

CHAPTER XIII.

A STATEMENT TO THE PRESS.

"This is indeed extraordinary," exclaimed Lord Maybury, the Premier, at last.

"An amazing development—most amazing!" the Foreign Minister cried, unusually excited.

"Is the dispatch from Paris very remarkable?" I asked, unable to any longer bear their tantalizing conversation, so anxious was I to ascertain the latest development of this conspiracy against our country.

"Read it for yourself," Lord Warnham answered, glancing at the Premier to ascertain whether this course received his approbation, and finding that it did, he handed me the dispatch, which I found, a moment later, read as follows:

"From Marquis of Worthorpe, Paris, to Earl of Warnham, Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs—My Lord, In further continuation of my dispatch of this morning I have the honor to report to your lordship that the war preparations actively commenced here on receipt of a telegram from St. Petersburg (copy of which was enclosed in my last dispatch) have, owing to a later telegram from Russia, been entirely stopped. The orders for mobilization have everywhere been countermanded. According to a statement just made to me by our secret agent in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the French Government have to-day received word that the Czar's declaration of war will not, for some unexplained reason, be published. I send this by special messenger, in the hope that it will reach your lordship this evening. —Worthorpe."

"This is remarkable!" I cried. "It appears as if Russia had already repented."

"We want," said the Prime Minister, "this statement spread throughout the country."

"In order to allay undue public alarm I wish it to be known that, according to advices I have received, the statement in the 'Novoe Vremya' to-day, at first believed to be correct, is without foundation."

"Then war is not declared?"

"No. The alarming report reproduced by the English press from the St. Petersburg journal is apparently totally incorrect."

There presently came another loud knock at the door. One of the clerks who had rushed over from the Foreign Office, entered bearing a telegraphic dispatch.

"Where from?" inquired Lord Warnham, noticing the paper in his hand as he came in.

"From St. Petersburg, your lordship," he answered, handing him the telegram.

The Premier and Foreign Secretary read it through together in silence, expressions of satisfaction passing at once across both their countenances.

"Then we need have no further apprehension," exclaimed the Premier at last, looking up at his colleague.

"Apparently not," observed Lord Warnham. "This is certainly sufficient confirmation of Worthorpe's dispatch," and he tossed it across to the table where I sat, at the same time dismissing the clerk who had brought it.

Taking up the telegram I saw at a glance it was from our secret agent in the Russian Foreign Office and that it had been re-transmitted from Hamburg. Although he had stated that all cipher messages were refused this was in our private code, and its transcription written beneath was as follows:

"Remarkable development of situation has occurred. Ministers held a council this afternoon, and after conferring with the Czar the latter decided to withdraw his proclamation of war which was to be issued to-night. The reason for this sudden decision to preserve peace is a mystery, but the Czar left half an hour ago on his journey south, two of the Ministers have left for their country seats, and telegraphic orders have been issued countermanding the military preparations, therefore it is certain that all idea of war is entirely abandoned. Immediately at the conclusion of the council a telegram was sent to the Russian Minister in Paris informing him of the decision not to commence hostilities against England. The Novoe Vremya, in order to allay public feeling is to be prosecuted for publishing false news."

CHAPTER XIV.

SONIA.

Notwithstanding official assurances that no alarm need be felt at the political outlook the popular excitement abated but slowly. On the morning following this memorable scene in the House of Commons a great panic occurred on the Stock Exchange, and it was fully a week before confidence was restored. Meanwhile, at Lord Warnham's dictation, I exchanged constant communications with our Ambassador in St. Petersburg, and although every endeavor was used to elucidate the mysterious reason why the Russian Government so suddenly altered its tactics, it remained as inexplicable as the means whereby they had obtained the original of our secret convention with Germany.

Both the London police and our secret agents in Russia abandoned none of their activity, but all their efforts were to no purpose. The incident was a perfect enigma.

Thus a month went by.

