

WALLACE EDGAR

THE BOOK OF
ALL-POWER

Edgar Wallace

The Book of All-Power

«Public Domain»

Wallace E.

The Book of All-Power / E. Wallace — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	15
CHAPTER IV	21
CHAPTER V	25
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	26

Edgar Wallace

The Book of All-Power

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING MALCOLM HAY

If a man is not eager for adventure at the age of twenty-two, the enticement of romantic possibilities will never come to him.

The chairman of the Ukraine Oil Company looked with a little amusement at the young man who sat on the edge of a chair by the chairman's desk, and noted how the eye of the youth had kindled at every fresh discouragement which the chairman had put forward. Enthusiasm, reflected the elder man, was one of the qualities which were most desirable in the man who was to accept the position which Malcolm Hay was at that moment considering.

"Russia is a strange country," said Mr. Tremayne. "It is one of the mystery places of the world. You hear fellows coming back from China who tell you amazing stories of the idiosyncrasies of the Chink. But I can tell you, from my own personal observations, that the Chinaman is an open book in words of one syllable compared with the average Russian peasant. By the way, you speak Russian, I understand?"

Hay nodded.

"Oh, yes, sir," he said, "I have been talking Russian ever since I was sixteen, and I speak both the dialects."

"Good!" nodded Mr. Tremayne. "Now, all that remains for you to do is to think both dialects. I was in Southern Russia attending to our wells for twenty years. In fact, long before our wells came into being, and I can honestly say that, though I am not by any means an unintelligent man, I know just as little about the Russian to-day as I did when I went there. He's the most elusive creature. You think you know him two days after you have met him. Two days later you find that you have changed all your opinions about him; and by the end of the first year, if you have kept a careful note of your observations and impressions in a diary, you will discover that you have three hundred and sixty-five different views—unless it happens to be a leap year."

"What happens in a leap year?" asked the innocent Hay.

"You have three hundred and sixty-six views," said the solemn Mr. Tremayne.

He struck a bell.

"We shan't want you to leave London for a week or two," he said, "and in the meantime you had better study up our own special literature. We can give you particulars about the country—that part of the country in which the wells are situated—which you will not find in the guidebooks. There are also a few notable personages whom it will be advisable for you to study."

"I know most of them," said the youth with easy confidence. "As a matter of fact, I got the British Consul to send me a local directory and swotted it."

Mr. Tremayne concealed a smile.

"And what did the local directory say about Israel Kensky?" he asked innocently.

"Israel Kensky?" said the puzzled youth. "I don't remember that name."

"It is the only name worth remembering," said the other dryly, "and, by the way, you'll be able to study him in a strange environment, for he is in London at this moment."

A clerk had answered the bell and stood waiting in the doorway.

"Get Mr. Hay those books and pamphlets I spoke to you about," said Tremayne. "And, by the way, when did M. Kensky arrive?"

"To-day," said the clerk.

Tremayne nodded.

"In fact," he said, "London this week will be filled with people whose names are not in your precious directory, and all of whom you should know. The Yaroslavs are paying a sort of state visit."

"The Yaroslavs?" repeated Hay. "Oh, of course—"

"The Grand Duke and his daughter," added Mr. Tremayne.

"Well," smiled the young man, "I'm not likely to meet the Grand Duke or the Grand Duchess. I understand the royal family of Russia is a little exclusive."

"Everything is likely in Russia," said the optimistic Mr. Tremayne. "If you come back in a few years' time and tell me that you've been appointed an admiral in the Russian Navy, or that you've married the Grand Duchess Irene Yaroslav, I shall not for one moment disbelieve you. At the same time, if you come back from Russia without your ears, the same having been cut off by your peasant neighbours to propitiate the ghost of a martyr who died six hundred years ago, I shall not be surprised either. That is the country you're going to—and I envy you."

"I'm a little surprised at myself," admitted Malcolm, "it seems almost incredible. Of course, sir, I have a lot to learn and I'm not placing too much reliance upon my degree."

"Your science degree?" said Tremayne. "It may be useful, but a divinity degree would have been better."

"A divinity degree?"

Tremayne nodded.

"It is religion you want in Russia, and especially local religion. You'll have to do a mighty lot of adapting when you're out there, Hay, and I don't think you could do better than get acquainted with the local saints. You'll find that the birth or death of four or five of them are celebrated every week, and that your workmen will take a day's holiday for each commemoration. If you're not pretty smart, they'll whip in a few saints who have no existence, and you'll get no work done at all—that will do."

