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THE SECRET
WITNESS

George Gibbs

The Secret Witness

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CHAPTER I

JUNE 12, 1914

The Countess Marishka was fleet of foot. She was straight and slender and she set a pace for Renwick along the tortuous paths in the rose gardens of the Archduke which soon had her pursuer gasping. She ran like a boy, her dark hair falling about her ears, her draperies like Nike's in the wind, her cheeks and eyes glowing, a pretty quarry indeed and well worthy of so arduous a pursuit. For Renwick was not to be denied and as the girl turned into the path which led to the thatched arbor, he saw that she was breathing hard and the half-timorous laugh she threw over her shoulder at him only spurred him on to new endeavor. He reached the hedge as she disappeared, but his instinct was unerring and he leaped through the swaying branches just in time to see the hem of her skirt in the foliage on the other side and plunging through caught her in his arms just as she sank, laughing breathlessly, to the spangled shadows of the turf beyond.

"Marishka," he cried joyously, "did you mean it?"

But she wouldn't reply.

"You said that if I caught you—"

"The race—isn't always—to the swift—" she protested falteringly in her pretty broken English.

"Your promise—"

"I made no promise."

"You'll make it now, the one I've waited for—for weeks—Marishka. Lift up your head."

"No, no," she stammered.

"Then I—"

Renwick caught her in his arms again and turned her chin upward. Her eyes were closed, but as their lips met her figure relaxed in his arms and her head sank upon his shoulder.

"You run very fast, Herr Renwick," she whispered.

"You'll marry me, Marishka?"

"Who shall say?" she evaded.

"Your own lips. You've given them to me—"

"No, no. You have taken them—"

"It is all the same. They are mine." And Renwick took them again.

"Oh," she gasped, "you are so persistent—you English. You always wish to have your own way."

He laughed happily.

"Would you have me otherwise? My way and your way, Marishka, they go together. You wish it so, do you not?"

She was silent a while, the wild spirit in her slowly submissive, and at last a smile moved her lips, her dark eyes were upturned to his and she murmured a little proudly:

"It is a saying among the women of the House of Strahni that where the lips are given the heart must follow."

"Your heart, Marishka! Mine, for many weeks. I know it. It is the lips which have followed."

"What matters it now, beloved," she sighed, "since you have them both?"

Renwick smiled.

"Nothing. I only wondered why you've kept me dangling so long."

She was silent a moment.

"I—I have been afraid."

"Of what?"

"I do not know. It is the Tzigane in my blood which reads into the future—"

She paused and he laughed gayly.

"Because I am a foreigner—"

"I have not always loved the English. I have thought them cold, different from my people."

He kissed her again.

"And I could let you believe me that!"

She laughed. "Oh, no.... But you have shown me enough." And, pushing him gently away, "I am convinced, *mon ami*...."

"As if you couldn't have read it in my eyes—"

"Alas! One reads—and one runs—"

"You couldn't escape me. It was written."

"Yes," she said dreamily, "I believe that now." And then, "But if anything should come between us—"

"What, Marishka?" he smiled.

"I don't know. I have always thought that love would not come to me without bitterness."

"What bitterness, *liebchen*?"

She settled softly closer to him and shrugged lightly. "How should I know?"

He smiled at her proudly and caught her brown hand to his lips.

"You are dyed in the illusions of your race,—mystery—fatalism. They become you well. But here among the roses of Konopisht there is no room in my heart or yours for anything but happiness. See how they nod to each other in the sunlight, Marishka. Like us, they love and are loved. June comes to Bohemia but once a year—or to us. Let us bloom in the sunlight like them—happy—happy—"

"Blood red, the roses," she said pensively. "The white ones please me better. But they are so few. The Archduke likes the red ones best. What is the verse?"

"I sometimes think that never blows so red
The Rose as where some buried Cæsar bled."

"What matter Cæsar or Kaiser to us, Marishka? Our own kingdom—"

"Yes, yes," she sighed. "And I am happy in it. You know it, *nicht wahr*?"

Silence, except for the drowsy hum of the bees and the songs of the birds. No fatalism is long proof against the call of love and June. Marishka was content that her flight had ended in capture and sat dreamily gazing at the white clouds floating overhead while she listened to the voice at her ear, replying to it in monosyllables, the language of acquiescence and content. The moments passed. Konopisht was no longer a garden. Enchanted their bower and even the red roses forgotten.

Suddenly the girl started upright to her knees, and peered wide-eyed through an opening in the foliage.

"What is it, Marishka?"

She put a finger to her lips in token of silence, and Renwick followed her gaze down the graveled path which led toward the arbor. As under-secretary of the British Embassy in Vienna, he had been trained to guard his emotions against surprises, but the sight of the three figures which were approaching them down the path left him bereft for the moment of all initiative. In the center walked the Archduke, pulling deliberately at his heavy dark mustaches while he listened to the figure upon his right, a man of medium stature, who wore a hunting suit and a jäger hat with a feather in it. He carried his left hand, concealing a defect of his arm, in the pocket of his shooting jacket, while with his free right hand he swung an ebony cane. His mustaches were turned straight upward from the corners of his mouth and the aggressive chin shot outward as he glanced right and left, talking

meanwhile with his companions. The third figure was very tall, topping even the Archduke, who was by no means small of stature, by at least six inches; his hair, or as much of it as could be seen beneath the soft hat, was gray, and a long beard, almost white in the patches at either side of the chin, descended in two long points half of the way to his waist.

Renwick recognized the visitors at once, and turned toward his startled companion, his own mind as to the propriety of his situation at once made up.

"Marishka," he whispered, "we must go."

"It is too late," she murmured. "They would see us."

"And what does that matter?"

"I forgot," she breathed helplessly. "I was told I was not to come today into the rose garden. I wondered why. Sh—! Sit still. Crouch lower. Perhaps they will pass on and then—"

Renwick obeyed somewhat dubiously and sank, scarcely daring to breathe, beneath the thick foliage beside the arbor which concealed his companion. She seized his hand and he felt her fingers trembling in his own, but he pressed them gently—aware that the tremors of the girl's fingers as the footsteps approached the arbor were being unpleasantly communicated to his own. The breach of hospitality to the household of the Archduke, upon whose land he was, was as nothing beside the breach of etiquette to the Empire by his Chief. Renwick's nerves were good but he trembled with Marishka. The friendship of nations depended upon the security of his concealment—more than that—and less than that—his own fate and the girl's. And so Renwick crouched beside her and silently prayed in English, a language he thought more fitted to the desperate nature of his desires, that the three figures would pass on to another part of the garden, that they, the luckless lovers, might flee to the abandoned tennis court in innocence and peace.

But Renwick's prayers were not to be answered. Had he known at the moment how deeply the two of them were to be enmeshed in the skein of Europe's destiny he would have risen and faced the anger of his host, or, risking detection, incontinently fled. But Marishka's hand clasped his own, and lucklessly, he waited.

The three men reached the gate of the arbor, the smaller one entering first, the giant with the gray beard, at a gesture from their host, following, and they all sat in chairs around the small iron table. Renwick was paralyzed with fear and Marishka's chill fingers seemed frozen to his. There had been rumors in the chancelleries of Europe of this visit to Konopisht to see the most wonderful rose garden in Bohemia in mid-June, but Renwick knew, as did every other diplomat in Vienna, that the visit to the roses of Konopisht was a mere subterfuge. If there had been any doubt in the Englishman's mind as to the real nature of the visit, the grave expressions upon the faces of the men in the arbor would speedily have set him right. The Archduke opened a cigarette case and offered it to his companions who helped themselves with some deliberation.

"A wonderful rose garden, truly, my friend," said the man in the jäger hat with a smile which broke the grave lines of his face into pleasant wrinkles. "I will give your gardener twice what you offer him to come to me."

The Archduke showed his white teeth in a smile. "*Majestät* has but to request—"

"A jest, my friend. It would be unmannerly. It is Her Highness that I would also rob, for roses, after all, are more a woman's pleasure than a man's."

"The Duchess spends many hours here—"

"The *Arch* Duchess," corrected the other vehemently.

The Archduke shrugged. "She will always hold that rank in my heart," he said quietly.

"And with me and my House," said the other quickly.

"It is a pity that my own family should not be of the same mind."

"It matters nothing," said the other. "Nothing. You shall see."

The Archduke examined the ash of his cigarette, but said nothing.

"You must realize, my great and good friend," continued the man in the hunting suit, "that I did not come to Konopisht only to see your roses."

The Archduke nodded attentively.

"The fortunes of your family are linked to mine by ties deeper than those of blood,—a community of interest and of fortune which involves the welfare, happiness and progress of many millions of people. The history of civilization in Europe has reached a new page, one which must be written by those who have in keeping the Divine destiny of the Germanic race. It is not a time to falter before the graveness of our responsibility and the magnitude of our undertakings. I spoke of these things at Eckartsau. I think you understand."

The Archduke nodded gravely.

"I will not shirk any responsibility. I hesitated once. That hour has passed. Sophie—Maximilian—Ernest—"

"They must have their heritage."

The man in the jäger hat got up and paced impatiently the length of the arbor, at one moment within three yards of the terrified lovers in the foliage.

"Are we alone, your Highness?" he asked of the Archduke.

"I gave orders that no one should enter the rose garden at any time this afternoon," replied his host.

"It is well." He sent a quick glance toward the tall man who had risen. "You understand, Admiral, *nicht wahr?*"

A guttural sound came from the old man's throat.

"The destinies of Europe, *meine Herren*," he went on.

"*Majestät* may speak on," said the Archduke coolly, "without fear of eavesdroppers."

Renwick, crouched beneath the foliage, was incapable of motion. All his will power was used in the effort to control his breathing, and reduce his body to absolute inertness. But as the moments passed, and the men in the arbor gave no sign of suspicion he gained confidence, all his professional instincts aroused at the import of this secrecy and the magnificence of the impending revelations. He was England, waiting, alert, on guard, for the safety and peace of Europe. He did not dare to look at Marishka, for fear of the slightest motion or sound which might betray them. Only their hands clasped, though by this time neither of them was conscious of the contact.

"At Eckartsau, my brother," went on the smaller man, "you and I came to an understanding. Maximilian and Ernest are growing toward manhood. And what is that manhood to be? Habsburg blood flows in their veins as it flows in you, the Heir Presumptive, but the Family Law debars them. Not even the Este estates can pass to your children. They will become pensioners upon the bounty of those who hate their mother."

"Impossible!" whispered the Archduke tensely. "It must not be. I will find a way—"

"Listen, Franz, my brother. A magnificent horizon spreads before you. Look at it. Part of the Duchy of Posen, the ancient Kingdom of Poland with Lithuania and the Ukraine, the Poland of the Jagellons, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Yours. And after you, Maximilian's. For Ernest, Bohemia, Hungary, the Southern Slav lands of Austria, Serbia, the Slav coast of the Eastern Adriatic and Saloniki;—two Empires in one. And the states of those who have despised Sophie Chotek—" he paused expressively and snapped his jaws, "the Austrian Erbländer will come into the Confederated German Empire." He paused again and then went on more quietly, "Between us two a close and perpetual military and economic alliance, to be the arbiters of Europe under the Divine will, dominating the West and commanding the road to the East." He paused and took a fresh cigarette from the box on the table.

"It is what I have dreamed," murmured the deep voice of the Archduke. "And yet it is no dream, but reality. Fate plays into my hands. At no time have we been in a better position."

It was the turn of the Archduke to walk the floor of the arbor with long strides, his hands behind him, his gaze bent before him.

"Yes, civilization, progress—all material things. But the Church—you forget, *Majestät*, that your people and mine are of different faiths. Some assurance I must have that there will be no question—"

"Willingly," said the other, rising. "Do not my people serve God as they choose? For you, if you like, the Holy Roman Empire reconstituted with you as its titular head, the sovereignty of central Europe intact—all the half formulated experiments of the West, at the point of the sword. This is your mission—and mine!"

The two men faced each other, eye to eye, but the smaller dominated.

"A pact, my brother," said the man in the hunting-suit, extending his hand.

The Archduke hesitated but a moment longer, and then thrust forward. The hands clasped, while beside the two, the tall man stood like a Viking, his great head bent forward, his forked beard wagging over the table.

"A pact," repeated the Archduke, "which only Death may disrupt."

They stood thus in a long moment of tension. It was he they called *Majestät* who first relaxed.

"Death?" he smiled. "Who knows? God defends the Empire. It lives on in my sons and yours."

"Amen!" said the Archduke solemnly.

"For the present," continued the other quietly, "silence! I shall advise you. You can rely upon Von Hoetendorf?"

"Utterly. In two weeks I shall attend the grand maneuvers at Savajevo."

"Oh, yes, of course. You shall hear from me." He took a few steps toward the door of the arbor. "It does not do to stay here too long. We must join the others. Berchtold, you said, is coming?"

The Archduke nodded with a frown, and followed with the Admiral into the garden. The sun had declined and the warm glow of late afternoon fell upon the roses, dyeing them with a deeper red. But along the crimson alleys the three men walked calmly, the smaller one still gesturing with his ebony cane. Presently the sound of their footsteps upon the gravel diminished and in a moment they disappeared beyond the hedge by the greenhouses.

Renwick in his place of concealment trembled again. The reaction had come. He drew a long breath, moved his stiffened limbs and glanced at his companion. Her face was like wax, pale as death and as colorless. Her fingers in his were ice-cold. Her eyes, dark with bewilderment, sought his blankly like those of a somnambulist. Renwick rose stiffly to his knees and peered through the bushes.

"They have gone," he muttered.

"The Archduke!" she gasped. "You heard?"

He nodded.

"Have we dreamed? I cannot believe—"

Renwick was thinking quickly. Marishka—their position—his duty—a way of escape—one thought crowded another in his mind. He glanced about through the foliage behind them and then rose to his feet.

"I must get back to Vienna, at once," he said hoarsely.

Marishka stood beside him, clinging to his arm.

"And I—I know not what to do. I could not look Her Highness in the face. But I too must go to Vienna. I am not versed in politics, but the secret that we share is terrible. It oppresses me. Austria—my country!"

She hid her face in her hands and stood silent a moment, in the throes of a struggle, still trembling violently. At the touch of Renwick's fingers upon her arm, she straightened, lowered her hands, her face now quite composed.

"I too must leave here at once," she said quietly. "I have an allegiance stronger than my duty to Sophie Chotek. I am going—"

"Where?" he asked.

"To Schönbrunn."

"But Marishka, have you thought—?"

"I pray that you will waste no words. As you love me, Hugh, you will do what I ask and be silent."