One morning toward the end of July I received a strangely worded letter written in a foreign hand, asking me to call at an address in Pembroke Road, Kensington, and signed "Sonia."

That night, at the time she named, I found myself before a large, substantial looking detached house situated in the quiet, rather unfrequented thoroughfare off Earl's Court Road, a house which, to my excited imagination, bore external evidence of mystery within. Why such thought should seize me I know not. Perhaps it was because the writer of the letter was unknown, and the object of my visit at present unexplained; nevertheless I entered the small garden that divided the house from the roadway, and ascending the steps rang the bell. My summons was immediately answered by a neat maid, to whom I gave my card, and next moment I was ushered into a well-furnished drawing room, dimly lit by one tall shaded lamp, the light of which was insufficient to illuminate the whole room.

For a few moments I remained alone in wonder, when suddenly the door opened, and there entered an extremely pretty girl scarcely out of her teens, dark-haired, with clear-cut features, bright eyes, and a delicately rounded chin. It struck me, however, even before she spoke, that in her face was a strange expression of unutterable sadness, a look that told of long suffering and intense agony of mind. Her mannerisms were those of a foreigner, her chic was that of the true Parisienne, her dress of black silk crepon was plainly but well made, and the fact that she spoke in broken French was, next second, conclusive.

"Ah! You have come, m'sieur. You are indeed very good," she exclaimed, with a charming accent, her skirt rustling as she advanced to greet me.

"I am at your service, mademoiselle," I answered, bowing, at the same time accepting the seat she offered.

"Well," she commenced, with a smile, slowly sinking into an armchair near me, "when I wrote to you I feared you would not come. You have been so good to me already that I fear to ask any further favor."

"I must ask your pardon, mademoiselle," I said, "but I really am unaware that I have ever rendered you any service."

"What! Do you not remember?" she cried. "You, who were so good to my father and myself; you, to whom we both owed our lives!"

"I certainly have some hazy recollection of your name," I answered, puzzled, "but try how I will I cannot recollect in what connection it has come before me."

"Do you not remember the case of the refugee, Anton Korolenko, the man who, after being hounded all over Europe, in Vienna, in Madrid, in Paris, by the 'agents provocateurs' of the Secret Police, found an asylum in London?" she inquired, surprised. "They said we need not fear the 'Okhrannoe Otedlenie' here, in your free England, but no sooner had we arrived than, owing to the treachery of one of our brotherhood, a warrant for our extradition was issued by General Sekerzhinski, chief of the Department in Petersburg. News of this was telegraphed to us, and I applied to your Minister for protection. You yourself saw me and gave me your promise of assistance, a promise which you kept; the warrant was returned to Russia unexecuted, and you thus saved us from the fate we dreaded."

"Ah, yes," I answered quickly. "Of course I remember now. It is fully two years ago; but you have so altered that I scarcely knew you."

"I was a girl then," she smiled. "Now I feel quite a woman. Since I saw you last I have sustained a bereavement. My poor father is, alas! dead."

"Dead!" I echoed sympathetically.

CHAPTER XV.

BEYOND RECALL.

Now, as she sat before me, older and yet more beautiful, gazing into my eyes with that intense, wistful look that had attracted me when first we had met, all her tragic story came back to me vividly, and I was not surprised at her deep sorrow at the loss of her father she had loved so dearly.

"So you desire my assistance," I exclaimed presently, after she had been explaining how lonely she was in exile from her friends.

"Yes," she said slowly, with emphasis. "But first tell me one thing. You are acquainted with a woman named Ella Laing. Do you know her past?"

"Really your question is a curious one," I exclaimed, smiling.

"Tell me what objection there is to her. Why do you inquire about her past?"

"Because it is a mystery," Sonia replied, regarding me calmly, the strange glint in her penetrating eyes increasing my mistrust.