He ended the interview with a jerk of his head, and as the young man got to his feet to go, added: "Come back again to-morrow. I think you ought to see Kensky."

"Who is he?" asked Hay courteously. "A local magnate?"

"In a sense he is and in a sense he's not," said the careful Mr. Tremayne. "He's a big man locally, and from a business point of view, I suppose he is a magnate. However, you'll be able to judge for yourself."

Malcolm Hay went out into the teeming streets of London, walking on air. It was his first appointment—he was earning money, and it seemed rather like a high-class dream.

In Maida Vale there are many little side streets, composed of shabby houses covered with discoloured stucco, made all the more desolate and gloomy in appearance by the long and narrow strip of "garden" which runs out to the street. In one of these, devoted to the business of a boarding-house, an old man sat at a portable bench, under the one electric light which the economical landlady had allowed him. The room was furnished in a typically boarding-house style.

But both the worker at the bench, and the woman who sat by the table, her chin on her palms, watching him, seemed unaffected by the poverty of their surroundings. The man was thin and bent of back. As he crouched over the bench, working with the fine tools on what was evidently intended to be the leather cover of a book, his face lay in the shadow, and only the end of his straggling white beard betrayed his age.

Presently he looked up at the woman and revealed himself as a hawk-nosed man of sixty. His face was emaciated and seamed, and his dark eyes shone brightly. His companion was a woman of twenty-four, obviously of the Jewish type, as was the old man; what good looks she possessed were marred by the sneer on her lips.

"If these English people see you at work," she said presently, "they will think you are some poor man, little father."

Israel Kensky did not stop his work.

"What book are you binding?" she asked after awhile. "Is it the Talmud which Levi Leviski gave you?"

The old man did not answer, and a dark frown gathered on the woman's heavy face. You might not guess that they were father and daughter, yet such was the case. But between Sophia Kensky and her father there was neither communion of spirit nor friendship. It was amazing that she should accompany him, as she did, wherever he went, or that he should be content to have her as his companion. The gossips of Kieff had it that neither would trust the other out of sight; and it may be that there was something in this, though a stronger motive might be suspected in so far as Sophia's actions were concerned.

Presently the old man put down his tools, blinked, and pushed back his chair.

"It is a design for a great book," he said, and chuckled hoarsely. "A book with steel covers and wonderful pages." He smiled contemptuously. "The Book of All-Power," he said.

"Little father, there are times when I think you are mad. For how can you know the secrets which are denied to others? And you who write so badly, how can you fill a great book with your writings?"

"The Book of All-Power," repeated the man, and the smile on the woman's face grew broader.

"A wonderful book!" she scoffed, "filled with magic and mystery and spells—do you wonder that we of Kieff suspect you?"

"We of Kieff?" he repeated mockingly, and she nodded.

"We of Kieff," she said.

"So you are with the rabble, Sophia!" He lifted one shoulder in a contemptuous little gesture.

"You are also of the rabble, Israel Kensky," she said. "Do you take your dinner in the Grand Duke's palace?"

He was gathering together the tools on the table, and methodically fitting each graver into a big leather purse.

"The Grand Duke does not stone me in the street, nor set fire to my houses," he said.

"Nor the Grand Duchess," said the girl meaningly, and he looked at her from under his lowered brows.

"The Grand Duchess is beyond the understanding of such as you," he said harshly, and the woman laughed.

"There will come a day when she will be on her knees to me," she said prophetically, and she got up from the table with a heavy yawn. "That I promise myself, and with this promise I put myself to sleep every night."

She went on and she spoke without heat.

"I see her sweeping my floors and eating the bread I throw to her."

Israel Kensky had heard all this before, and did not even smile.

"You are an evil woman, Sophia," he said. "God knows how such a one could be a daughter of mine. What has the Grand Duchess done to you that you should harbour such venom?"

"I hate her because she is," said the woman evenly. "I hate her not for the harm she has done me, but for the proud smile she gives to her slaves. I hate her because she is high and I am low, and because all the time she is marking the difference between us."

"You are a fool," said Israel Kensky as he left the room.

"Perhaps I am," said the woman, his daughter. "Are you going to bed now?"

He turned in the doorway.

"I am going to my room. I shall not come down again," he said.

"Then I will sleep," she yawned prodigiously. "I hate this town."

"Why did you come?" he asked. "I did not want you."