"What can I do?"

"Go with me to Vienna tonight."

"That would be most imprudent. Your reputation—"

"I care nothing. Will you accompany me?"

Renwick shrugged. "Of course."

"Then do as I bid you. I will show you a way out to a small gate from the garden by which you can reach the public road. Go to your Inn. Make arrangements for an automobile. I will join you tonight." She peered in all directions through the foliage and then led the way through the bushes in a direction opposite to that by which they had come. Renwick followed silently, his mind turbulent. What was his duty? And where did it conflict with Marishka's mad plan? What would his Ambassador have wished him to do? And in what could he serve England best? He must have time to think. For the present at least Marishka should have her way. Indeed, had he wished, he saw no means of dissuading her. He would go with her to Vienna, make a clean breast of things to his Chief, before Marishka could carry out her plan. After that the matter would be out of his hands.

The girl descended some steps to a narrow gate in the hedge. Here Renwick paused a moment to clasp her in his arms.

"Belovèd," she whispered, "not now. Go. Follow the path to the wall. You must climb it. Let no one see you descend. Au revoir. God be with you."

And she was gone.

CHAPTER II

COURT SECRETS

Hugh Renwick lay flat upon the coping of the wall for a moment peering up and down the road until sure at last that the way was clear, when he let himself down and walked rapidly in the direction of the village. The events of the last hour were of a nature to disturb the equanimity of an existence less well ordered than his. The winning of the Countess Marishka, an achievement upon which he had set his whole soul for many uncertain weeks in which hope and fear had fought a daily battle in his heart—that in itself had been enough to convince him that the gods looked upon him with favor—but this other *coup de foudre*! Whatever the means by which his information had been obtained, the mere possession of it and the revelation of it to his Ambassador was a diplomatic achievement of the highest importance. There had long been rumors of an *entente* between Archduke and Kaiser, but *this*! He rubbed his eyes to make sure that he was awake.

Hugh Renwick was merely the average Englishman of good family and wealth, who because of his education in a German university had found the offer of the post of Vienna singularly attractive. He had filled his position with circumspection, if not with brilliancy, and had made himself sufficiently popular in court circles to be sure that if not a triumphant success in the drudgery of the office, he was at least not altogether a social failure. Good looking, wealthy, talented though he was, it was something indeed to have won Marishka Strahni, who, apart from her high position in Vienna and the success of a season, was, as he well knew, the finest girl in all Austria. Even yet he doubted his good fortune. He had come to Konopisht, where the girl was visiting the Duchess of Hohenberg, who had been a childhood friend of her mother's. As everyone in Vienna knew, Sophie Chotek was ineligible for the high position she occupied as consort of the Heir Presumptive. Though a member of an ancient Bohemian family, that of Chotek and Wognin, the law of the Habsburg's that archdukes may marry only those of equal rank, forbade that the Duchess of Hohenberg and her children should share the position of husband and father. She had been snubbed upon all the occasions of her appearance at court functions, and had at last retired to the Archduke's estates at Konopisht, where she led the secluded life of the *ebenburtige*, still chafing, rumor had it, and more than ever jealous and ambitious for the future of the children.

Upon the occasion of a previous visit of the Countess Marishka to Konopisht, Renwick had spent a week end at the castle, but he thanked his stars that he was now stopping at the village inn. It would have been difficult to go through the formality of leave-taking with the shadow of this impending tragedy to Europe hanging over him. He pitied Marishka from the bottom of his heart for he had seen the beginnings of the struggle between her devotion to the Duchess and her duty to her sovereign. But he knew enough of her quality to be sure that she would carry out her plan at whatever the cost to her own feelings.

As Renwick approached the gates which led into the Castle grounds, he had an actual sense of the consequence of the Archduke's guests in the appearance of soldiery and police which were to be seen in every direction, and while he waited in the village road two automobiles came out of the gate and dashed past him in the direction of the railroad station, in the foremost of which he recognized Archduke Franz and his guests of the rose garden.

"The roses of Konopisht," he muttered, thinking of Marishka's fatalism. "Were they symbols, those innocent red blossoms?" And then with an inward smile, "Marishka! What bitterness could the roses of Konopisht bring between Marishka and him?"

A sense of the grave importance of his mission came over Renwick with a rush. He looked at his watch. Six o'clock. It would have been hazardous to use the wire to reach the Embassy even had he possessed a code. He knew enough of the activities of the Austrian secret service to be sure

that in spite of his entrée at the Castle, his presence at Konopisht at this time might be marked. He sauntered down the street with an air of composure he was far from feeling. There was nothing for it but to obey Marishka's injunctions and wait, upon his guard against surprises, but ready to go to any extreme to reach Vienna and the Embassy with a sound skin. He found the owner of a motor car, and telling the man that he was traveling by night, he paid its owner in advance and engaged it to be at a certain place by nightfall, promising a further payment if the matter were kept secret. Then he went to the inn, took supper, and lighting his pipe, paced the cobbles and waited.

As the summer dusk fell slowly upon the streets of the little village, Renwick found himself a prey to renewed apprehensions as to Marishka. Had her presence and his in the rose garden been discovered by one of the Archduke's retainers? And was she now a prisoner in the castle where a few hours ago she had been so free a guest? She was clever, as he knew, but the burden of her secret had marked its shadows upon her face. What excuse would she offer the Duchess for her sudden departure? The girl was dear to him, dearer than anything in the world but England, and the thought of making a choice between her safety and the performance of his duty was bitterly painful to him. Eight o'clock passed—nine. He had gone inside the house again, for the actions of any stranger in Konopisht were sure to be conspicuous and he felt himself already an object of notice. But at last unable to bear the suspense inactive, he went out, crossed the road and stood, his teeth clenched upon his extinguished pipe, his gaze upon the road which led to the gates of the Park.

There she came to him, out of the darkness. At the touch of her fingers he started, for he had not been expecting her from this direction, but the sound of her voice fell like the balm of her presence upon his spirit.

"Thank God," he gasped. "Marishka, I was afraid—"

"I came as soon as I could," she whispered rapidly in English. "It was difficult. I could make no excuses for leaving. I pleaded fatigue and went to my room. And when the opportunity offered, stole out through the garden."

"And your absence will not be discovered—?"

"Not until tomorrow—when, please the Holy Virgin, I shall be at Schönbrunn."

He took her in his arms and kissed her warmly, but he felt the restraint in her caress.

"Hugh, beloved, let us wait upon duty for our own happiness. I cannot rest until I have told our dreadful secret. You have a motor car?"

"Come," he said. And taking her small valise with his own, he led the way to the spot where the machine was awaiting them. Marishka gave directions and in a few moments they were off. The danger of detection, once beyond the village, was slight, and their purpose to reach the railroad at Budweis and take a late train to Vienna was not difficult of accomplishment. The machine was none too good, but the road for the main part was excellent. Renwick's arm was about the girl, and they sat discussing their plans for the immediate future.

"You have no fear for what you are about to do?" he asked.

"What should I fear?" she said lightly. "I am only doing my duty."

"There will be difficulties, will there not?"

"Perhaps. But I shall succeed. Prince Montenuovo, the High Chamberlain of the Court will listen to me."

"But you will not tell him all."

"Not unless it is necessary. You, Hugh, will take me to him."

Renwick was silent for a moment.

"Marishka," he said at last, "we share a terrible duty, yours to Austria, and mine to England—"

"But mine—is it not the greater?" she pleaded. "You must not speak, Hugh, until I have given you permission."

Renwick folded his arms and gazed stolidly into the darkness.

"I must tell what I know to Sir Herbert," he said firmly. "You must not ask me to be silent."

He noticed the change in her voice as she replied, "Is my happiness so slight a thing that you can refuse the first request I make of you?"

He caught her hand to his lips.

"Marishka, you know—"

"My first request—"

"There is nothing in the world that I would not do for you. You would think little of me if I did not do my duty."

"And of your duty to me—? Is that nothing?"

Renwick smiled into the darkness. Had he been told six months ago that he would be bandying the interests of England against the plans of a pretty woman he would have laughed the idea to scorn.

"What do you wish me to do, Marishka?" he asked gently.

With a swift impulse, she threw her arms about his neck, whispering in his ear.

"O Hugh, I cannot bear that there should be a difference between us, today, the first of our *fiançailles*. It will perhaps make no great difference that you should tell what we have heard, for your country, thank the Holy Virgin, is at friendship with mine. If you would but wait until I give you permission."

"And if something happened to me in the meanwhile—?"

"Nothing can happen. No one at Konopisht can know. I am sure of that—sure."

Perhaps the moment of danger that had threatened their happiness had made each more considerate, and the two great secrets that they possessed, their own and the other more terrible one had strengthened the bond between them.

"I will wait until you have been to Schönbrunn," he decided.

"Until I give you permission," she insisted.

He kissed her. She believed it to be a promise and the tight pressure of her hand rewarded him. In that moment of *rapprochement*, the destinies of nations seemed a matter of little moment to them.

"You will marry me soon, Marishka?" he murmured.

"Perhaps," she whispered gently.

Morning brought the pair in a *fiacre* into the Schottenring, Marishka weary but resolute, Renwick somewhat dubious as to their appearance at this early hour alone in the streets of Vienna. But at his suggestion that they drive first to the house of Marishka's aunt and guardian, Baroness Racowitz, where some excuse could be made for the girl's unexpected visit, Marishka only shook her head and gave the town address of Prince Montenuovo, who, as she knew, was still in residence, the Emperor not being expected at Ischl until the middle of July. Nor would she permit Renwick to accompany her within the house, and so he sat alone in the humble *fiacre* for what seemed an interminable time, until a man in livery came down the steps and gave him a note in Marishka's hand.

"I have succeeded in getting an audience. Go to the Embassy and await word from me. Silence."

And so at last he drove away to his hotel, sure at least that for the present he had done his duty to Marishka. But this was no boy-and-girl matter. The lives of nations, perhaps, hung upon his decision. In a weak moment he had promised Marishka an impossible thing. He did not know what danger hung over him. If anything happened to him England might never know until it was too late. The vision of Marishka's pale face haunted him, but he decided to take no further chances, and locking himself in his own rooms, he wrote a long statement, in which he accurately recounted his experience in the garden the day before. This letter written, sealed, addressed, and given to a trusted servant to be delivered into the hands of the Ambassador at a given time, Renwick breathed a sigh of relief, then bathed, dressed, and waited.

It was not until some days later that he heard in detail of Marishka's visit to the Emperor. The High Chamberlain, aware of the visit of the Countess Strahni to Konopisht, and convinced of

her earnestness and anxiety, had acted immediately. The Emperor fortunately was not ailing and the audience was obtained without difficulty. Franz Joseph at eighty-four, and burdened with more sorrows than those that fall to the lot of the average man, still found interest in the complaints and petitions of his subjects and had audience on certain days at Schönbrunn. It was this intimate touch with his people, kept through many years, which endeared him to his subjects, and stories of his paternal kindness were thus continually sent the length and breadth of the nation.

Marishka was shown into an antechamber in the Emperor's private suite where for what seemed an interminable time she sat and waited. At length her sponsor appeared and conducted her along a short corridor past several rooms to a white door which the Prince opened, and then stood aside as Marishka entered.

"The Countess Strahni," he announced.

Marishka, a little bewildered and frightened, advanced uncertainly, her eyes dazzled by the brilliant sunlight which streamed in at the south. As she hesitated, a voice near the furthest window spoke reassuringly.

"Come in, child," it said. "I am here."

She advanced with trembling knees, aware of an old man in a military blouse sitting in a large chair beyond a desk. The infirmities of age and suffering had bowed his shoulders and to Marishka the Emperor seemed smaller than when she had seen him last, smaller and very much older. There was a stillness about his person, a quality of resignation and quiescence that was almost statuesque. But his whiskers and mustache, carefully groomed, were brushed upward and outward from the rather heavy lip and chin, and had a military cut which comported well with the dignity of his appearance. His eyes, the right one much smaller than the left, were light gray in color, and as her own gaze caught them, very grave and kindly, like his voice, which as he spoke gave her every encouragement to be at her ease.

"You will pardon the infirmities of an old man and forgive me for not rising," he said gently. "Will you be seated, here, before me, where I may look at you?"

There was a pathetic touch of his old gallantry in the gesture which accompanied the words, and a bright flash of his eyes as Marishka came forward into the light and stood before him. Even today the Emperor was not immune from the charms of feminine beauty. Marishka did as she was bidden, sitting upon the edge of her chair before the old man, gazing at him again, without words to begin.

"His Highness has told me that you have something of importance to communicate," said the Emperor with a smile. "Your grandfather once did me a service. If there is anything that I may do—"

The quiet voice paused and she was conscious of the gaze of the gray eyes upon her in gentle inquiry.

"It is nothing that I want, Sire," she murmured haltingly. "It is something of the utmost importance that has occurred—at Konopisht—which I thought it necessary that you should know—something of the gravest moment to the State—to Austria—and to—to Your Majesty."

She paused breathless, finding speech difficult.

She saw his eyebrows upraised slightly and then contracted, while his gaze upon her grew concentrated.

"You may speak freely, child. There is no one here who hasn't the interests of my country at heart."

Marishka glanced around swiftly, her pulses throbbing. Prince Montenuovo stood beside the desk, immovable.

"Your Majesty," she almost whispered, "my information is of such a character—"

She paused again and felt the old man's gaze upon her in deeper interest and curiosity. There was a silence, but if he had had a momentary doubt of her, it was speedily dispelled, for his rather weary lips parted in a smile, as he turned to his Chamberlain. "If Your Highness will be pleased to await my call—"

Prince Montenuovo with a bow withdrew.

"Now, child," said the Emperor, bending slightly forward in his chair, "will you not tell me freely what has bothered you?"

"Your Majesty," said Marishka, plunging breathlessly into her subject, "I was stopping at Konopisht at the castle of the Archduke Franz. The Duchess of Hohenberg, formerly the Countess Chotek, was a friend of my mother's, and for many years our families have been intimate."

She saw the slight contraction of the heavy brows at the mention of Sophie Chotek's name, but she went on rapidly:

"Sire, when you know how long our families have been friendly, how kind Her Highness has been to me since the death of my father and mother, you will understand that what I am about to say—to reveal—is very painful to me. I could not speak, Sire, even now, unless the welfare of Austria and of Your Majesty were not more important to me than any personal considerations whatever."

As she paused painfully again, he encouraged her with a smile.

"Go on, child," he said.