"In what way?" I inquired. I had known Mrs. Laing and Ella for over a year, and certainly nothing I had learned regarding their antecedents had excited my suspicion. The Yorkshire Laings are a county family, and Edward Laing, Ella's father, had been the head of the great shipping firm that has its headquarters in Hull, and is well known in the North Sea and Atlantic trades. At his death the concern was turned into a company, and Mrs. Laing and her daughter had travelled for nearly three years, returning to London shortly before I met them. The statement that Ella's past life was mysterious was certainly puzzling, therefore I added: "When you make an allegation I really think it is only fair that you should substantiate it."

She shrugged her shoulders with a foreign mannerism that was charming, exclaiming in her broken English:

"Yes, I am well aware of that," she answered with volubility. "You love her; you have offered her marriage—the woman who is your most bitter foe!"

"What do you mean? That Ella is my enemy?" I cried dismayed.

Again she sighed, but at last said: "The truth has already been forced upon you, I should think."

"In what manner?"

"By the death of your friend, Dudley Ogle," she replied in a half whisper, the strange look of almost murderous hatred again showing in her eyes.

"Well," I said, "I can see nothing in that tragic incident to lead me to any conclusion that Ella is my enemy."

"Love is blind, of course," she answered rather contemptuously. "Your blindness extends apparently even to the theft of the important dispatch entrusted to your care."



"What do you mean? That Ella is my enemy?"

Her words amazed me, for, with the exception of Lord Warnham, the Marquis of Maybury and Frayling at Scotland Yard, no living person knew of the theft of the secret convention.

"How, pray, are you aware that any document has been stolen?" I asked quickly, my mind at once filled with suspicion. The fact that this girl was a Russian was, in itself, sufficient to place me at once upon my guard.

"I've heard so," she answered, with a mysterious smile.

Knowing, as I did, how the Czar's emissaries followed and captured by all manner of subtle devices those suspected of revolutionary conspiracy, I was again convinced as I had been two years ago, that Sonia was a conspirator against the life of his Majesty. She certainly was not a common criminal. As she chatted to me, young, refined, sad eyed, there was in her face unmistakable traces of anxiety and suffering. Finding that she absolutely refused to say anything further regarding the woman I adored, I began to question her as to her own happiness and future.

"Alas, I cannot forget," she said, still speaking in French. "It is impossible. I am exiled here in your country, while all my relatives and friends are so far away. The fact is I want you to do me a favor. I want to return to Russia for a month or so to visit my relatives, and to transact some legal business connected with my poor father's estate."

"But is it safe for you to return?" I hazarded.

"Not unless you will procure me a passport. This you can do if you will," she answered earnestly.

"You would be arrested on the frontier," I said. "Is it wise to run such risks?"

"Of course the passport must not be in my own name," she went on. "You alone can obtain one from your friend at the embassy. Will you try?" she asked, intensely in earnest.

"If it is your wish I will try," I answered. "But only in return for one service."

"Well?" she inquired sharply.

"That when I bring you the passport you will tell me truthfully and honestly the grounds whereon you allege that Ella Laing is my enemy."

It's a bargain. But, remember, I must be in St. Petersburg within fourteen days. If you doubt what I say regarding the woman you love, look calmly into her face, pressing her hand affectionately the while, and ask her if she knows anyone with diamond eyes."

CHAPTER XVI.

ADVICE GRATIS.

Soon after noon next day I called at the Russian Embassy at Chesham House, and was ushered into the private room of my friend Paul Verblioudovitch, the Secretary to the urbane old gentleman who acted as the Czar's representative at the Court of St. James. Paul and I were very intimate friends. I had first met him in St. Petersburg, where for six months I had occupied an unimportant post in the British Embassy. Since that time our friendship had been renewed, and we had spent many a pleasant evening together.

"You're an early visitor," he laughed, shaking hands cordially. "Well, what is it? A message from your indefatigable chief?"

"No, not exactly," I smiled. "I have a friend who wants to go to Russia and desires a passport."

"Well, he can get one at the Consul-General's office," my friend answered, without removing his cigarette. "I'll give you a note, if you like."