"I came because you did not want me," said Sophia Kensky.

Israel went to his room, closed the door and locked it. He listened and presently he heard the sound of his daughter's door close also and heard the snap of the key as it turned. But it was a double snap, and he knew that the sound was intended for him and that the second click was the unlocking of the door. She had locked and unlocked it in one motion. He waited, sitting in an arm-chair before a small fire, for ten minutes, and then, rising, crossed the room softly and switched out the light. There was a transom above the door, so that anybody in the passage outside could tell whether his light was on or off. Then he resumed his seat, spreading his veined hands to the fire, and listened.

He waited another quarter of an hour before he heard a soft creak and the sound of breathing outside the door. Somebody was standing there listening. The old man kept his eyes fixed on the fire, but his senses were alive to every sound. Again he heard the creaking, this time louder. A jerry-built house in Maida Vale does not offer the best assistance to the furtive business in which Sophia Kensky was engaged. Another creak, this time farther away and repeated at intervals, told him that she was going down the stairs. He walked to the window and gently pulled up the blind, taking his station so that he could command a view of the narrow strip of garden. Presently his vigil was rewarded. He saw her dark figure walk along the flagged pavement, open the gate and disappear into the darkened street.

Israel Kensky went back to his chair, stirred the fire and settled down to a long wait, his lined face grave and anxious.

The woman had turned to the right and had walked swiftly to the end of the street. The name of that street, or its pronunciation, were beyond her. She neither spoke English, nor was she acquainted with the topography of the district in which she found herself. She slowed her pace as she reached the main road and a man came out of the shadows to meet her.

"Is it you, little mother?" he asked in Russian.

"Thank God you're here! Who is this?" asked Sophia breathlessly.

"Boris Yakoff," said the other, "I have been waiting for an hour, and it is very cold."

"I could not get away before," she said as she fell in beside him. "The old man was working with his foolery and it was impossible to get him to go to bed. Once or twice I yawned, but he took no notice."

"Why has he come to London?" asked her companion. "It must be something important to bring him away from his money-bags."

To this the woman made no reply. Presently she asked:

"Do we walk? Is there no droski or little carriage?"

"Have patience, have patience!" grinned the man good humouredly. "Here in London we do things in grand style. We have an auto-car for you. But it was not wise to bring it so close to your house, little mother. The old man—"

"Oh, finish with the old man," she said impatiently; "do not forget that I am with him all the day."

The antipathy between father and daughter was so well known that the man made no apology for discussing the relationship with that frankness which is characteristic of the Russian peasant. Nor did Sophia Kensky resent the questions of a stranger, nor hesitate to unburden herself of her grievances. The "auto-car" proved to be a very common-place taxi-cab, though a vehicle of some luxury to Yakoff.

"They say he practises magic," said that garrulous man, as the taxi got on its way; "also that he bewitches you."

"That is a lie," said the woman indifferently: "he frightens me sometimes, but that is because I have here"—she tapped her forehead—"a memory which is not a memory. I seem to remember something just at the end of a thread, and I reach for it, and lo! it is gone!"

"That is magic," said Yakoff gravely. "Evidently he practises his spells upon you. Tell me, Sophia Kensky, is it true that you Jews use the blood of Christian children for your beastly ceremonies?"

The woman laughed.

"What sort of man are you that you believe such things?" she asked contemptuously. "I thought all the comrades in London were educated?"

Yakoff made a little clicking noise with his mouth to betray his annoyance. And well he might resent this reflection upon his education, for he held a university degree and had translated six revolutionary Russian novels into English and French. This, he explained with some detail, and the girl listened with little interest. She was not surprised that an educated man should believe the fable of human sacrifices, which had gained a certain currency in Russia. Only it seemed to her just a little inexplicable.

The cab turned out of the semi-obscurity of the side street into a brilliantly lighted thoroughfare and bowled down a broad and busy road. A drizzle of rain was falling and blurred the glass; but even had the windows been open, she could not have identified her whereabouts.

"To what place are you taking me?" she asked. "Where is the meeting?"

Yakoff lowered his voice to a husky whisper.

"It is the café of the Silver Lion, in a place called Soho," he said. "Here we meet from day to day and dream of a free Russia. We also play bagatelle." He gave the English name for the latter. "It is a club and a restaurant. To-night it is necessary that you should be here, Sophia Kensky, because of the great happenings which must follow."

She was silent for awhile, then she asked whether it was safe, and he laughed.

