the service, but remember, I have no confidence in you."

"Then you still suspect me of being a spy?" I cried, reproachfully. "I am to remain under suspicion!"

"Until the truth is ascertained I, at least, shall believe you had something to do with the theft of that secret convention. Perhaps, after all, I have been just a trifle unjust in condemning you, therefore consider yourself reinstated in the same position as before, although I must admit that my previous confidence in your integrity is, to say the least, seriously—very seriously impaired."

"I hope it will not remain so long," I said. "If there is anything I can do to restore your belief in my honesty I will do it at whatever cost."

"There is but one thing," he exclaimed. "Discover the identity of the spy."

"I will regard that the one endeavor of my life," I declared, earnestly. "If the mystery is to be fathomed I will accomplish it."

My words were interrupted by a loud double knock at the door, and in response to an injunction to enter, there appeared hot and breathless, Frank Lawley, one of the Foreign Office messengers. He wore, half-concealed by his overcoat, his small enamelled greyhound suspended around his neck by a thin chain, his badge of office, and in his hand carried one of the familiar travelling dispatch boxes.

"Good evening, your lordships," he exclaimed, greeting us.

"Where are you from, Lawley?" inquired Lord Warnham, eagerly.

"From Paris, your lordship. My dispatch, I believe, is most important. The Marquis of Worthorpe told me that he feared to trust it on the wire, and sent me here posthaste."

In an instant both Premier and Minister sprang to their feet. While Lord Maybury broke the seals Lord Warnham whipped out his keys, opened the outer case, and then the inner red leather box, from which he drew forth a single envelope.

This he tore open, and holding beneath the softly-shaded electric lamp the sheet of note paper that bore the heading of our Embassy in Paris both of Her Majesty's Ministers eagerly devoured its contents.

When they had done so they both held their breath, raised their heads and without speaking looked at each other in abject dismay. The contents of the dispatch held them spell-bound.

The window of the room was open, and the dull distant roaring of the great turbulent multitude broke upon our ears. The excitement outside had risen to fever heat.