"No," I said. "First, it is not a man who is going, but a woman; and, secondly, I want a passport vised by the Embassy in a name other than the real name of its bearer."

"Oh," he exclaimed suspiciously, glancing straight at me. "Something shady, eh? Who's the woman?"

"Well, she's hardly a woman yet," I answered. "A pretty girl who has lost her father and desires to return to her friends in Petersburg."

"What's her name?"

"You know her," I said slowly. "I came to you on her behalf some time ago when a warrant was out for the arrest of her and her father. I"—

"Of course, I quite remember," he answered quickly, interrupting me. "Anton Korolenko escaped with his daughter, that ingenious little nymph Sonia, who came and pitched you a long, almost idyllic yarn and you came here to intercede. I then kept my promise by returning the warrant, but I tell you I narrowly escaped getting into a devil of a scrape about it."

"But you can manage to give me a false passport for her, can't you?" I urged,

"Where's her father? If he goes back their whole game will be given away."

"Her father is dead," I answered.

"Dead! Well, the grave is, I think, about the best place for such an enterprising old scoundrel, and as for his daughter, hang it, old chap, ten years in Nerchinsk wouldn't hurt her. What story has she been telling you this time, eh?" he asked.

"She is lonely without her father, and in order to secure her property, which is about to be seized by her uncle, she is bound to be in Petersburg within fourteen days."

"Fourteen days," repeated my friend reflectively. "Let's see, to-day's the twelfth," and he made some rapid calculations upon his blotting pad. "Well, what else?" he inquired, looking up at me keenly.

"Nothing except that she dare not return under her own name."

"I should scarcely think she'd better," he laughed. "Unless she wants to spend the remainder of her days in that rather uncomfortable hotel called Schlusselburg, where the beds are not aired and there are no toilet glasses. But, tell me," he added, gravely, a moment later. "Why do you interest yourself in her welfare? She's entertaining and rather pretty, I've been told, but surely you, who are engaged to that charming girl to whom you introduced me at the Gaiety one evening a few weeks ago, really ought not to associate yourself with Anton Korolenko's daughter. She's a criminal."

CHAPTER XVII.

A SPY'S STORY.

"I have an object," I said briefly.

"Every man says that when a girl has taken his fancy I know the world, old fellow."

"But it so happens that I've not been captivated by her charms," I retorted.

"Do not be entrapped by a pretty face or a fine pair of eyes, that's my advice," my companion said slowly striking a match.

"I can assure you, old fellow, I shall not be misled by any pretty face, even if it has diamond eyes," I said quite unthinkingly, Sonia's strange words recurring to me at that moment.

"Diamond eyes!" gasped Paul Verblioudovitch, staring visibly and holding the burning match still between his fingers without lighting his cigarette. He had in that instant grown paler, and I thought I detected that his hand trembled, almost imperceptibly be it said. "What do you mean?" he demanded with a strange fierceness in his gaze. "What do you know of Diamond Eyes?"

"I know nothing of diamond eyes," I replied, surprised at Paul's excited inquiry. "I don't claim originality for it. To Sonia is the credit due."

"To Sonia!" he exclaimed, glancing sharply at me. "Then it is true, as I suspected, that she has been telling you some of her ingenious falsehoods."

"Scarcely that," I replied, thrusting my hands deeply into my pockets. "She has merely urged me to go to Ella and ask her whether she is acquainted with any one with diamond eyes."

"As I thought," he cried, rising and pacing the floor furiously. "It is exactly as I expected. She is trying to entrap you as she has the others, and has embarked upon the first step by speaking thus of Ella, and sowing seeds of suspicion in your mind. Surely you have confidence in her, or you would not have asked her to be your wife."

"There is a mystery connected with her," I said, quietly. "A mystery deep and inscrutable that perplexes me to the point of distraction."

"Tell me about it," Verblioudovitch said, interested.