"Safe!" he scoffed. "There are no secret police in London. This is a free country, where one may do as one wishes. No, no, Sophia Kensky, be not afraid."

"I am not afraid," she answered, "but tell me, Yakoff, what is this great meeting about?"

"You shall learn, you shall learn, little sister," said Yakoff importantly.

He might have added that he also was to learn, for as yet he was in ignorance.

They drove into a labyrinth of narrow streets and stopped suddenly before a doorway. There was no sign of a restaurant, and Yakoff explained, before he got out of the cab, that this was the back entrance to the Silver Lion, and that most of the brethren who used the club also used this back door.

He dismissed the cab and pressed a bell in the lintel of the door. Presently it was opened and they passed in unchallenged. They were in a small hallway, lighted with a gas-jet. There was a stairway leading to the upper part of the premises, and a narrower stairway, also lighted by gas, at the foot leading to the cellar; and it was down the latter that Yakoff moved, followed by the girl.

They were now in another passage, whitewashed and very orderly. A gas-jet lit this also, and at one end the girl saw a plain, wooden door. To this Yakoff advanced and knocked. A small wicket, set in the panel, was pushed aside, and after a brief scrutiny by the door's custodian, it was opened and the two entered without further parley.

CHAPTER II

A GUN-MAN REFUSES WORK

It was a big underground room, the sort of basement dining-room one finds in certain of the cafés in Soho, and its decorations and furniture were solid and comfortable. There were a dozen men in this innocent-looking saloon when the girl entered. They were standing about talking, or sitting at the tables playing games. The air was blue with tobacco smoke.

Her arrival seemed to be the signal for the beginning of a conference. Four small tables were drawn from the sides and placed together, and in a few seconds she found herself one of a dozen that sat about the board.

The man who seemed to take charge of the proceedings she did not know. He was a Russian—a big, clean-shaven man, quietly and even well-dressed. His hair was flaming red, his nose was crooked. It was this crooked nose which gave her a clue to his identity. She remembered in Kieff, where physical peculiarities could not pass unnoticed, some reference to "twist nose," and racked her brains in an effort to recall who that personage was. That he knew her he very quickly showed.

"Sophia Kensky," he said, "we have sent for you to ask you why your father is in London."

"If you know my father," she replied, "you know also that I, his daughter, do not share his secrets."

The man at the head of the table nodded.

"I know him," he said grimly, "also I know you, Sophia. I have seen you often at the meetings of our society in Kieff."

Again she frowned, trying to recall his name and where she had seen him. It was not at any of the meetings of the secret society—of that she was sure. He seemed to read her thoughts, for he laughed—a deep, thunderous laugh which filled the underground room with sound.

"It is strange that you do not know me," he said, "and yet I have seen you a hundred times, and you have seen me."

A light dawned on her.

"Boolba, the *buffet-schek* of the Grand Duke!" she gasped.

He nodded, absurdly pleased at the recognition.

"I do not attend the meetings in Kieff, little sister, for reasons which you will understand. But here in London, where I have come in advance of Yaroslav, it is possible. Now, Sophia Kensky, you are a proved friend of our movement?"

She nodded, since the statement was in the way of a question.

"It is known to you, as to us, that your father, Israel Kensky, is a friend of the Grand Duchess."

Boolba, the President, saw the sullen look on her face and drew his own conclusions, even before she explained her antipathy to the young girl who held that exalted position.

"It is a mystery to me, Boolba," she said, "for what interest can this great lady have in an old Jew?"

"The old Jew is rich," said Boolba significantly.

"So also is Irene Yaroslav," said the girl. "It is not for money that she comes."

"It is not for money," agreed the other, "it is for something else. When the Grand Duchess Irene was a child, she was in the streets of Kieff one day in charge of her nurse. It happened that some Caucasian soldiers stationed in the town started a pogrom against the Jews. The soldiers were very drunk; they were darting to and fro in the street on their little horses, and the nurse became frightened and left the child. Your father was in hiding, and the soldiers were searching for him; yet, when he saw the danger of the Grand Duchess, he ran from his hiding-place, snatched her up under the hoofs of the horses, and bore her away into his house."

"I did not know this," said Sophia, listening open-mouthed. Her father had never spoken of the incident, and the curious affection which this high-born lady had for the old usurer of Kieff had ever been a source of wonder to her.