"I was at the tennis court, playing with"—she paused and blushed prettily—"with a friend. The game finished, we—we went into the garden and sat upon the lawn in the shade of some foliage where it was cool. I did not know, Sire, nor did my companion, of the presence of royalty at Konopisht, and did not remember that I had been told not to go into the rose garden until it was too late."

"Too late?" he asked keenly.

"We were interested, talking, and not until the sound of footsteps upon the graveled walk near the arbor, did I realize how grave a violation of the hospitality of the Archduke had been committed. I should have fled, but, Sire, I could not. I was frightened. And so we stayed, hidden in the foliage by the arbor."

"So!" he broke in, his voice speaking the word with a rising inflection of intense interest. "It is well that you have come. I, too, know something of the visitors to the roses of Konopisht. The talk was not all of roses, *nicht wahr?*" he said quietly, with a little bitterness.

"No, Sire. The talk was not all of roses," said Marishka.

"Go on, then," he continued. "Spare me no word of what you heard or saw. Nothing."

And Marishka, composing herself with an effort, obeyed the command.

CHAPTER III

THE HABSBURG RAVEN

The Emperor heard her through until the end, with a word here, a sudden question there, the gravity of the girl's disclosures searing more painfully the deeply bitten lines at eye and brow. But he did not flinch. It seemed that grief and pain had already done their worst to that frail body. For whatever this Habsburg's failings, fear was not one of them. There was resolution too in the clenching of the freckled fist upon the chair arm and in his footsteps as he started up from his chair and walked the length of the room. Bowed though his shoulders were with the weight of his years, he was still a figure to respect—a personality. Marishka watched furtively, waiting for him to speak again as he strode back and forth, but his brows were deeply tangled in thought and his shoulders were more bent than ever. It almost seemed that he had forgotten her presence.

But at last he turned toward where Marishka, who had risen and was still standing, was awaiting his pleasure. He came straight toward her and extended his fingers. She sank to her knees to kiss them, but he caught her by the hand and restrained her.

"You have done well, Countess Strahni," he said quietly. "The men of your House have always been brave soldiers and good citizens, the women comely and loyal, and you, my child, have today done much to continue the honorable traditions of your family. Austria is, for you, as she is for us all, the Mother, whom God blesses in the loyalty of her children. As for those"—and his brows clouded—"who follow the devices of their own hearts, those who consider neither the family law nor the human law—" He paused, turned and sank into his chair, leaning forward again intently as the new thought struck him. "Who was your companion, Countess?"

Marishka flushed a little but said quietly,

"A gentleman—an Englishman—"

"So!" again the rising inflection, followed this time by a slight frown. "An Englishman!"

"A friend of mine, Sire," she went on with an access of dignity. "Herr Renwick, an attaché of the British Embassy—"

"Ah, I understand. He has told?"

"He has given me his promise to reveal nothing until I had been at Schönbrunn and then only with my permission."

"I see," said the Emperor with a frown. "He is discreet?"

"He has a reputation for discretion, Sire; I think he may be trusted."

"So," said the Emperor. "Where is he now?"

"I was to communicate with him later."

"Giving him permission to speak?"

"Yes, Sire."

"It is a pity," he muttered, as though meditating aloud. "We have washed enough linen in public. And this—" He turned abruptly toward her. "You have influence with this Herr Renwick?" he asked keenly.

Marishka was painfully embarrassed.

"A little, Sire, I think."

"You have served Austria well today, Countess Strahni. You can serve her again if you can prevent this Herr Renwick from communicating with Sir Herbert Southgate.... This is no concern of England's."

"I will do what I can, Sire. But the matter, it seemed, was of grave importance to Herr Renwick. He is an able diplomat and most intelligent."

The Emperor regarded her almost wistfully.

"It would be a pity," he said, "if Herr Renwick should be discredited at the Austrian court—"

"It would ruin him, Sire," said Marishka apprehensively; "if he tells what he knows, he would only be doing his duty."

"He must not tell, child," said the Emperor gravely. "This is Austria's secret and her sorrow. You realize that, do you not?"

Marishka bowed her head, painfully.

"Yes, Sire."

"You will promise me to do what you can?"

She looked into the face of this tired old man and a great pity for him swept over her.

"I will, Sire. I will ask him not to tell—demand it of him even if—"

She paused and hid her face in her hands, unable to say more, trying to hide the true nature of the sacrifice he was asking of her.

The Emperor understood and laid a kindly hand upon her shoulder.

"I understand, my daughter. I pray that no bitterness may come between you, on account of this. Responsibility comes to you early, and yet you cannot—must not shirk it."

"And if he refuses—?" she pleaded.

The wrinkled face broke into a smile, the gray eyes were bright in admiration.

"I am sure," he said gallantly, "that Herr Renwick could refuse you nothing. Were I younger—" He paused with a sigh and smiled again. "I am not sure even now that I am not a trifle jealous of this discreet Englishman of yours." And, then, aware of her intense embarrassment, "But I am sure that you will succeed."

"I shall try, Sire," she murmured.

And still he seemed loath to let her go, walking toward the window where he stood in the sunlight looking down upon the lovely gardens beneath him.

"Perhaps you did not know, Countess, that this visit to the roses of Konopisht has caused us some concern here in Vienna. Berchtold, who went yesterday to Konopisht, will, of course, discover nothing. The Duchess of Hohenberg is a very clever woman. You know her as a friend. If her loyalty to her friends is as sincere as her ambitions for her children, then you can surely have no cause for complaint. Friendship begets friendship, but those who love Austria may not serve other gods—or goddesses. You have considered these things, and however difficult the task—have chosen?"

"It has been bitter, Sire. I can never go back to Konopisht."

"I am sorry. A terrible lesson awaits Sophie Chotek. I have been sorely tried. As for the Archduke Franz—a reckoning—a reckoning—"

She saw the old man pause and start a pace back from the window, toward which he stared, wide-eyed and immovable. There, upon the sill of the window, a black bird had suddenly appeared and hopped awkwardly to and fro. It seemed perfectly at home, and not in the least frightened, peering into the room with its head cocked upon one side, a baleful purplish glitter in its eye.

In a flash Marishka remembered the legend which connects every misfortune of the House of Habsburg with the appearance of this bird of ill omen: the flight of ravens at Olmütz, the raven of the ill-fated Maximilian at Miramar, the raven of the Archduchess Maria Christina on the eve of her departure for her future kingdom of Spain, the raven which came to the Empress Elizabeth on the afternoon before the day of her assassination,—all these incidents so closely connected with the royal figure before her, passed quickly across her mind as they must have crossed that of the Emperor. He sank into his chair and she followed his gaze through the window again. The somber bird had gone.

Marishka stood in silence, not daring to move, aware of the terrible undercurrent of thought which must be racking the mind of her sovereign, this man of sorrows, who stood upon the brink of the grave and peace, and yet who must still live and suffer until the curse of the Countess Karolyi should be utterly fulfilled.

"Sire," she muttered after a moment, "can I—"

He stirred, and raised a pallid face to hers. It was quite composed now, but marked with a sadness inexpressible.

"You may leave me now, child. I am a little tired. If you will touch the bell upon the table—"

He paused as she did so, and a servant entered.

"You will tell Prince Montenuovo that the audience is concluded," he said.

Marishka fell upon her knees before him, and touched his fingers to her lips.

"May God bless Your Majesty," she murmured half-hysterically, scarcely knowing what she said, "and give you peace."

She was aware of his smile as she arose.

"Go, Countess," he said, "you have done well. Keep this secret at whatever the cost to yourself. Those who love Austria must now be prepared to suffer for her. My blessing, child."

She obeyed the gesture of his hand and followed the High Chamberlain into the outer corridor.

Marishka's first thought, upon emerging from the palace, was that she must find Hugh Renwick at once. A new idea of her duty had been born in her. The importance of keeping this secret of theirs from England had not seemed as obvious before her visit to Schönbrunn. The thought of her lover's possible refusal of her request now seemed appalling. As she remembered his sober face last night in the automobile, when this topic had caused her a moment of unhappiness, it seemed that his refusal to accede to her request was more than possible. She had liked Hugh Renwick because he was strong, honest, reliable, serious,—qualities she had not found abundant among the younger men of the ancient families of her country. She loved him now because, against many obstacles, he had at last carried her heart by storm. But she realized that the very qualities she had most admired in him were the very ones that would make her present task most difficult.

He had given his word not to reveal the secret to his Ambassador without her permission. That was his promise, given, she knew, grudgingly, and only because he felt for the moment that her duty took precedence over his own. But was it, after all, merely a question of precedence? And would he, now that he had kept his promise so far, insist upon doing his manifest duty to his own country? Fears assailed her that she might not be able to prevail. His love for her was untried. How far might she rely upon it in this inevitable conflict between them? And if he refused her!

The motor car of the Prince carried her to the apartments of the Baroness Racowitz, where, after a rapidly thought-out explanation of her sudden visit which seemed satisfactory, she wrote a note to Hugh Renwick, asking him to come at once to her, addressing it to his apartments in the Strohgassee and telling the servant if he was not at home to take it to the Embassy. This note dispatched, her mind somewhat more at ease, she joined the Baroness at luncheon.

Baroness Racowitz, her father's sister, was a woman of liberal views. Educated in England, she had absorbed some of the democratic spirit of the West, and so looked with favor upon the suit of the young Englishman who had won his way into Marishka's heart. Today, however, in spite of the confession which trembled upon her lips, Marishka remained silent. And the mere fact that she did not speak added conviction of the danger which threatened her happiness and Hugh Renwick's.

As the afternoon waned she grew apprehensive, and it was not until evening that he came. His appearance did little to reassure her.

"Your note did not reach me until a few moments ago," he began soberly. "I went upon a mission to the ministry which has kept me all day."

"I have been worried," she began nervously. "I went to Schönbrunn this morning—"

"I know it," he broke in quickly. "Otway, of the Embassy, saw you leaving in the Prince's car."

Something in his tone, in the avidity with which he had seized upon her phrase, warned her of the truth.

"Oh, Hugh," she cried, "you have already told!"

His voice sank a note lower, and its very earnestness seemed to make the barrier between them the greater. "This morning when I left you, I wrote a complete statement of what happened at

Konopisht, and gave it to a servant with instructions to deliver it at the Embassy at a certain hour. When I tell you that I was bidden to the Ministry this afternoon, closely questioned and detained in violation of all precedent, you will understand that from my own point of view, I acted wisely."

"You mean—"

"I mean that larger forces than yours and mine have taken control of the situation."

"Then your message has been delivered?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I cannot believe it of you—" she said, staring at him in anguish.

He smiled gently.

"I have only done my duty—"

"Your duty!" she said bitterly. "And what of your duty to me? You promised—"

"Merely," he put in quickly, "that I would wait until you had been to Schönbrunn."

"No, no, you promised," she said, with rising anger. "It was my secret—not yours. I have never given you permission to reveal it."

"Nor having been to Schönbrunn would have given it now, Marishka," he said firmly.

"And knowing this, you use subterfuge, an unmanly recantation—break your promised word—"

"I have broken no promise, Marishka, listen—"

"Nothing that you can say—"

She rose, her face hidden in her hands. "Oh, you have done me a damage—irreparable! I too have promised—"

"The Emperor!"

"My sovereign—he asked this secrecy of me and you—the man I—"

"Marishka, I love you," he pleaded, trying to take her hand. "Anything but this! Can't you understand? I would have betrayed my trust. The situation you placed me in was impossible. Great mischief is brewing in Europe. Could I sit idly by and let my country be in ignorance of it? God knows what is to happen, but whatever comes your country and mine can have no quarrel—any more than you and I can have. England is strong. No nation in Europe can endure without her friendship. Can't you see? I have done Austria no wrong—a service, rather, Marishka; and you—"

"You can do me no further service, Herr Renwick," she said coldly, rising.

He was on his feet too, his face pale, regarding her steadily.

"I cannot believe that you are willing to blame me for doing my duty. Love can only exist in an atmosphere of respect, Marishka. Could you have cared for me if I had been willing to seek your favor at the expense of my own honor? Could you? Think."

"Those who can thrive politically upon the misfortunes of my country are my country's enemies—and mine," she said coldly.

"I have done your country no harm—nor you. Listen, Marishka," he pleaded tensely. "Look at me. I love you, dear, with all my heart and soul, I love you. You cannot forget what happened to us yesterday. I will not give you up—"

"You must—I pray that you will leave me, Herr Renwick," and she moved past him toward a door.

Renwick straightened. Whatever hopes he had had in his heart that Marishka might forgive him for acting without her consent, her action left no doubt as to her present intentions. The bitterness the girl's fatalism had predicted yesterday had fallen upon them quickly. But he would not despair. As the girl was yet to learn, Renwick was not one who despaired easily. But his years of service had given him discretion.

"I cannot believe that you are quite in earnest," he said quietly. "I will call upon you again when you have had time to weigh my action impartially—"

"I shall not be at home to you."

"Nevertheless," he said coolly, "I shall come."

Her shoulders moved disdainfully. "It should be enough that I—"

"Marishka," he broke in again and came toward her, "at least give me a chance to speak to you again—tomorrow—"

The curtains beside her parted abruptly as she fled, leaving Renwick staring helplessly at the embroidered hangings.

He stood awkwardly for a moment, like a figure suddenly frozen, and then dropping his arms to his sides turned and sought his hat and stick. For the present at least there seemed nothing else to do. He descended the stairs, a deeply puzzled frown upon his brows, and went out into the darkness of the street.

Courts and camps, they say, are the best schools, and Renwick had not lived his thirty years in vain. He had known since last night what he must do in England's service, and he had also known what havoc that service must work in Marishka's mind. He had foreseen the inquietude of the Austrian government at his possession of this state secret, and had known that his relations with Marishka must be put in jeopardy. He knew that she must request his silence, that he must refuse her, and that no woman's pride, put to the test, could brook such a refusal. Like Marishka, he had had a brief hope that this love might survive the ordeal put upon it, but he had not been long in discovering that the Emperor's request to Marishka had made his action seem unpardonable. And yet he had known as he knew now, that no other course had been open to him. Since Marishka's early visit to the Palace, an undercurrent of events had moved swiftly. The fact that he had received a note from Baron Lichtevelt asking him to call at the Ministry, the interview between them full of allusions on the Baron's part which showed a complete knowledge of the situation; a veiled request, a veiled threat, to both of which Renwick had appeared oblivious. These, and an uncomfortable sense that he was being detained, had at last made Renwick open his lips. The information of which he was possessed, he had told the Baron, was in the hands of those who would at the proper time place it before the British Ambassador. The firmness of his attitude had brought the interview, apparently pleasant and quite unofficial, to a sudden ending, and Renwick had left the Ministry, aware that his own official position in Vienna had suddenly become precarious.