It was upon my tongue to relate to him the whole of the facts sub silentio, but a thought at that instant occurred to me that such a course would be unjust to Ella; therefore I evaded his invitation to make him my confidant. Returning quickly to the object for which I had sought him, I persuaded him to assist me by giving me a passport for Sonia.

"You seem actuated by some spirit of animosity against her," I blurted forth.

"Not at all. I've never seen her in my life," he protested. "You apparently want confirmation of my words. Well, you shall have it at once," and he touched an electric button.

The summons was instantly obeyed by a messenger in uniform, and to this man Paul spoke some words. A few minutes later a short, middle-aged Russian entered.

His hair was gray, his clean-shaven face was rather red and slightly pimply, his small jet-black eyes were set too closely together, and his low brows met above his nose. Fashionably attired in frock coat of light gray, with a pink carnation in the lapel, he looked as spick and span that I regarded him with genuine surprise. When my friend, introducing us, said:

"This Geoffrey, is Ivan Renouf. I dare say you have heard of him. He is now chief of the section of Secret Police attached to our Embassies of London and Paris."

"Renouf," my friend exclaimed, "I want to ask you a question. What character does Sonia Korolenko bear?"

"For the past nine months we have kept her under strict surveilance, expecting that she intended to recommence operations in London. Indeed, I have here in my pocket the report for the last forty-eight hours," and he took from his breast pocket a long folded paper. "It shows, among other things, that she has had several visitors at her house in Kensington, one of whom was a gentleman who, according to the description, must have born a strong resemblance to m'scieur. Two hours before this man had called a lady visited her and remained with her about an hour." Then, reading from the report, he continued, "the description says, tall, good-looking, blue eyes, reddish-brown hair, straw hat trimmed with pale blue, brown shoes, light blouse, black cycling shirt."

"By heaven!" I cried excitedly. "That's Ella! Every word of that description tallies, even to the dress, boots and hat!"

"She is a frequent visitor," the detective observed. "She calls on her bicycle every day."

"Every day!" I echoed in astonishment. "I did not know they were friends."

"Did I not tell you that she was concealing the truth?" Paul observed, smiling at my dismay. "Tell m'sieur of the past, Ivan."

"Ah! her record is a very black one—very black," the officer of police answered gravely, fixing his small dark eyes upon me. "Her swindling transactions extend over several years, and she has no doubt acquired quite a fortune, while at least one of her victims has lost his life. By one coup she accomplished in Moscow with the aid of that soft-spoken old scoundrel, her father, they pocketed nearly one hundred thousand rubies between them."

"I really can't believe it," I exclaimed dumbfounded.

"You apparently suspect the woman you love of some terrible crime or other," Paul said after a pause. "I can't understand you, Goeffrey, I must confess. Of what do you suspect her—of a crime?"

I paused.

"Yes," I answered gravely, "of a crime."

I fancied he started as I spoke, almost imperceptible, perhaps, yet I could have sworn that my words produced within him some nervous apprehension.

"I see, Deedes, it's quite useless to argue longer. If you are determined to assist her I suppose I must obtain for you the necessary paper."

"Thanks, old fellow, thanks: I knew you would help me," I exclaimed enthusiastically.

"I cannot let you have it before this evening. If you will send Juckes around at 7 you shall have it with the vise and everything complete."

CHAPTER XVIII.

SOME SURPRISES.

Several weeks passed uneventually. In fulfilment of my promise to Sonia I had obtained the required permit and taken it personally to Pembroke Road on the same evening, but on arrival there discovered that the pretty Russian had been unexpectedly summoned to the bedside of a sick friend. She had, however, left a note with the English maid asking me to enclose the document in an envelope and leave it.

From day to day I waited in the expectation of a letter from her, but although I remained in anxiety and doubt, for more than a month, none came, and I was at last compelled to admit that I had actually been tricked, as Paul had predicted. He was right after all. Sonia, the innocent-looking girl with sad dark eyes and dimpled chin was a woman internationally notorious, who, soft-voiced, had posed as my friend in order to attain her own ends, and had then departed without carrying out her part of the compact.