"You know it now," said Boolba. "The Grand Duke has long since forgotten what he owes to Israel Kensky, but the Grand Duchess has not. Therefore, she comes to him with all her troubles—and that, Sophia Kensky, is why we have sent for you."

There was a silence.

"I see," she said at last, "you wish me to spy upon Israel Kensky and tell you all that happens."

"I want to know all that passes between him and the Grand Duchess," said Boolba. "She comes to London to-morrow with her father, and it is certain she will seek out Israel Kensky. Every letter that passes between them must be opened."

"But—" she began.

"There is no 'but,'" roared Boolba. "Hear and obey; it is ordered!"

He turned abruptly to the man on his left.

"You understand, Yaroslav arrives in London to-morrow. It is desirable that he should not go away."

"But, but, Excellency," stammered the man on his left, "here in London!"

Boolba nodded.

"But, Excellency," wailed the man, "in London we are safe; it is the one refuge to which our friends can come. If such a thing should happen, what would be our fate? We could not meet together. We should be hounded down by the police from morning until night; we should be deported—it would be the ruin of the great movement."

"Nevertheless, it is an order," said Boolba doggedly; "this is a matter beyond the cause. It will gain us powerful protectors at the court, and I promise you that, though the commotion will be great, yet it will not last for very long, and you will be left undisturbed."

"But—" began one of the audience, and Boolba silenced him with a gesture.

"I promise that none of you shall come to harm, my little pigeons, and that you shall not be concerned in this matter."

"But who will do it, Excellency?" asked another member.

"That is too important to be decided without a meeting of all the brethren. For my part, I would not carry out such an order unless I received the instructions of our President."

"I promise that none of you shall take a risk," sneered Boolba. "Now speak, Yakoff!"

The man who had accompanied Sophia Kensky smiled importantly at the company, then turned to Sophia.

"Must I say this before Sophia Kensky?" he asked.

"Speak," said Boolba. "We are all brothers and sisters, and none will betray you."

Yakoff cleared his throat.

"When your Excellency wrote to me from Kieff, asking me to find a man, I was in despair," he began—an evidently rehearsed speech, "I tore my hair, I wept—"

"Tell us what you have done," said the impatient Boolba. "For what does it matter, in the name of the saints and the holy martyrs" (everyone at the table, including Boolba, crossed himself) "whether your hair was torn or your head was hammered?"

"It was a difficult task, Excellency," said Yakoff in a more subdued tone, "but Providence helped me. There is a good comrade of ours who is engaged in punishing the bourgeoisie by relieving them of their goods—"

"A thief, yes," said Boolba.

"Through him I learnt that a certain man had arrived in England and was in hiding. This man is a professional assassin."

They looked at him incredulously, all except Boolba, who had heard the story before.

"An assassin?" said one. "Of what nationality?"

"American," said Yakoff, and there was a little titter of laughter.

"It is true," interrupted Boolba. "This man, whom Yakoff has found, is what is known in New York as a gun-man. He belongs to a gang which was hunted down by the police, and our comrade escaped."

"But an American!" persisted one of the unconvinced.

"An American," said Yakoff. "This man is desired by the police on this side, and went in hiding with our other comrade, who recognized him."

"A gun-man," said Boolba thoughtfully, and he used the English word with some awkwardness. "A gun-man. If he would only—is he here?" he demanded, looking up.

Yakoff nodded.

"Does he know—"

"I have told him nothing, Excellency," said Yakoff, rising from the table with alacrity, "except to be here, near the entrance to the club, at this hour. Shall I bring him down?"

Boolba nodded, and three minutes later, into this queer assembly, something of a fish out of water and wholly out of his element, strode Cherry Bim, that redoubtable man.

He was a little, man, stoutly built and meanly dressed. He had a fat, good-humoured face and a slight moustache, and eyes that seemed laughing all the time.

Despite the coldness of the night, he wore no waistcoat, and as a protest against the conventions he had dispensed with a collar. As he stood there, belted about his large waist, a billycock hat on the back of his head, he looked to be anything from a broken-down publican to an out-of-work plumber.

He certainly did not bear the impress of gun-man.

If he was out of his element, he was certainly not out of conceit with himself. He gave a cheery little nod to every face that was turned to him, and stood, his hands thrust through his belt, his legs wide apart, surveying the company with a benevolent smile.

"Good evening, ladies and gents," he said. "Shake hands with Cherry Bim! Bim on my father's side and Cherry by christening—Cherry Bim, named after the angels." And he beamed again.