His statement was now at the Embassy, and its astounding contents had been read by his Chief. He made his way thither, somewhat dubious as to the thrill of his achievement, aware of a shadow about him, the ghost of yesterday's joy, which made all success save the intimate personal one that he most craved, flat, stale, and unprofitable. In the darkness of the street he was aware, too, that he was being observed and followed, but he went boldly toward his destination, sure that as a member of the staff of the British Embassy, his person at least partook of the official immunity of his Chief.

But there were other forces arrayed against him with which he had not reckoned. At a deserted and unlighted corner he found his progress blocked by two figures who attempted to engage him in a conversation. Now thoroughly awake to a personal danger which no official immunity could minimize, he was at once upon his guard, moving quickly into the middle of the street. The two men followed him, and another whom he had not seen came upon him from the rear. He dodged the blow of a stick which caught him a stinging blow upon the forearm, but he sprang aside, striking a furious blow full in the face of one of his antagonists and leaping out of harm's way as the third came on; and then, finding discretion the better part of valor, took to his heels, emerging into the Ringstrasse some moments later, with no greater damage than a bruised arm and the loss of his breath and hat.

The Embassy in the Metternichgasse fortunately was not far away, and he reached the building without further mishap, now fully aware of the desperateness of his enemies, whom he did not doubt were employed by those whose interests in his secret were more important even than those of the Austrian government. Who? It was obvious. There were other agencies at work, which drew their information from high sources with which they had little in common. A little bewildered by the rapid march of events, but now certain of the web of intrigue and hostility of which he was the center,

Renwick entered the office of the Embassy, breathing a sigh of relief that he was again for the present safe within its familiar portals.

The Ambassador was at his desk in his private office, and Renwick went in to him immediately, the grave faces of his Chief and Captain Otway, the military attaché, assuring him that his information had already been received and discussed.

"Ah, Renwick," said the Ambassador, rising, "glad you've come. We were beginning to fear that something had happened to you. Why, what's the matter? You're as white as a sheet—"

"Am I, sir? Oh, it's nothing. You got my message?"

The ambassador nodded and then quickly, "Give him a drink, Otway." And then as the other moved across the room to obey, "You were attacked—in the street?"

Renwick laughed. "Oh, don't bother, please. I'm quite all right—just a bit of a breather—that's all. You see—I ran for it. Safer, I thought. I could have done for the beggars, if I'd had a heavier stick, but I didn't want to make a rumpus. You see, I did well in putting the thing on paper."

"Are you hurt?"

"Merely a bruised arm. Little chap with a stick—behind me."

"Most extraordinary! I can hardly believe that the government would dare—"

"It isn't the government, sir, I'm afraid," he said, with conviction, as he took his whiskey and soda. "There are others who have more to lose than the Emperor's party by this revelation—"

"Yes, that may be so," replied the Ambassador judiciously, pacing the floor. "Perhaps you're right, Renwick. But now that you're safe, we should only concern ourselves with the greater issue. Tell me again in your own words all that has happened since yesterday morning."

Renwick obeyed, and it was far into the night before he finished, while the faces of his auditors grew grave again. The security of this well ordered office, with the familiar tokens of distant peaceful England all about them, made a prosaic background for the visions which were flashing through the minds of these three Englishmen. Even now, to Renwick, as he related his experience again, the whole thing seemed incredible, and the reiterated questions of his Chief, who was a prudent man, might have shaken a less convincing witness. But Renwick had dreamed no dream, and the returning ache in his arm left no room to doubt the actuality of his experience.

"You have done England a service, Renwick," said the Ambassador at last, magnanimously. "It isn't often that such crumbs of information are offered us—in such a way. But we will take them—and digest them overnight. I want to sleep on this matter. And you—you will stay here tonight, Renwick. It will be safer. Until tomorrow, gentlemen—"

And so he dismissed them.

CHAPTER IV

SECRET INFORMATION

An ambassador has been wittily described as an honest man sent to "lie" abroad for the commonwealth. He is supposed to be familiar with all the scandal and intrigue of the court to which he is accredited, to be possessed of countless incriminating secrets, and to steer his way amid the maze, disturbing no ghost or skeleton of family or government, preserving the while a calm punctilio and an exterior of fathomless simplicity. The ambassador of modern Europe is at once a Chesterfield, a Machiavelli, and a Vidocq. He must be a lamb, a lion, and a ferret. He must fly upon the wing of occasion, he must condescend to act as messenger boy to his Prime Minister, he must conduct a business office and a fashionable restaurant and successfully run a detective bureau.

Something of the ambitions of Franz Ferdinand and his wife had been known to the Right Honorable Sir Herbert Southgate; the Archduke's visit with his wife to the court of St. James was significant, and their stay at Potsdam dutifully recorded at Berlin, had shown something of the nature of the *rapprochement* between Archduke and Kaiser. The visit of the Kaiser to the Archduke's hunting lodge at Eckartau on the Danube, had set tongues wagging, and private information had served to warn Sir Herbert that an understanding had been brought about. The visit to the roses of Konopisht had not deceived the Ambassador, for it was known that a pact of some sort had been made, but the revelations of Mr. Renwick had been of a nature to appall.

A night of deliberation had done little to obliterate the Ambassador's grave fears for the future, and he communicated at once in code and in full with the Home Government. He lost little time upon the following day in setting in motion all the devices he possessed for obtaining secret information as to the effect of Countess Strahni's startling disclosures.

For several months the surface of the diplomatic pool had been ominously placid. Few ripples had disturbed its surface, save those occasional ones from the direction of unquiet Serbia. But the waters were seething now, stirred to their very lees by plot and counterplot. The advices received by the Ambassador were alarming. Had the attack upon Hugh Renwick failed to advise him that the military party possessed full knowledge of the Countess Strahni's disclosures, he should soon have discovered it. There was an undercurrent of intrigue in various high offices which advised him that communications of the greatest importance were passing. His own interests, of course, were best served by a studied innocence and unconcern, and his public appearances, both social and official, gave no sign of his intimate knowledge of approaching calamity.

The first surface indication of the turmoil was a polite note from the ministry, stating that his second secretary, Hugh Renwick, was *persona non grata* to the Austrian government, and requesting his recall. This indicated a definite purpose neither to ignore nor condone, and in itself was a surprising admission of the facts. The Ambassador by note expressed his high opinion of the abilities of his secretary and requested the Ministry's reasons for their decision. They merely repeated their former request without explanations. And so the Ambassador, with a smile, which had a world of meaning, offered Renwick his passports.

But Renwick had no desire or intention to leave Vienna. He merely removed his personal belongings to his apartment and stayed. That he had ventured into deep political currents he was now sure, for though he moved with great care, he was aware of being followed and once he was shot at in a quiet street in broad daylight. He made no complaint to the authorities, but only moved with greater discretion, sure that the interests that desired his elimination were not among the Austrians. From the point of view of the Austrian government he was merely a discredited Englishman, and therefore a person of no importance. That the Countess Marishka had apparently also reached the

same conclusion was evident, for though he called several times at the apartment of the Baroness Racowitz, he was not admitted.

With theories of his own as to the probable effect of the Countess Strahni's bombshell, Renwick began some investigations which he conducted with great tact and secrecy. The forthcoming visit of the Archduke Franz to Sarajevo had assumed suddenly a vital importance. One morning after a night conference with Sir Herbert he took the train for Belgrade. When he returned a few days later he was again closeted with the British Ambassador, and when night fell, he went direct to the apartment of the Baroness Racowitz, succeeding by a handsome bribe to the servant at the door in sending a note to the Countess Marishka, which read as follows—

Countess Marishka Strahni,

A friend of yours is in grave danger, chiefly through your agency. I pray that you will see me, if only for a moment. In doing so you will secure for yourself an opportunity of doing a service which you can never regret.

Hugh Renwick.

When the servant returned, some moments later, Renwick was shown into the drawing room, with the word that the Countess Strahni would see him. She appeared almost immediately, her face a little pallid, her manner restrained, her accents frigidly polite. But the dark eyes were luminous, the brows were drawn inward, and her voice trembled slightly as she spoke his name.

"Herr Renwick, I can hardly believe that you would impose so difficult a situation were it not that something of importance has occurred—"

"It has, Countess Strahni," he said gravely, then paused. "I beg that you will believe me."

She sank into a chair and motioned for him to be seated, but he remained standing, his eyes studying the fine line of her neck and shoulder as she bent forward, her gaze upon the rug. There was something almost childish in her imperiousness. He wanted to take her in his arms and hold her there as he would have done a spoiled child, and trust the issue to his strength and her weakness, but the quick tap of her slippered toe upon the carpet warned him that his mission was delicate.

"Proceed, if you please," she said after a moment.

"You may not know, but a few days after my return from Konopisht, my connection with the British Embassy ceased—"

"I have heard," she broke in quickly, in a suppressed tone; "I am sorry."

"But my interests in the political aspect of affairs were so great that I could not leave Vienna."

"At least I am not to blame for the actions of the ministry."

"Naturally. I suppose I might attribute all my misfortunes to the roses of Konopisht," he said.

She glanced up at him quickly and a little scornfully, but she swallowed nervously and her toe accelerated its tapping upon the rug.

"I beg that you will come to the point of your visit," she said quickly.

"I will," he went on easily. "The possession of State secrets has given me an interest in Austrian affairs which has created a pardonable curiosity. Fortune has favored my investigations and I have learned much here in Vienna. I have learned more in Belgrade—and in Sarajevo."

She glanced up quickly.

"Sarajevo! Why?"

"You will remember that the Archduke spoke of going there to see the maneuvers of his troops on the twenty-eighth of this month."

"Yes." Her eyes stared at him widely now. "But what—?"

She paused uncertainly, expecting him to go on. Instead he waited a moment as though seeking his words carefully.

"The Archduke plans to take the Duchess of Hohenberg to Sarajevo with him. I came here to tell you that if she goes she will be in great danger—"

"Danger!"

"Yes. There is a plot against the life of the Archduke. I thought that as a lifelong friend, you would like to know—"

"Assassination! Holy Virgin! Not that!"

She had started up from her chair and faced him, trembling violently.

"I swear to you," he said soberly, "that I have every reason for believing that in Sarajevo the lives of both will hang by a hair."

"But who—?" she stammered, her eyes wide with consternation.

She paused, the thoughts that had come first into her mind, stifled in horror.

"It is not necessary for me to say. I am merely giving my belief based on the closest study of political conditions."

A slight color had come into her cheeks.

"I am sure that you must be unduly alarmed," she said coolly. "The Archduke will be in the midst of his friends—his whole army at maneuvers!" Her lips found courage in a smile. "Why, the thing is impossible!"

Renwick leaned against the mantel, his arms folded, and went on steadily.

"The thing is not impossible, Countess Strahni. The danger to Franz Ferdinand is very real—a danger that no army of Austrian soldiers can minimize. He goes to a hostile neighborhood. He is not loved in Sarajevo. Should not this be sufficient?"

"You trouble me," she muttered, passing a hand before her eyes. "But I must know more. An Archduke must have enemies—"

"But this Archduke! Can you conceive of no reason why Franz Ferdinand should be in danger?" he asked meaningly.

She searched his face quickly, in her eyes the truth dawning.

"You mean—?"

He shrugged.

"You should know what I mean."

"I cannot believe—" she halted again.

"Countess Strahni," he went on quickly, "were I still a member of the staff of the British Embassy, I should not speak. I do not even now accuse any group or political party of participation in this plot. The Emperor at least is guiltless. Death has already done its worst to him. The matter is out of his hands. But I do know that such a plot exists. Franz Ferdinand will not return alive from Sarajevo and if the Duchess of Hohenberg accompanies him, she, too—"

"It is horrible—and I—I will have been the cause—"

She sank into her chair and buried her face in her hands.

"Perhaps now you will understand my motive in coming to you," he said softly. "I have no desire but to serve you. England has no further concern for Archduke Ferdinand. Forewarned is forearmed. His sting is already drawn. But death, like this—sudden, violent, without a chance—England has never looked with kindness upon the killing of women, Countess Strahni."

"It is horrible," she whispered. "Horrible! I cannot believe—"

"Unfortunately I can give you none of the sources of my information. But whatever my sins in your eyes, at least you will admit that I am not given to exaggeration. You may still believe that I have taken a liberty in coming to you; but the situation admits of no delay. The telegraph lines are in the hands of the Archduke's enemies. The Archduke and Duchess leave Konopisht in the morning by special train, but there is still time to reach them."

Marishka had risen, and was now pacing the floor, her hands nervously clasped before her.

"I see. I—I—understand. I—I should be grateful that you have told me. But it is all so sudden. So terrible!"

She paused before him.

"I have betrayed her," she stammered through pallid lips.

"You could do nothing else. His fortunes are hers—"

"But not this—" she whispered. "It is too ghastly!"

There was a long pause, and then, "Will you make the effort?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You must leave in an hour."

"But how—?"

She looked at Renwick and their glances met.

"I will go with you," he said coolly.

His gaze was on the dial of his watch which he had taken from his pocket and was regarding judicially. His calmness, his impudence, enraged her. She had sworn, because of his falseness, that she would never see this man again, and here he was calmly proposing a night journey into Bohemia, and she was actually listening to him.

She turned quickly toward the door and stood, one hand grasping the portière, while she turned a white face toward him.

"Thanks, Herr Renwick," she said icily, "but I go alone—"

"That is impossible. There is danger. A night journey in a train of uncertain quality—"

"I hope that you will not waste words. I thank you for what you have done, but I—I must go at once—"

Renwick took a pace toward her.

"Countess Strahni, if you will listen to me—"

But he got no farther, for he knew that her will was as strong as his own, and that forgiveness was not to be read in her eyes.

"I beg that you will excuse me, Herr Renwick. The time is short—"

He bowed gravely.

"At least, you will permit me to order you a *fiacre*——"

She nodded in assent as though to be rid of him and then turned and went up the stairs leaving Renwick to find his way out into the darkness of the street.

Marishka hurried to her room and rang for her maid. In spite of the turbulence of her thoughts, she gave her orders calmly and then prepared for the journey. The imminence of the danger to Sophie Chotek should have obsessed her to the exclusion of all personal considerations, but while she dressed she could not help thinking of the imperturbable impudence of her visitor. His kindness, his thoughtfulness, the fact that he had done her a service, and was at this very moment doing her another, gave her a sense of being in a false position, which made her most uncomfortable. And yet one could not treat with contumely a person who acted in one's interests. His calmness, his assurance enraged her. She would never see him again, of course, but she seemed to feel the need of some final words to convince him of the depth of her disdain. He was so calm, so gravely cheerful, so assured, so maddeningly considerate! She wondered now why she had not led him on to a renewed plea for forgiveness, that she might the more effectually have crushed him.