Then at last, five weeks after Sonia's flight, I called at Pont street and demanded of Ella the reason she had visited the house in Pembroke Road. Her reply was quite unexpected. She told me quite calmly that they had been school fellows at Neuilly, and that, finding Sonia had lost both her parents, she went to Pembroke Road each day to bear the bereaved girl company. She was in ignorance regarding Sonia's life since she had left the French school, and expressed surprise that she should have departed suddenly without telling her of her destination. Her replies to my inquiries set my mind at rest upon several points. It appeared quite plain that Ella herself had told Sonia of her engagement to me and had described the tragic incident at Staines, therefore the pretty refugee had been enabled to drop those ingenious hints at mystery that had so sorely puzzled me, and had cleverly secured my interests on her behalf.

She eyed me gravely, but spoke no word.

Yet in that instant I knew I had misjudged her, that through these long anxious weeks while I had entertained dark suspicions she had nevertheless still loved me honestly and truly. I know not what words I uttered, but a few moments later I found her sobbing in my fond embrace. Her tears were tears of joy.

"How I wish that this night could last forever," I said with a sigh of supreme contentment. "In my memory it will live always."

"Always?" she echoed, looking tenderly into my face; then for the first time she put her arms around me and held me tightly pressed against her heart.



The man was none other than Ivan Renouf, the great Russian detective.

"Yes, always," I said. "Until I die."

"Ah! Don't speak of death," she whispered. "If you died, I—I should die also, Geoffrey. I could not live without you. How I have endured these dark weary weeks I scarcely know."

Mrs. Laing, stiff and stately in black satin, entered the room a few moments later, and Ella having whispered and obtained my consent, forthwith made a full and complete statement to her mother of the position of affairs. The old lady listened attentively in silence, inclining her head now and then with a gesture indicative of approbation, but when her daughter had concluded her face brightened.

"I am indeed glad to think that dear Ella is to marry you, after all, Goeffrey," she said. "Once, not so very long ago, I feared that you two would never again be reconciled, for Ella moped day after day, crying and quite spoiling her complexion. But I am absolutely sure that this marriage is one that Ella's father would have approved, therefore you have my entire consent and heartiest congratulations.

"Thank you, Mrs. Laing," I answered. "I, too, am convinced that we love each other sufficiently well, and I can only promise to be a sympathetic and devoted husband."

Then, deeming it but just that they both should know the reason of my recent coolness and suspicion, I told them in confidence of the mysterious theft of the secret convention, the strange and tragic events that followed, the discovery of the seal on the body of Dudley Ogle, and my absurd belief that Ella had, in some way, been implicated in the ingenious efforts of the spy.

"Do you actually suspect poor Dudley of having been in the pay of the Russian Government?" Mrs. Laing asked open-mouthed in dismay.

"I do," I was constrained to reply.

While we had been speaking the door had opened and as I glanced from Ella across to Mrs. Laing I saw a gray-haired man-servant in the act of handing her a letter.

The man was none other than Ivan Renouf, the great Russian detective.

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Nearly three months had slipped away. It was mid-November. The cloud that had darkened my days had lifted, the sun shone out, and life and hope sprang up and ran riot in my heart. The long, anxious weeks were over, for Ella was now my wife, and our lives were full of joy and love. With utter contempt for the warning words of the ingenious Russian who left so mysteriously without fulfilling her promise, I had taken the dearest other half of my soul, happy in the knowledge that I would be a solitary wretch no more.

With Ella as my wife I had passed six blissful weeks visiting many of the quaint old-world towns in Central France. It had been Ella's fancy to do this. She hated the glare and glitter of Paris, and would only remain there the night on our outward and homeward journeys; indeed, cities had no charm for her; she preferred the lethargic provincial towns from which she could make excursions into the country, and spent the bright Autumn days at old-fashioned inns.