This little speech, delivered in English, was unintelligible to the majority of those present, including Sophia Kensky, but Yakoff translated it. Solemnly he made a circuit of the company and as solemnly shook hands with every individual, and at last he came to Boolba; and only then did he hesitate for a second.

Perhaps in that meeting there came to him some premonition of the future, some half-revealed, half-blurred picture of prophecy. Perhaps that picture was one of himself, lying in the darkness on the roof of the railway carriage, and an obscene Boolba standing erect in a motor-car on the darkened station, waving his rage, ere the three quick shots rang out.

Cherry Bim confessed afterwards to a curious shivery sensation at his spine. The hesitation was only for a second, and then his hand gripped the big hand of the self-constituted chairman.

"Now, gents and ladies," he said, with a comical little bow towards Sophia, "I understand you're all good sports here, and I'm telling you that I don't want to stay long. I'm down and out, and I'm free to confess it, and any of you ladies and gents who would like to grubstake a stranger in a foreign land, why, here's your chance. I'm open to take on any kind of job that doesn't bring me into conspicuous relationship with the bulls—bulls, ladies and gentlemen, being New York for policemen."

Then Boolba spoke, and he spoke in English, slow but correct.

"Comrade," he said, "do you hate tyrants?"

"If he's a copper," replied Mr. Bim mistakenly. "Why, he's just as popular with me as a hollow tooth at an ice-cream party."

"What does he say?" asked the bewildered Boolba, who could not follow the easy flow of Mr. Bim's conversation, and Yakoff translated to the best of his ability.

And then Boolba, arresting the interruption of the American, explained. It was a long explanation. It dealt with tyranny and oppression and other blessed words dear to the heart of the revolutionary; it concerned millions of men and hundreds of millions of men and women in chains, under iron heels, and the like; and Mr. Bim grew more and more hazy, for he was not used to the parable, the allegory, or the metaphor. But towards the end of his address, Boolba became more explicit, and, as his emotions were moved, his English a little more broken.

Mr. Bim became grave, for there was no mistaking the task which had been set him.

"Hold hard, mister," he said. "Let's get this thing right. There's a guy you want to croak. Do I get you right?"

Again Mr. Yakoff translated the idioms, for Yakoff had not lived on the edge of New York's underworld without acquiring some knowledge of its language.

Boolba nodded.

"We desire him killed," he said. "He is a tyrant, an oppressor—"

"Hold hard," said Bim. "I want to see this thing plain. You're going to croak this guy, and I'm the man to do it? Do I get you?"

"That is what I desire," said Boolba, and Bim shook his head.

"It can't be done," he said. "I'm over here for a quiet, peaceful life, and anyway, I've got nothing on this fellow. I'm not over here to get my picture in the papers. It's a new land to me—why, if you put me in Piccadilly Circus I shouldn't know which way to turn to get out of it! Anyway, that strong arm stuff is out so far as I'm concerned."

"What does he say?" said Boolba again, and again Yakoff translated.

"I thought you were what you call a gun-man," said Boolba with a curl of his lip. "I did not expect you to be frightened."

"There's gun-men and gun-men," said Cherry Bim, unperturbed by the patent sarcasm. "And then there's me. I never drew a gun on a man in my life that didn't ask for it, or in the way of business. No, sirree. You can't hire Cherry Bim to do a low, vulgar murder."

His tone was uncompromising and definite. Boolba realized that he could not pursue his argument with any profit to himself, and that if he were to bring this unwilling agent to his way of thinking a new line would have to be taken.

"You will not be asked to take a risk for nothing," he said. "I am authorized to pay you twenty thousand roubles, that is, two thousand pounds in your money—"

"Not mine," interrupted Bim. "It's ten thousand dollars you're trying to say. Well, even that doesn't tempt me. It's not my game, anyway," he said, pulling up a chair and sitting down in the most friendly manner. "And don't think you're being original when you offer me this commission. I've had it offered me before in New York City, and I've always turned it down, though I know my way to safety blindfolded. That's all there is to it, gentlemen—and ladies," he added.

"So you refuse?" Neither Boolba's voice nor his manner was pleasant.

"That's about the size of it," said Cherry Bim, rising. "I'm a grafter, I admit it. There ain't hardly anything I wouldn't do from smashing a bank downwards, to turn a dishonest penny. But, gents, I'm short of the necessary nerve, inclination, lack of morals, and general ungodliness, to take on murder in the first, second, or third degree."