But her duty to Sophie Chotek soon drove these speculations as to the unfortunate Herr Renwick from her mind. Suppose that Sophie Chotek questioned closely as to the reasons for Marishka's sudden departure. What should she say? The Duchess was not one who could easily forgive a wrong. Her placid exterior served well to conceal a strength of purpose which had already brought her many enemies in the Royal House. That she was capable of tenderness was shown in her adoration of her children and in the many kindnesses she had shown Marishka herself, but there was, too, a strain of the Czech in her nature, which harbored grievances and was not above retaliation. Marishka's cause, as a loyal Austrian's, was just, and she had not faltered in doing what she knew to be her duty, but the thought of seeking the Duchess now that she had betrayed her, required all of her courage. She had balked an ambitious woman, stultified all her efforts to advance the fortunes of her children,

and had written her husband before the House of Habsburg a traitor to his Emperor and his country. What if she had heard something and suspected? Would the Duchess even listen to a plea for her own life and safety from the lips of one who had proven an enemy, a bread and salt traitor to the Houses of Austria-Este and Chotek and Wognin?

But Marishka did not falter, and when the *fiacre* came to the door she descended quickly. The Baroness fortunately had gone upon a visit to friends in the country, but Marishka left a note with her maid which explained her absence, and departed alone for the railroad station, feeling very helpless and forlorn, but none the less determined to see her venture through to its end.

She wore a gray traveling dress and was heavily veiled, and when she reached the station, the guard showed her immediately into an unoccupied compartment. This, it seemed, was unusual, as her watch indicated that only a few moments remained before the train should leave. But she settled herself comfortably, grateful for her seclusion, whatever its cause, and closed her eyes in an effort to sleep.

The last warning words of the guards had been given and the train was already in motion when she heard a warning "Sh—" at the open window, where a head and a pair of shoulders appeared, followed immediately by an entire body which was suddenly projected through the opening and landed head first upon the floor. Marishka had risen, a scream on her lips, but something familiar in the conformation of the figure restrained her. The tangle of legs and arms took form, and a head appeared, wearing a monocle and a smile. It was the imperturbable but persistent Herr Renwick.

CHAPTER V

TWO INTRUDERS

Marishka was too dismayed for a moment to trust her tongue to speech. That she was angry she knew, for she felt the blood rising to her temples, and the words that hung on her lips were bitter, cruel and unreasoning.

"It is a pity, Herr Renwick," she began quite distinctly in English, "that you have neither the good taste nor the intelligence to leave me to my own devices."

Renwick gathered up his stick and straw hat, bowed politely and seated himself opposite her. Indeed, as the train was now moving rapidly, no other course was open to him. But he wore no look of recantation. His calmness was more impudent than ever, and he even took out and reset his monocle.

"Oh, I say, Countess Strahni," he said, "that's rather rough on a chap. I had to come. It was wiser, you know."

"I care nothing for your wisdom," she said scornfully. "If it is no more firmly seated than your sense of honor, it can be of little value to you or to me."

"I'm sorry. I will try not to interfere with your comfort—"

"You—you arranged this"—as the thought came to her—"this opportunity for a tête-à-tête?"

"The Countess Strahni's conception of a tête-à-tête may differ from mine," he said with a smile. But his coolness only inflamed her the more.

"You have taken an unpardonable liberty," she said wildly. "You have already passed the bounds of decency or consideration. You have been not only impudent but ridiculous. One service you have done me tonight. I thank you. You may do me another—by getting out at the first station."

He folded his arms and regarded her gravely.

"I regret that that is impossible."

"Why, please?"

"Because I propose to go with you to Konopisht, and to accompany you upon your return."

"You—you—!"

"One moment, please," he said quietly and with some show of spirit. "It is not necessary that you should have a further misconception of my motives or of my agility. I did not seek this—er—tête-à-tête. My servant engaged this carriage. I had not hoped to have the honor of accompanying you. Unfortunately, circumstances forced a change of plan."

"Circumstances!" she said contemptuously.

He bowed slightly. "As a discredited Englishman, I still possess, it seems, some interest for certain citizens of Austria. I only discovered the fact this evening when leaving the apartment of the Baroness."

"You were followed again?" she asked quickly, her interest in the fact mastering her animosity.

"The object of my visit to you has been guessed. I was followed—but you were followed also."

"I—?"

"Yes—to the station."

"And where—"

"Booked through to Konopisht not a foot from the back of your head in the adjoining compartment—"

And then as she straightened in alarm and regarded the cushioned seat behind her in sudden terror, "But I do not think you need be unduly alarmed. We can—"

"They are following *me*!" she whispered. "But why? Why?"

"Because of your friendship with the Duchess. Those who plan the death of the Archduke are in no humor to fail."

"Incredible! And they—" she halted again, breathless with apprehension.

"I fear, Countess Strahni, that your mission to Konopisht has now become a difficult one. That is why I thought it better to go with you. The men who are following you are moving with considerable insolence and confidence. They will carry out their orders unless circumvented."

"But how?" she whispered, her anger of a moment ago magically transmuted. "What can I do?"

He gazed out of the window at the blur of night and smiled.

"To begin with," he said politely, "they think you are alone. You see, I might help you, Countess Strahni, if you could manage to endure my presence for a few hours."

It was Renwick's innings and he made the most of them. Indeed, Marishka sat leaning forward looking at him appealingly, aware that after all here was the only prop she had to lean upon in this extremity. She did not speak. The wrong he had done her and Austria was great—unforgivable, but the merit of his service in this situation was unmistakable. Inimical as he might be to the sentiments in her heart, there was no disguising the relief his presence gave her or the confidence that radiated from his calm assurance.

"One of the men I have seen before," he said. "He has gained some celebrity in the Secret Service. You see, we must give them the slip before we get to Budweis. This train makes several stops. It ought not to be difficult."

The plural pronoun seemed quite inoffensive now, and she even uttered it—herself.

"Yes," breathlessly; "but suppose they tried to stop us?"

"Er—that would be most unfortunate," he muttered, as though to himself.

"You don't think they will, do you?" she appealed.

"I'm sure I don't know," he said thoughtfully.

For some moments he said nothing and Marishka, whose pride had come again to her rescue, gazed steadily out of the window away from him, trying to forget her dependence upon her companion, whose initiative and devotion were hourly growing more in importance. Whatever his private purposes in aiding her, and she had no reason to doubt his disinterestedness, for the present at least they had a common duty to humanity which must be performed at any costs to prejudice or pride.

At the next station a surprise awaited them. The door of their compartment was opened, a man entered and bowing most politely, quickly closed the door behind him. Marishka examined him with apprehension, noticing that he seemed more interested in the Englishman than in herself, for in the brief glance he gave Renwick, the suavity of his demeanor seemed for a brief moment to have changed.

He was a person of middle age, tall, stockily built, but withal rather jaunty in appearance, and when he smiled again he disclosed a gold tooth which seemed to Marishka for some reason inexpressibly reassuring. He rubbed his hands together and looked a great deal like a successful head-waiter in mufti. But he glanced from one to the other quickly and settled himself in a corner with an air of being very much at home, which removed the earlier impression. Renwick took the initiative at once.

"A pleasant evening," he said to the newcomer, in German.

"One might say so," replied the other, bowing calmly.

"But one doesn't?" asked Renwick. "The conditions are not so propitious as they were a while ago. A storm is brewing perhaps?"

The man examined him steadily, aware of the double meaning, but only smiled again. Renwick got up and with great deliberateness, moved the length of the aisle, and, while Marishka followed him with her gaze, seated himself directly opposite the intruder. The man made a movement with his right hand which he put into the side pocket of his coat, but as Renwick sat, he smiled again and shrugged.

"You are traveling to Budweis and beyond?" asked the Englishman.

"To Budweis and beyond," said the other coolly. "And I would advise Herr Renwick," he went on quickly, "that the hotels of Budweis are excellent."

"Ah!" That he had come out into the open suited Renwick's plans excellently. He removed his monocle and slipped it into a waistcoat pocket. "To be sure. Budweis. Unfortunately the lady whom I have the honor to accompany, visits friends at some distance in the country."

"The Countess Strahni must go to the Kaiser von Oesterreich Hotel at Budweis tonight," he said with precision. "It is near the station." And then quickly "I would also advise Herr Renwick to move at once to the other end of the compartment."

Renwick stared at him for a moment as though he had not understood his meaning and then shrugged and rose. Polite amenities had ceased. He turned half toward Marishka and then, without warning, threw himself furiously at the man.

There was a muffled discharge as the stranger attempted to draw the weapon from his pocket, but the bullet did no damage, and the Englishman's blow, fiercely struck, sent the other reeling sideways. He smiled no longer, but struggled upward gamely. Renwick had caught his pistol hand and forced him down to the floor, where he pinioned him with his weight.

The whole affair had happened so quickly that after one gasp of terror, Marishka had sat stupefied with horror. But as the struggle continued, the man on the floor began to shout lustily for help, and she sprang to the aid of the Englishman, who was choking the man by twisting his cravat.

"Your veil—quick," he stammered breathlessly. And after she had given it to him, "Now, take the revolver from his coat pocket."

She obeyed. Most of the fight was out of their antagonist, and the muzzle of the automatic, thrust beneath his nose, completed his subjugation. After they had gagged him, they bound his wrists and ankles with handkerchiefs, and then straightened and looked at each other, listening. Marishka's eyes were sparkling and the color was coming back into her cheeks.

"He—he might have killed you," she stammered in English.

"Or I him," said Renwick. "Thank the Lord, I didn't have to. Do you think they heard?"

They listened again, but there was no sound above the roar of the train.

"We'll have to get out of this—at the first stop—and run for it. I don't know where we are, but Budweis can't be far off. You still want to go on?"

"Yes, I must," she cried resolutely. "I must. Oh, God, if I failed now, I could never forgive myself."

"You see—they're determined—"

He paused, staring at the mummy upon the floor, who had raised his head. One eye was badly damaged, but the other was frowning at them comically. But neither Renwick nor Marishka felt like laughing. Renwick started suddenly toward the window and peered out, for the train was coasting and ahead of them in the distance he saw the lights of a station.

"Quickly!" he said to the girl. "There's nothing for it but to go out on the opposite side. The door is locked." He glanced at the prostrate figure. And then to Marishka, "You must follow me."

He did not wait for her answer, but opening the closed window he swung himself from the floor by a grip on the door jamb, put his feet out and lowered himself to the running board. The brakes were on now as the train approached the station, but still Marishka hesitated.

Renwick's face appeared in the aperture. "All clear," he whispered, "the tracks on this side are empty. Wait until the train stops and then step out—quickly, please."

There was no denying his command of her and of the situation, and, difficult as the feat appeared, in a moment she was sitting on the sill, her feet depending outside into the darkness, where Renwick without another word seized her in his arms and lowered her to the step beside them, thrilled by the danger of her flight, but ready to follow wherever he led.

With a grinding of brakes the train stopped, but they got down quickly, and in a moment had dodged behind a building, and listening for sounds of pursuit, made their way up the dimly lighted street of a small town. It was not yet midnight and there were signs of activity here and there. She hurried beside Renwick blindly, content as he was for the present to put as much distance as possible

between themselves and the railroad station. They listened anxiously for the train to move, but there was no sound of bell or exhaust. The distant shouts seemed more ominous. Renwick only glanced behind them and hurried the pace. He led her around a corner, into a well-lighted street where an automobile, its engine running, was standing before a rather pretentious house. He ran up to it and examined it quickly.

"It's really too bad," he muttered, with a quick glance toward the house, "but our need is great," and got in, Marishka following without a word. "It's a Mercedes, thank God," he whispered. "I hope it will go."

It did, with a sputter and roar which brought a shouting figure to the door of the house, but Renwick was beyond stopping and turned blindly at the next turning and followed the street through the sleeping town into a well-traveled country road, which led straight onward toward the setting moon.

"I haven't the slightest notion where we're going," he said presently, "but we seem to be on our way."

Marishka found herself laughing nervously. She wasn't in the least amused, but the strain was telling on her.

"Nice chap—the owner of this car, to put it just there. I'll have to buy it, I suppose. No end of a good machine. I wonder if he thought to fill the tank."

Renwick ran the car up a long hill which it took with ease, and at the summit the moonlit summer landscape was visible for miles in all directions. There at a crossroad the Englishman stopped the stolen car in the shadow of a tree, got quickly out and investigated the tank.

"Plenty of petrol—enough for all night, I should say," he reported. "And now"—as he looked around him in all directions—"which way? Hanged if I know."

Marishka was scanning the valley below them eagerly. In the distance to their right a row of lights moved slowly into the night. "The train!" she said, "Budweis lies in that direction. I've often been over the road from Konopisht. If we can reach it—"

"That ought not to be difficult. Here goes." And he took the crossroad to the right.

So far all was well, but the stolen motor car was a dead weight on Renwick's conscience, and the danger of detection was still most unpleasant. If an excuse were needed for his arrest, a pretext which would hide the real secret of the mission of his pursuers, the larceny of the machine would now furnish it. He had no humor to see the inside of a village jail from which communication with the Ambassador would be difficult if not impossible. There were processes of law in Austria which suddenly became formidable to one in his position. But he drove on, keeping a lookout for sign posts, aware that the girl beside him, now that their danger was passed, had again assumed an uncompromising silence which was not too favorable an indication of the state of her mind and feelings toward him. He smiled inwardly. At least she could not rob him of the moment when on the steps of the train he had held her in his arms. He did not doubt that she was thinking of that moment also, hating him the more cordially because she was so dependent on him. Did she hate him? He stole a glance at her. She sat stiffly staring before her into the night, a frown at her brows, her lips closed in a thin line. Pride?

"Marishka," he ventured softly, "will you forgive me?"

Her figure grew more rigid.

"Herr Renwick—!" she gasped.

"I love you," he broke in. "You must know how much—"

"It is a pity that I have already gauged your capacity for devotion," she said bitterly.

"I *had* to tell, Marishka—"

"Herr Renwick, I am already much in your debt. Add to my burden, if you will, by keeping silence on a matter so painful—"

"Forgive me—"

"Never. You have betrayed me."

"I'll never give you up."

"You must. Circumstances have placed me in this false position. I am at your mercy. I beg you to be silent."

"You will marry me, some day, Marishka," he asserted cheerfully.

"Never," scornfully. "Never. The House of Strahni, Herr Renwick, holds honor high and loyalty even higher than honor—"

"There is another precept of the House of Strahni," he broke in calmly. "Their women—where they give their lips—"

"Oh, you are intolerable! I abominate you!"

"And I—I still adore you," he whispered. "I shall always adore—and serve."

"Thank God, the hour of your service nears its end," she said chokingly.

"Who knows?" he muttered.

But he made no further attempt to break through her reserve. She was too greatly in his power. And so he drove in silence, passing through the silent streets of Budweis without challenge and soon found himself upon the main highroad to Prague, over which the two had traveled less than a week ago in their hurried flight to Vienna. The moon had long since set, but when they climbed the hills along the Moldau faint gray streaks upon their right hand proclaimed the coming of the dawn. If Marishka was weary she gave no sign of it, for she sat bolt upright in her seat, her eyes wide open, staring along the thin yellow ribbon which marked their road. To the few questions as to her comfort she answered in monosyllables, and at last he made no further effort to engage her in a conversation. He felt no anger at her rebuffs—only tenderness—for in his heart he could not altogether blame her for her repudiation of him.

Broad daylight found them on the Prague highroad, not three miles from Konopisht Schloss. Here Renwick decided to desert the car and go afoot through the forest to the castle. He hid the machine in a thicket and led the way, Marishka following silently, content to trust herself to a judgment which until the present moment had seemed unerring. He glanced at her from time to time, aware of the pallor of her face and the fatigue of her movements. Once when he turned he fancied that her lips were smiling, but when he spoke to her she answered him shortly. The wounds to her pride were deep, it seemed, but he armed himself with patience and smiled at her reassuringly as they paused at the edge of the wood.

"The Schloss is just beyond these woods, I think. Some smoke is rising yonder. We must avoid the village. I think we may reach the garden by the lower gate. And there I will await you, Countess Strahni," he finished quietly.

It seemed as though in giving her her title, that he was accepting without further plea any conditions of formality in their relations which she might impose.

She waited a long moment without moving or replying. And then she turned toward him with a smile.

"Herr Renwick," she said gently, "whatever the personal differences between us, I owe you at least a word of gratitude for all that you have done. I thank you again. But I do not wish you to wait for me. I shall not trouble you longer."

"I will wait for you," he repeated.

"It is not necessary. I shall not return."

"You might, you know," he smiled. "I don't mind waiting at all. I shall breakfast upon a cigarette."

"Oh," she cried, her temper rising again, "you are—you are impossible."

With that she turned and strode ahead, reaching the gate before him and entering.

"*Au revoir*, Countess Strahni," he called after her.

But she walked rapidly toward the rose garden without turning her head, while Renwick, after lighting his cigarette, strolled slowly after her, sure that the world was very beautiful, but that his path of love even amid the roses did not run smoothly.

He reached the hedge just in time to see a man, one of the gardeners he seemed to be, come forward along the path from the direction of the castle and stand before Marishka bowing. He saw the girl turn a glance over her shoulder, an appealing glance, and Renwick had just started to run forward when from each tree and hedge near him figures appeared which seemed to envelop him. He struck out to right and left, but they were too many. He felt a stinging blow at the back of his head, and had the curious sensation of seeing the garden path suddenly rise and smite him tremendously.

CHAPTER VI

HERR WINDT

When Renwick managed again to summon his wits, he found himself lying in the dark where somebody was bathing his brows with a damp cloth. His head ached a great deal and he lay for a moment without opening his eyes, aware of soft fingers, the touch of which seemed to soothe the pain immeasurably. He opened his eyes to the semi-obscurity of a small room furnished with the cot on which he lay, a table and two chairs. It was all very comfortable and cozy, but the most agreeable object was the face of Marishka Strahni, not a foot from his own. Through eyes dimmed by pain he thought he read in her expression a divine compassion and tenderness, and quickly closed them again for fear that his eyes might have deceived him. When he opened them again he murmured her name.

"Marishka," he said gently, "you—you have forgiven me?"

But she had moved slightly away from him and was now regarding him impassively. It was too bad for his vision to have played him such a trick. It was so much pleasanter to sleep with Marishka looking at him like that.

"You have had a blow upon the head, Herr Renwick," her voice came as from a distance. "I hope you are feeling better. It was necessary for me to bathe your head with cold compresses."

Necessary! Of course. But it would have been so much pleasanter to know that she had done it because she wanted to.

"So it was *au revoir*, after all?" he smiled, struggling to a sitting posture.

"You had better lie still for a while," she said briefly.

His head was throbbing painfully, but he managed to make light of it.

"Oh, I'm quite all right, I think," he said looking around the room curiously. "Would you mind telling me what happened and where we are?"

"They struck you down and brought us here. It's one of the gardener's cottages on the estate."

"And you?"

"They were very polite but we are prisoners—for how long I don't know. I've failed, Herr Renwick—" she finished miserably.

"Perhaps it isn't too late—"

"There are men outside. They intend to keep us here for the present."

"There ought to be a way—" said Renwick, putting his feet to the ground. "I could—" He stopped abruptly, for at that moment he discovered that the captured weapon had been removed from his pocket.

"I'm afraid it's hopeless," said Marishka bitterly.

Renwick glanced at his watch. "Only eight o'clock. Even now we could—"

He rose and walked to the window, peering through a crack in the shutter, but an attack of vertigo caused him to sink into a chair. She regarded him dubiously, pride and compassion struggling, but she said nothing.

"Beastly stupid of me," he groaned. "I might have known they'd spare no detail—"

There was a knock upon the door, and at Marishka's response, a turning of the key, and a man entered. In spite of a discolored eye and a wrinkled neckband, he was not difficult to identify as their friend of the railroad train. His manner, however, was far from forbidding, for he clicked his heels, swept off his cap and smiled slowly, his gold tooth gleaming pleasantly.

"Herr Renwick is, I trust, feeling better," he said politely.

Renwick grinned up at him sheepishly.

"I congratulate Herr Windt upon his adroitness," he said. "I fear I made the mistake of underestimating his skill in divination."

"It was not inspired enough to guess that you were in the Countess Strahni's carriage," he replied. "You have quick fingers, Herr Renwick. Fortunately I was aware of your destination and knew that we should meet. All is well that ends well."

"That depends upon the point of view, Herr Windt. But I might have killed you in the railway carriage."

"That would have been an error in judgment, which would have been most unfortunate for both of us. I, too, might have shot you through my pocket, but I refrained, at some hazard to myself. I try never to exceed the necessities of a situation. Having performed my mission successfully I can now afford to be generous."

"Meaning—what, Herr Windt?"

"That I shall keep you here only so long as is absolutely necessary." He glanced at his watch and said significantly, "The Archduke's private train will leave here in half an hour."

Marishka had listened in some amazement to this conversation, but the politeness of her jailer only angered her.

"I would like to know by what authority you imprison a loyal citizen of Austria," she stormed. "Your identity seems to have made some impression upon Herr Renwick, but I would inform you that I at least am not without friends to whom you will answer for this outrage."

Herr Windt bowed low.

"I beg that Countess Strahni will reconsider that word. I have intended to act with great discretion. Herr Renwick unfortunately underestimated the forces to which he was opposed. I am sorry he has suffered injury. As for you, Countess, I beg leave to recall that those who have restrained you have treated you with every consideration."

"Who are you?" she asked angrily.

"Herr Renwick has spoken my name."

"You are a member of the secret service of the Austrian government?"

He smiled again and bowed low.

"It is the custom of those in my trade to ask questions—not to answer them. In this service, however, it will please you perhaps to know that I am not acting for the Austrian government."

"Who then?"

"I cannot reply."

"You dare not."

"Perhaps. But I am willing to admit, Countess Strahni, that the same motive which impelled you to Schönbrunn," he said significantly, "has actuated both myself and my employers."

"And that motive?"

"The safety of the Empire."

"Austria! But not complicity in this dastardly—"

At a warning sound from Renwick she paused. Herr Windt was regarding her gravely.

"I regret that I do not comprehend the Countess Strahni's meaning," he said with a bow. "It would be a source of great unhappiness to me, if in doing my duty, I had done you a harm. I am not an enemy, Countess, but a loyal compatriot. I may add that I am prepared to do what I can to protect you from the results of your unfortunate connection with a dangerous political situation."

"Protect! You!" Marishka smiled bitterly and glanced ironically around the walls of the cabin.

"I beg to assure you that I am not jesting. Herr Renwick will recall that he was attacked one night upon the streets of Vienna. He was also shot at by some person unknown. The inspiration for those assaults did not emanate from my employers."

"I suspected as much," muttered Renwick.

Marishka was examining Renwick wide-eyed.

"Shot at!" she murmured.

"The information in Herr Renwick's possession," Herr Windt went on suavely, "was more damaging to other interests than to theirs. Herr Renwick's connection with the British Embassy has terminated. He has merely the status in Austria of a traveling Englishman. But his activities are dangerous where they concern the movements of the Countess Strahni. I am performing an act of friendship to a loyal Austrian in offering her escort back to Vienna, where if she is wise she will remain quietly under my surveillance."

During this speech, of which Herr Windt delivered himself with much bowing and rubbing of his hands, Marishka remained silent, a wonder growing in her eyes.

"I fail to see how my presence here or elsewhere can interest you or others," she said as she sank upon the cot. Weariness was telling on her and the disappointment of her mission's failure. And the threat of danger that hung in his words was hardly reassuring.

"Countess Strahni may doubt my good intentions. That is her privilege. In a short time"—here he looked at his watch again—"she will be at liberty to come and go as she chooses. In the meanwhile I beg that she will listen to me and heed my warning."

He looked at her until she raised her head and signified for him to continue. "The agencies which attempted to prevent the delivery of Herr Renwick's information to the British Embassy are again at work. Herr Renwick having been"—he paused and bowed to Renwick—"if I may be permitted to say so—having been repudiated by his Ambassador and by the British government, he is politically a person of no importance—at least as far as my relations with him are concerned. Whatever he may do privately, unless it proves valuable to the interests of Austria's enemies, will pass as it has already passed—unnoticed in Austria. The case of the Countess Strahni is different—"

He paused a moment to rub his hands together thoughtfully.

"I can not understand—"

"Within the past twenty-four hours the apartments of the Baroness Racowitz have been observed by persons not in my service. The Countess perhaps has had no unusual communications?"

Marishka started up in her chair, while Windt, watching her, smiled slowly.

"Ah, I was not mistaken—" he said.

"A request to go to the Hofburg tonight—before Herr Renwick came," she whispered, now thoroughly aroused. "I did not go. The signature was unfamiliar to me."

Herr Windt took a pace toward the window and peered forth through the slats of the blind.

"The Countess Strahni would not have reached the Hofburg," he said quietly. "She would have gone—er—elsewhere!"

"The man in the green limousine!" came suddenly in cryptic tones from the silent Renwick.

"Exactly. He followed the Countess Strahni's fiacre in motor car to the Nordwest Bahnhof."

"And you?"

"We forestalled him—that's all," he said, showing his gold tooth in a most ingratiating smile, but there was a flash in the deep set eyes which explained much to Renwick.

"There was a commotion near the booking-stall," said Renwick.

"Ah, you witnessed?"

"From a distance. I had other affairs."

"Yes. That will perhaps make my laxity with regard to Herr Renwick's sudden appearance the more pardonable," said Windt, with a professional air.

Marishka, who had listened with growing inquietude to these revelations of her danger, had risen and paced nervously the length of the room.

"But why?" she pleaded. "Who can dare to molest me in my own home or in the streets of Vienna?"

Herr Windt rubbed his injured eye gravely.

"The Countess Strahni has unfortunately become a political document, the possession of which, I may even say the suppression of which, is highly important."

Marishka sank upon the couch, and for a moment buried her face in her hands.

"But what would be gained by getting me out of the way? I have already told what I know."

Herr Windt smiled.

"As Herr Renwick would perhaps inform you, the place for an important document is the safe. If the document is harmless a desk may do. If it is incriminating, like you, Countess"—he said with a dramatic gesture—"the fire!"

Renwick by this time had risen and stood fitting his monocle into his eye.

"Astounding!" he muttered. "And yet I quite believe you."

"There seems little room to doubt." Herr Windt walked to the window and peered out again. "My men are all about this place, Herr Renwick, and yet even now I am not certain that you have not been followed."

He turned and faced Marishka with his usual bland composure. "Herr Renwick should, I think, be able to take care of himself. I beg, however, that Countess Strahni will not be unduly anxious. I shall myself go outside and take every precaution." He turned at the door and bowed. "I beg that in the meanwhile, you will come to some decision as to your immediate plans, counting upon my efforts to aid you. There is no train for Vienna until this afternoon," he said significantly. "I may add that the machine in which you came from Altensteig will be returned to its owner by one of my young men, who will explain the circumstances, and arrange a proper compensation."

With this parting shot delivered in his best professional manner, Herr Windt left the room with an air of triumphant urbanity which added not a little to the respect with which Renwick now regarded him.

Marishka sat upright on the bed staring straight before her while Renwick paced the floor frowning.

"If I could only have reached her—for a moment," said Marishka brokenly, as though thinking aloud. "She would have listened to me—she would have believed me. I would have thrown myself upon her mercy—told her all. It is horrible—a death like that—when a word might save them now—and it will be I—I who have killed them—" She started up staring at Renwick. "And you! Why do you stand there, doing nothing?" she flung at him wildly. "You learned of this thing—at Belgrade. Why couldn't you have prevented it? Given it publicity? Why don't you do something now? England has power. Why doesn't your Ambassador speak? Is he frightened? Dumb? Will he stand idly by and see this—"

"It is none of England's affair, Countess Strahni," Renwick broke in soothingly.

"Then it is of Germany's?" She halted as the new idea came to her, and walked to the small table where she sank into a chair and buried her head in her hands, trying to think.

After a while she raised her head suddenly and looked at Renwick.

"Do you believe that this man tells the truth?"

"I do. He stands high among those of his profession."

"Do you believe that agents of the German government were trying to take me prisoner—and you?"

"Herr Windt is surprisingly well informed. I am quite sure that someone is trying to shoot me," he laughed. "I believe that you were followed—by whom I don't know."

"Then how do you explain the efforts of German agents to take me, when I am acting in the interests of the Kaiser's friend and ally, the Archduke Franz?"

"You forget that this plot is a secret one. The Archduke may fear the Serbians and the Bosnians, not his own countrymen."

"Oh! Yes—of course." She was silent again, but moved her hands nervously along the table top and in a moment got up and peered through the window-blind.