"You have courage, my friend," said Boolba significantly. "You do not suppose we should take you into our confidence and let you go away again so easily?"

Mr. Bim's smile became broader.

"Gents, I won't deceive you," he said. "I expected a rough house and prepared for it. Watch me!"

He extended one of his hands in the manner of a conjurer and with the other pulled up the sleeve above the wrist. He turned the hands over, waggling the fingers as though he were giving a performance, and they watched him curiously.

"There's nothing there, is there?" said Cherry Bim, beaming at the company, "and yet there is something there. Look!"

No eyes were sharp enough to follow the quick movement of his hand. None saw it drop or rise again. There was a slur of movement, and then, in the hand which had been empty, was a long-barrelled Colt. Cherry Bim, taking no notice of the sensation he created, tossed the revolver to the ceiling and caught it again.

"Now, gents, I don't know whether you're foolish or only just crazy. Get away from that door, Hector," he said to a long-haired man who stood with folded arms against the closed door. And "Hector," whose name was Nickolo Novoski Yasserdernski in real life, made haste to obey.

"Wait a bit," said the careful gun-man. "That's a key in your waistcoat pocket, I guess." He thrust the barrel of his revolver against the other's side, and the long-haired man doubled up with a gasp. But Cherry Bim meant no mischief. The barrel of the gun clicked against the end of a key, and when Cherry Bim drew his revolver away the key was hanging to it!

"Magnetic," the gun-man kindly explained; "it is a whim of mine."

With no other words he passed through the door and slammed it behind him.

CHAPTER III

THE GRAND DUCHESS IRENE

Israel Kensky was dozing before the fire when the sound of the creaking stair woke him. He walked softly to the door and listened, and presently he heard the steps of his daughter passing along the corridor. He opened the door suddenly and stepped out, and she jumped back with a little cry of alarm. There were moments when she was terribly afraid of her father, and such a moment came to her now.

"Are you not asleep, Israel Kensky?" she faltered.

"I could not sleep," replied the other, in so mild a tone that she took courage. "Come into my room. I wish to speak to you."

He did not ask her where she had been, or to explain why, at three o'clock in the morning, she was dressed for the street, and she felt it necessary to offer some explanation.

"You wonder why I am dressed?" she said.

"I heard a great noise in the street, and went out to see—"

"What does it matter?" said Israel Kensky. "Save your breath, little daughter. Why should you not walk in the street if you desire?"

He switched on the light to augment the red glow which came from the fire.

"Sit down, Sophia," he said, "I have been waiting for you. I heard you go out."

She made no reply. There was fear in her eyes, and all the time she was conscious of many unpleasant interviews with her father—interviews which had taken place in Kieff and in other towns—the details of which she could never recall. And she was filled with a dread of some happening to which she could not give form or description. He saw her shifting in her chair and smiled slowly.

"Get me the little box which is on my dressing-table, Sophia Kensky," he said.

He was seated by the fire, his hands outstretched to the red coal. After a moment's hesitation she got up, went to the dressing-table, and brought back a small box. It was heavy and made of some metal over which a brilliant black enamel had been laid.

"Open the box, Sophia Kensky," said the old man, not turning his head.

She had a dim recollection that she had been asked to do this before, but again could not remember when or in what circumstances. She opened the lid and looked within. On a bed of black velvet was a tiny convex mirror, about the size of a sixpence. She looked at this, and was still looking at it when she walked slowly back to her chair and sat down. It had such a fascination, this little mirror, that she could not tear her eyes away.

"Close your eyes," said Kensky in a monotonous voice, and she obeyed. "You cannot open them," said the old man, and she shook her head and repeated:

"I cannot open them."

"Now you shall tell me, Sophia Kensky, where you went this night."

In halting tones she told him of her meeting with Yakoff, of their walk, of the cab, of the little door in the back street, and the stone stairs that led to the whitewashed passage; and then she gave, as near as she knew, a full account of all that had taken place. Only when she came to describe Bim and to tell of what he said, did she flounder. Bim had spoken in a foreign language, and the translation of Yakoff had conveyed very little to her. But in this part of the narrative the old man was less interested. Again and again he returned to Boolba and the plot.

"What hand will kill the Grand Duke?" he asked, not once but many times, and invariably she answered:

"I do not know."

"On whose behalf does Boolba act?" asked the old man. "Think, Sophia Kensky! Who will give this foreigner twenty thousand roubles?"

"I do not know," she answered again.