"I beg that you will submit yourself to Herr Windt if not to me—" pleaded Renwick earnestly. "At least in his company you will be in no danger. I have done what I can to help you reach the

Duchess, because the secret we shared brought about this calamity. But the matter has been taken out of my hands and yours. I advise you to return this afternoon to Vienna."

She did not reply and only stood by the window, tapping at the sash with unquiet fingers.

"You are tired," he said gently. "Lie down on this bed for awhile and I will see what can be done about breakfast."

"I'm not hungry."

"You can't go without food."

"I'm not hungry," she repeated.

Renwick shrugged and walked to the other window, where he presently observed Herr Windt coming around the corner of the building. That remarkable person had thought of everything, for he carried in his hands a coffeepot and cups, while another man followed with plates and a saucepan.

He turned the key in the lock and entered, putting the coffee upon the table and rubbing his hands with a more than usual gusto.

"I am delighted to be able to inform you that the occasion for your detention has passed. Within certain bounds you are now at liberty. The train of the Archduke has just passed down the valley."

"Oh!" gasped Marishka.

"I would advise you, however, to keep within call. If Herr Renwick will give me his word of honor not to try to escape—"

"I don't quite know where I should go—"

"Very good. The wires, of course, Herr Renwick, are in the hands of Austrian officials."

Renwick nodded.

"You have won, Herr Windt. I have no plans which conflict with yours." He turned a glance toward Marishka. "Countess Strahni is very tired. I think if we were to leave her for a few hours, she would probably eat and rest—"

"By all means," said Windt with alacrity, moving toward the door. "And if Herr Renwick will follow me I think I can find another coffeepot."

Marishka did not turn from the window as they went out of the door. Her heart was heavy within her, and through the glaring summer sunlight which came in at the window and beat upon her face, she saw—Sarajevo! Sophie Chotek alighting from her train, the pomp and circumstance, the glitter of uniforms, the crowded streets through which she must pass and the crowd which seethed with unrest, along the street through which Sophie Chotek must pass...! It was too horrible. She wanted to shriek—to cry out against the infamy that was to be done, but she could only close her eyes to try and shut the vision out.

After awhile she grew calmer, and tried to think clearly. There was a pitcher and basin in the corner of the room, and so she bathed her face and hands and refreshed herself. The coffee still steamed upon the table. There was rye bread, and there were eggs in the water of the saucepan. She felt weak and dispirited, but it would not do to fail for lack of strength, and so she sat and ate and drank. The plan born of her talk with Hugh Renwick still turned over and over in her mind. Would Renwick still be able to do something to help her? Which way should she turn? If her own efforts to warn Sophie Chotek had been futile, if Hugh Renwick could not do something, and England selfishly held aloof while this horrible conspiracy which seemed to have its very tendrils hidden in the hearts of those who should have been her friends, was under way, what must she do? She felt dreadfully; alone, and fearfully guilty. Her own death or the threatened imprisonment of which Herr Windt spoke seemed slight atonements for the wrong that she had done Sophie Chotek. If she could still succeed, by using the agents of the Archduke's imperial friend and ally, in sending a warning through the German ambassador at Vienna, to Budapest or Sarajevo, the consequences to herself were immaterial. They might have her to do with as they chose; for by this sacrifice only could she atone. She did not fear death, for death to youth and health is inconceivable. She smiled incredulously as she thought again of the ominous surmises of the impossible Herr Windt. There was something of the opera bouffe

about his methods which abstracted from the brilliancy of his success. To Marishka he was still the head waiter. This was the twentieth century. No political secret could justify the imprisonment or death of a woman!... She shuddered a little, as she thought of the very death that had been planned by the employers of Herr Windt—Austrians—loyal Austrians he called them, of the same blood and lineage perhaps as herself. She had not yet succeeded in wholly believing it. There was some missing reason for the actions of this secret service agent, some motive which neither she nor Hugh Renwick had yet fathomed, which would explain her detention and his. It was unbelievable that—

Marishka started at a small sound from the direction of the fireplace. It was a curious sound, a subdued metallic clink which nevertheless differentiated itself with startling clearness from among the already familiar sounds of the quiet summer morning. She started up and peered into the shadows of the hearth. There was something there, a small object—round, wrapped in paper. She reached forward quickly, picked it up and examined it curiously then took off its covering, disclosing an Austrian coin—a *kroner*—nothing more. It was most mysterious. The thing could obviously have not come from the sky. Who?

She examined the paper closely. It seemed like a leaf torn from a note book. There was writing on it, and moving to the window she made out the script without difficulty. It was written in evident haste with a blunt pencil.

I have found a way to escape in a machine from Herr Wendt, if you will come at once. Only one man watches the cabin by the door. There is another in the orchard. Go quietly out by the window and follow the hedge to the garden wall. I will be at the gate beyond the arbor. Destroy this note.

Hugh Renwick.

Marishka read the note twice to be sure that there was no mistake. She quickly peered through the window by the door. Yes, the man was there, smoking his pipe in the sunshine, his back against a tree, dozing. Anything were better than this interminable suspense—this horrible oppression of acknowledged failure. To be under further obligations to Herr Renwick was an added bitterness to her wounded pride, but hope had already beggared her and she could not choose. She got into coat and hat, and after another careful scrutiny of her somnolent guardian, quietly opened the shutters of the side window, stepped out into the shadow of the hedge, and made her way toward the distant garden wall.

CHAPTER VII

THE GREEN LIMOUSINE

Herr Windt started up from the bench on which he had thrown himself. It was a pity there was no earlier train for Vienna. He stretched himself and yawned, for he confessed himself a trifle disappointed that there was to be, after all, no test of wits between himself and the agent of the Wilhelmstrasse who had followed the Countess Strahni to the Nordwest station in Vienna. His men had done the fellow in the motor cap no great damage, for his own instructions had been limited but definite: to save Marishka Strahni in all secrecy from coming to harm, but to prevent her at all hazards from reaching Konopisht before the Archduke and Duchess left for Sarajevo. This simple task had been accomplished with little difficulty. The agent of the Wilhelmstrasse, undoubtedly a person of small caliber, had given up his efforts, or would seek a more propitious moment, to carry it out later in Vienna. Herr Windt yawned again. His visit to Bohemia would have been indeed a delight if a secret agent of the caliber of Herr Hauptman Leo Goritz, or Ober Lieutenant Franz Scheib, could have been sent upon this delicate mission to oppose him. But there was no such luck. Herr Windt had made a careful round of village and garden while Herr Renwick remained under the eye of his men, and there had been no sign of anything suspicious to disturb the monotonous peacefulness of the quiet garden. The reaction which always followed upon success, had set in, and the famous man was now frankly bored and somewhat fidgety. He got up and paced the stone walk a few times and then gazed out to where his most trusted man, Spivak, was dozing in the sun. Everything was too quiet, too peaceful. The serenity of the landscape annoyed him. He glanced at his watch—still four hours of this infernal quiet before their train left for Vienna. He went to the door of the room into which Herr Renwick had gone to lie down and looked in. The room was empty. This was not surprising, for Herr Renwick was under parole and would have the freedom of the garden in the immediate vicinity of the two cabins. As the morning was hot he had perhaps gone out to enjoy the shade of the trees. But Herr Windt now moved with alacrity and crossed the small plot of vegetable garden which separated the two cabins, and in some haste turned the corner of the small building which sheltered the Countess Strahni.

Before the door, listening, a puzzled look upon his face was Herr Renwick.

"I have called her three times," said the Englishman quickly. "She sleeps very soundly—or else—"

But Herr Windt did not stand upon ceremony, for he thrust past the Englishman, threw open the inner door, then returned bellowing lustily.

"Gone! The room is empty—"

"Gone!" cried Renwick.

Windt eyed him keenly.

"I have been yonder, by the trees, near your man—" protested Renwick and there seemed no doubt as to his innocence.

"Hi! Spivak! Linder! Hadwiger!" cried Windt. And as the men came running from all directions, "She is gone. What have you been at?"

"Gone?"

"By the window, idiots; did none of you see her?"

"No, Herr Windt—"

"But she could not have flown up the chimney—"

He halted abruptly, then dashed into the room again, peering into the fire place and examining the furniture, all his professional instincts keenly aroused. As he shook the bed clothing, there was a tinkle upon the floor, and a coin rolled into the farthest corner of the room. This he pounced upon like a dog upon a rat and brought it forth into the light of the window.

"A *kroner*!" he muttered. "Curious! Could she have dropped it do you suppose?"

"Perhaps. Her money was in a handbag," cried Renwick with his legs out of the window. He had already espied a possible mode of escape, and started running along in the shadow of the hedge.

"Your parole, Herr Renwick!" shouted Windt, scrambling after him.

"Come on then," cried the Englishman over his shoulder while the Austrian followed swiftly shouting orders to his assistants. "Follow me, Spivak! The Park gates, Hadwiger! Let no vehicle get out! Linder, notify Lengelbach—the telegraph!"

Renwick went fast but Herr Windt and the puffing Spivak kept at his heels as they reached the garden, crossing it at full speed toward the arbor, whither Renwick led them as though by an inspiration, through the bushes and toward the small gate beyond, which led to the door in the wall, over which a week ago he had climbed in his hurried flight with Marishka to Vienna.

Renwick was thinking rapidly. Had Marishka escaped alone—perhaps devised a plan of her own to reach Vienna from Budweis in time to come up with the party of the Archduke? Or had someone—He doubled his pace, cursing his throbbing head and his own simplicity and impotence. A trap?

"There is a door?" stammered Windt.

"In the bushes just beyond—a private one—usually locked—"

"Spivak! You hear?"

"I could not know—" panted the other.

"You should have known—"

They reached the small flight of steps that led down, and dashed along the path among the bushes toward an open gate, emerging upon the road which marked the beginnings of the village street. There were a few people in sight, an old man hobbling upon a stick, a child with a dog, two peasants in the shade of a tree eating their midday meal—and down the road to the west—a cloud of dust!

The peasants rose in alarm at the rapid approach of the three excited men, and turned as though to flee into the safety of the adjoining field, but Renwick overtook them.

"You saw a lady come out of the gate yonder?" he questioned.

"A lady, Excellency?"

"Yes, yes. A lady and perhaps a gentlemen."

"We are merely eating our dinner, Excellency. We—we have no wish to do harm to anyone."

"Idiots!" cried Windt. "A motor-car? An automobile? Did you see it? Answer—or—"

"A motor-car—Excellency?" the fellow stammered. "Yes—a motor-car."

"How long since?" snapped Windt.

"A moment only—it was here—just here—and now it is gone—"

"Where?"

"Y-yonder—" and he pointed down the road.

The three men exchanged frowning glances, but Herr Windt's were the most terrible of the three.

"You saw? Speak—What color was this car?"

"H—how should I know, Excellency? I was peacefully eating my dinner. See! It is but half finished—"

"You will never eat what remains unless you speak the truth—" he roared.

"I—I am speaking the truth—"

"What color had this car?"

"I don't understand—"

"Its color, man—the paint?"

"Oh! The paint—"

"Speak! Blockhead—"

"Excellency, I think—" he stammered in terror, "I think—"

"What—quickly—"

"I think, Excellency, that it was green."

Renwick gasped. The face of Herr Windt wore a blank look as though he had suddenly received a glacial douche.

"*Herr Gott!*" he muttered, wiping the sweat from his brow with an eloquent forefinger.

"The green limousine!" muttered Renwick.

For a moment all three men stood helplessly staring down the road toward the west, where the dustcloud was slowly settling on leaf and hedgerow, but there was a turn in the road which hid all objects beyond. Herr Windt was the first to recover his initiative.

"Clever!" he muttered. "A message! Linder should have observed—But they will not get far. Come—" And he led the way at a quick trot in the direction of the village, where they reached the telegraph office at the railway station.

While Herr Windt went inside to give his orders, Renwick sank upon a bench outside and tried to think of what had happened and what it might mean to Marishka and to him. The green limousine—a German secret agent—there could be no doubt, and he, Renwick, already warned of this possible danger to Marishka had permitted her to fall into this trap, while he had come off unscathed. His conscience assailed him bitterly. Trusting to the efficiency of Herr Windt's men he had slept—slept while Marishka was being carried off to danger—to imprisonment—or perhaps—he did not dare to think of anything worse. And Marishka must have connived at the plan for her escape! How had the message passed? And what was the lure?

As the new idea came to him he rose quickly and moved toward the door of the telegraph office. He paused for a moment to adjust his monocle and it was fortunate that he did so, for there was a crash of glass at the window just by his head, followed by a cry of alarm within the room. Renwick dodged behind a projection of the building, and peered out while Windt and Linder came rushing from the office.

"A shot?"

"Who?"

"I can't imagine. He can't have gone far."

The four men raced out, Herr Windt with automatic drawn, but when they reached the freight station which seemed to be in the direction from which the shot had come there was no one in sight. Across the railroad was a patch of dense woods.

Here Herr Windt paused.

"He was shooting at *you*, Herr Renwick," he said calmly.

"I haven't a doubt of it."

"Go forward, Linder and Spivak—search the woods—but do no shooting unless attacked." Here Windt pocketed his weapon. "I regret, Herr Renwick, that my other business is of the utmost importance. You will come with me to the telegraph office, please."

Renwick obeyed rather willingly. He was unarmed and saw no possible utility to his own cause or Marishka's in dodging around in woods which contained a person bent upon assassinating him.

"You see, Herr Renwick, the matter is not ended."

"I'm much more comfortable that it is not," replied Renwick grimly. "He shoots well."

"You must be careful," said his companion casually. "Come inside. Hadwiger will watch." And he calmly took up his interrupted duty with the telegraph officer, with an air of impassivity, which of course, was part of his professional mien, but Renwick somehow gained the idea that his own death whether by shooting, poison, or other sudden device was a matter with which Herr Windt could have the least possible concern. Renwick sank into a chair and smoked a pipe, trying to think what he could do, listening dully meanwhile to the Austrian's dictated messages to the wire, delivered rapidly and with a certain military precision.

"Stop all green motor cars traveling north on the Prague highroad—and all roads leading north. Report at once here by telegraph description of those arrested. Confirm this message by name of station." And then in quicker tones, "Send that to all telegraph stations in this district north and west of here—and quick, you understand—lose no time. When that message is sent I will give you another—for the Chief of Police at Prague." Then turning to the door as a new thought came to him he spoke to Hadwiger.

"Go to the wood on the Prague highroad where the machine is concealed and bring it here. Quick. We may need it. You see, Herr Renwick, in ten minutes all the roads into Prague will be closed to them. Even if they reach the city they will be detained."

Renwick did not reply. He was weighing the probabilities in his own thorough English way. His head still ached, but the pipe of tobacco aided his faculties. The thought that persisted in his mind was that Marishka had escaped from Herr Windt with the sole purpose of carrying out the object of her visit to Konopisht. He remembered the sudden interest she had displayed at the mention of the possibility of her having been followed to Konopisht by an agent of the Wilhelmstrasse. England could do nothing for her, Austria her own country stood helpless, while the Military Party, which alone possibly had the power to help her, still remained in ignorance of the plot. Germany! He remembered the look that had come into her eyes as he had confirmed the opinions of Herr Windt—an opinion borne out by the attempts upon his life and her safety in Vienna. But what of the man in the green limousine? She was a human document, as Herr Windt had said, which was destined for the safe, or possibly for destruction. By what means had the man in the green car lured her from the security of the cabin? Renwick could not believe, after all that he had done for her, that she would throw herself into the hands of a stranger on the barest chance of success without at least confiding in him. A shadow had fallen between them, a shadow and an abyss which had grown darker and deeper with the hours, but that he was her enemy—political, personal—he could hardly believe she could think him that; for he had done what he could—striven earnestly to help her reach the Duchess in safety. That he had failed was through no fault of his own. He could not understand her flight—not from Windt, but from him—without a word or a sign. It was not like her—not even like the Marishka who had chosen to call him dishonorable. However much she could repudiate his political actions, there still remained between them the ties of social consanguinity, the memory of things which might have been, that no wounded pride could ever quite destroy. But to repudiate him without a word—that was not like Marishka—not even the Marishka of today and yesterday. And while he tried to solve the problem in his own way, the telegraph instrument ticked busily on. Herr Windt leaned over the desk reading the messages, repeating the names of the towns which replied.

"Beneschau—Pribram—Wrshowitz—that district is covered, Lengelbach?"

"Yes. Ah, here is something."

Windt bent forward again repeating the message aloud.

"From Beraun—Franz—Schweppenheiser—and—a—woman—says—she—is—his—wife. Small—four—cylinder—car—American—make—black—in—color—with—brass—band—on—hood. Both—man—and—woman—have—grey—hair—age—seventy-two—and—" Herr Windt broke off with an oath, "*Schafsköpfen!*" he cried. "Enough of that—" And paced the floor of the room before Renwick, glaring impatiently out of the window.

"Another," said Lengelbach, "from Bresnitz. Man—and—girl—much frightened—"

"Ah!"

"Say—they—are—running—away—to—be—married."

"Yes—the description—"

"Man—dark—age—twenty-five—girl—yellow—hair—"

"Bah!" furiously. "Enough—the next."

For an hour or more, Renwick sat helplessly and listened while the different towns including the city of Prague responded. There was no green limousine in all Bohemia. At last, his patience exhausted, he rose and knocked his pipe out.

"Herr Windt," he inquired calmly, "what reason have you for believing that they will go to Prague?"

"The roads are good. The German border lies beyond," said Windt shortly, turning away.

"Wait!" Renwick's hand clutched his arm firmly. "Is there a road running south and parallel to the highroad?"

Windt regarded him in silence for a moment and then—

"Yes, many—but most of them mere cow paths."

"An automobile could pass over them, Herr Lengelbach?"

"Yes, the roads to Brünn are not bad," said the man.

Renwick smiled grimly. "It is my belief, Herr Windt, that they have slipped through your fingers."

"No."

"You have exhausted almost every means—"

"There are other stations—"

"I would suggest that you try the country to the southward."

"Why?"

"Because that is the way that they have gone—"

"Impossible!"

"I think you forget the Countess Strahni's mission—and yours."

"She will not succeed."

His stubbornness angered Renwick, and he caught him by the arm again, and whispered a few words in his ear.

Herr Windt turned a startled glance at the Englishman. His mind had been bent upon mere machinery. When he spoke there was in his voice a note of respect.

"Ah—it is worth considering. But how? The telegraph wires are now in my possession—here in this district to Budweis—to Vienna—"

"Then why don't you use them?" asked Renwick bluntly.

Windt stood stock still a moment and then went quickly to the desk.

"Repeat that message to Budweis, to Gmund, to Altensteig and Absdorf. Also cover the Brünn road. It can do no harm," he said turning urbanely to Renwick.

"Perhaps not," said Renwick dryly, "if the harm is not already done."

Together they listened to the clicking of the telegraph instrument. Half an hour passed. Hadwiger returned with the machine. Spivak and Linder came in from their fruitless search of the woods. The suspense was unendurable. Renwick, forgetting his danger, paced the road outside until a cry from Windt brought him into the office. The others were leaning over the instrument while Windt spelled out the words, "I-g-l-a-u t-w-o s-e-v-e-n-t-e-e-n G-e-r-m-a-n o-f-f-i-c-e-r a-n-d w-i-f-e. G-r-e-e-n l-i-m-o-u-s-i-n-e p-a-s-s-e-d h-e-r-e t-e-n m-i-n-u-t-e-s a-g-o f-o-r V-i-e-n-n-a."

"*Kollosaler Halunke!*" thundered Windt, his urbanity shattered to shreds. "They have taken the other road. Here, Lengelbach, take this quick. "Hold green motor-car man and woman." Send that to every telegraph station between Brünn and Danube. Relay all messages to Budweis. I'm going there."

And turning quickly he went toward the automobile, with a sign to the others to follow. Very politely he stood aside while Renwick entered, and with one of the men climbed into the rear seat while the other two got in front, Hadwiger driving at a furious pace. For a long time they went in silence, Herr Windt sitting with folded arms, his brows tangled in thought. To acknowledge that he had been outwitted had been galling, but to let this English creature of pipe and monocle indicate,

in the presence of his own underlings, the precise means of his discomfiture was bitter indeed. At last his lips mumbled vaguely.

"Still I do not understand," they said.

"A note wrapped around the coin," suggested Renwick.

"*Ach, so.* It is very probable. The simplest expedients are often the most effective. Still it is remarkable that they have slipped through."

"The green limousine goes to Vienna," said Renwick.

Herr Windt had self-respect enough for a rather cynical smile.

"And after Vienna?" he asked.

Renwick shrugged.

"That will depend upon the efficiency of the Austrian Secret Police."

"Meaning, precisely what, Herr Renwick?"

"Merely that the Wilhelmstrasse is skillful, Herr Windt," he replied.

"You mean that they will escape—here in Austria! Impossible!"

"You will need all your wits," said Renwick dryly.

The truth of the remark was soon apparent for when Herr Windt's party reached the telegraph station at Budweis, there were no reassuring messages. The green limousine had vanished into the earth.

CHAPTER VIII

AN ESCAPE AND A CAPTURE

In her flight from the cabin in the Archduke's woods, the Countess Strahni crept along in the shadow of the hedge which bordered the orchard, and reached the gate of the garden. She had seen the watcher in the orchard pacing to and fro, and, awaiting the moment when his back should be turned, she hurried swiftly on to the shelter of the garden wall, once within which, she thought that she would be safe from detection by the men of Herr Windt. She waited for a moment at the gate to be sure that the man near the cabin had not observed her, and noted, through the foliage, that he had not moved. Then summoning her courage, she crossed the garden boldly in the direction of the arbor—the fateful arbor of Austria's betrayal—and her own. In the path beyond it Hugh Renwick would be awaiting her—Renwick, the imperturbable, the persistent, the—the despicable. Yes, she was quite sure that she despised him, in spite of all his efforts on her behalf, so she thought that she was once more to be beholden to him in this hapless quest gave her a long moment of uncertainty as she reached the arbor. She paused within the structure, wondering whether, now that she had succeeded in eluding Herr Windt, it would not be better to flee into the castle, and enlist the aid of the servants in behalf of their master and mistress. She had even taken a few steps toward the tennis court, when she remembered—the telegraph in the hands of Austrian officials who had their instructions! That way was hopeless. The Archduke's chamberlain had, of course, gone south, and in the castle, beside the house-servants, there would have remained only the English governess, the children, and the housekeeper. There could be little help expected from them—only bewilderment, horror, or perhaps incredulity. She must go on to Herr Renwick, continue the impossible situation between them, hide her exasperation in a studied politeness, and trust implicitly, as she had done before, to his undoubted desire to retrieve his lost standing.

She turned into the path which led from the arbor, and hurried through into the narrow path which led to the hidden gate beyond. Just here where the foliage was thickest, and not twenty yards from the spot where she and Hugh Renwick had listened to the pact of Konopisht, a figure stood bowing. She had been so intent upon seeing the Englishman that it was a full moment before she recovered from the shock of her surprise. The man before her was tall, with good shoulders, and wore a brown Norfolk jacket and a soft hat. His eyes were dark and as he smiled they wrinkled very pleasantly at the corners.

Marishka halted and stared at him uncertainly.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I came here to meet—" She paused, for the thought suddenly entered her head that this perhaps might be another of the men sent to detain her. But in a moment she realized her mistake. The air with which the man swept off his hat and bowed convinced her that he was a gentleman and his manner put her at once at her ease.

"Herr Renwick," he said, with a smile, "has gone on to make some arrangements for your comfort. He has asked me to conduct you to the automobile, and will join us beyond the village."

An automobile! There would still be time, perhaps, to reach Vienna before the archducal party should leave for Bosnia.

"Oh, of course," gasped Marishka thankfully.

"If you will come this way, Countess—" he said, with something of an air. He bowed, but kept his gaze fixed upon hers. There was something very remarkable about this man's eyes—she could not tell just what it was—but they held her for a second, held her motionless until the hand which held his hat gestured for her to pass on. She took the walk before him, descended the steps which led to the lower path where he hurried forward and opened the door in the wall.

Even now, no notion entered her head that this polite person was other than he represented himself to be. And the well equipped machine which stood in the road outside the wall only caused her a momentary thrill of joy at the opportunity which placed the means of their escape so readily at the hand of the now really admirable Herr Renwick. As she paused again for a moment, her companion threw open the door of the limousine, and lightly touched her elbow.

"If the Countess Strahni will enter—" he said quietly. "There is little time to lose."

Marishka obeyed and in a moment the man in the Norfolk jacket was seated beside her, the chauffeur had thrown in the gears, and the machine was moving swiftly upon its way. She sank back into the comfortable cushions with a sigh of satisfaction which did not escape her companion.

"It was fortunate that I should have been in this neighborhood," he said with a strange smile. It was not until then that she noticed the slightly thick accents with which he spoke and she glanced at his profile hurriedly. His nose was aquiline and well cut, but the suggestion of his nationality was elusive. In spite of his evident gentility, his good looks, his courtesy and his friendship with Hugh Renwick, Marishka now had her first belated instinct that all was not as it should be. The man beside her looked past the chauffeur down the road ahead, turning one or two glances over his shoulder into the cloud of dust behind them. She noticed now that the car had not gone in the direction of the village, but had reached the country road which led to the west and was moving at a high speed which seemed to take the waiting Renwick little into consideration. All the windows of the car were closed, and she had a sense of being restrained—suffocated. For a while she did not dare to give her thoughts utterance, but as the car reached the Prague highroad and turned to the right, she started and turned in alarm to the man beside her.

"You told me that Herr Renwick was waiting for us just beyond the village. Where is—?"

The question trembled and died on her lips for the eyes of the man beside her answered before it was asked.

"I regret," he said evenly, "that there is no time to wait for Herr Renwick."

"You—you have—" she stammered helplessly.

"I beg that the Countess Strahni will not be unduly disturbed."

"Where are we going? This is the road to Prague. Tell me where you are taking me. I insist—"

He smiled at her again, but did not reply.

Marishka was now really alarmed and looked out of the closed windows at the flying hedgerows in desperation, wondering what she must do and trying to think how this dreadful mishap had befallen her. Hugh Renwick—his note to her—this stranger with the remarkable eyes who always smiled! Where was the missing link—what the deduction? But it was no time in which to lose one's courage. She turned toward the man beside her who was regarding her calmly.

"Who are you?" she asked.

His eyes narrowed slightly as he looked past her out of the window. Then he said politely:

"The Countess Strahni is well within her rights in asking that question. I am Captain Leo Goritz."

That meant nothing to her and she found herself repeating her question.

He deliberated a moment.

"I see no reason why I should not tell you," he said at last. "I do not desire a misconception of my personal motives—which I beg you to understand are of the highest. I am merely carrying out my orders to bring the Countess Strahni with all dispatch within the borders of the German Empire."

"You—you are—" she paused in dismay.

"Of the German Imperial Secret Service," he said quickly.

Marishka sank back into her seat breathless with apprehension, the warnings of the hated Herr Windt dinning in her ears.

"Then you sent—" She fingered the scribbled note which had not left her fingers.

"I regret, Countess, that the situation made deception necessary. One of my men in the tree above the chimney. My orders were urgent."

Marishka glanced about the machine helplessly, her thoughts, in spite of herself, recurring to Hugh Renwick, who must before long discover her absence and guess its cause. But there seemed no chance of escape. To open the door and leap forth into the road at this speed was only courting injury, and the calm appearance of Captain Leo Goritz seemed only the mask for a resoluteness of purpose with which she could not dare to cope. To cry out seemed equally futile for the road was deserted except for a few market wagons, the occupants of which were country louts who only stared dully as they passed. But in a flash the inspiration came to her. Germany! Germany could help her carry out her purpose to warn the Duchess before she reached Sarajevo. She glanced at her companion and found that his brown eyes had turned as though by prescience to hers.

"Captain Goritz," she stammered, "I—I seem to be in your power. Whatever your authority for this—this restraint of my liberty—I submit myself—"

He showed his fine teeth in a smile.

"I regret that the Countess Strahni should have been put to this inconvenience."

She made a motion of deprecation.

"I beg that you will spare yourself meaningless civilities. I do not know the meaning of this outrage."

"The Countess Strahni is far too clever to suppose that I can believe her—" he put in quickly.

"What do you mean?"

"Merely that an intelligence which can throw central Europe into a turmoil," and he laughed pleasantly, "does itself and me too little credit."

"Oh, you know—" she gasped.

"Yes, I know."

She examined Captain Goritz with a new interest.

"But you did not know the object of my visit to Konopisht," she went on desperately.

"I confess," he said slowly, "that your sudden departure from Vienna was most mystifying—"

"I will tell you," she went on excitedly. "I came to Konopisht to warn the Archduke Franz of a plot to assassinate him when he reaches Sarajevo—"

"Ah! So that—" Captain Goritz started suddenly forward in his seat and faced her eagerly in an attitude of sudden alertness.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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