Presently a note of distress was evident in her voice, and Israel Kensky rose up and took the box from her hand.

"You will go to bed, Sophia Kensky," he said slowly and deliberately, "and to-morrow morning, when you wake, you shall not remember anything that happened after you came into this house to-night. You shall not remember that I spoke to you or that I asked you to look in the little box. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Israel Kensky," she replied slowly, and walked with weary feet from the room.

Israel Kensky listened and heard her door click, then closed his own, and, sitting at a table, began to write quickly. He was still writing when the grey dawn showed in his windows at six o'clock. He blotted the last letter and addressed an envelope to "The Most Excellent and Illustrious Highness the Grand Duchess Irene Yaroslav" before, without troubling to undress, he sank down upon his bed into a sleep of exhaustion.

* * * * *

Malcolm Hay had an appointment with Mr. Tremayne on the morning that saw Israel Kensky engaged in frantic letter-writing. It was about Kensky that Tremayne spoke.

"He has arrived in London," he said, "and is staying in Colbury Terrace, Maida Vale. I think you had better see him, because, as I told you, he is a local big-wig and may be very useful to you. Our wells, as you know, are about thirty miles outside Kieff, which is the nearest big town, so you may be seeing him pretty often. Also, by the way, he is our agent. If you have any trouble with Government officials you must see Kensky, who can generally put things square."

"I believe his daughter is with him," Mr. Tremayne went on, "but I know very little about her. Yet another neighbour of yours arrives by special train at midday."

"Another neighbour of mine?" repeated Malcolm with a smile. "And who is that?"

"The Grand Duke Yaroslav. I don't suppose you'll have very much to do with him, but he's the King Pippin in your part of the world."

A clerk came in with a typewritten sheet covered with Russian characters.

"Here's your letter of introduction to Kensky. He knows just as much English as you will want him to know."

When Malcolm presented himself at the lodgings, it was to discover that the old Jew had gone out, and had left no message as to the time he would return. Since Malcolm was anxious to meet this important personage, he did not leave his letter, but went into the City to lunch with an old college chum. In the afternoon he decided to make his call, and only remembered, as he was walking up the Strand, that he had intended satisfying his curiosity as to that "other neighbour" of his, the Grand Duke Yaroslav.

There was a little crowd about Charing Cross Station, though it was nearly two hours after midday when the Yaroslavs were due; and he was to discover, on inquiry of a policeman, that the cause of this public curiosity had been the arrival of two royal carriages.

"Some Russian prince or other," said the obliging bobby. "The boat was late, and—here they come!"

Malcolm was standing on the side-walk in the courtyard of Charing Cross Station when the two open landaus drove out through the archway. In the first was a man a little over middle age, wearing a Russian uniform; but Malcolm had no eyes for him—it was for the girl who sat by his side, erect, haughty, almost disdainful, with her splendid beauty, and apparently oblivious to all that was being said to her by the smiling young man who sat on the opposite seat.

As the carriage came abreast and the postilions reined in their mounts before turning into the crowded Strand, the girl turned her head for a second and her eyes seemed to rest on Malcolm.

Instinctively he lifted his hat from his head, but it was not the girl who returned his salutation, but the stiff figure of the elderly man at her side who raised his hand with an automatic gesture. Only for a second, and then she swept out of view, and Malcolm heaved a long, deep sigh.

"Some dame!" said a voice at his side. "Well, I'm glad I saw him, anyway."

Malcolm looked down at the speaker. He was a stout little man, who wore his hard felt hat at a rakish angle. The butt of a fat cigar was clenched between his teeth, and his genial eyes met Malcolm's with an inviting frankness which was irresistible.

"That was his Grand Nibs, wasn't it?" asked the man, and Malcolm smiled.

"That was the Grand Duke, I think," he said.

"And who was the dame?"

"The dame?"

"I mean the lady, the young peacherino—gee! She was wonderful!"

Malcolm shared his enthusiasm but was not prepared to express himself with such vigour.

"That girl," said his companion, speaking with evident sincerity, "is wasted—what a face for a beauty chorus!"

Malcolm laughed. He was not a very approachable man, but there was something about this stranger which broke down all barriers.

"Well, I'm glad I've seen him," said Mr. Cherry Bim again emphatically. "I wonder what he's done."

Malcolm turned to move off, and the little man followed his example.

"What do you mean—what has he done?" asked the amused Malcolm.

"Oh, nothing," said the other airily, "but I just wondered, that's all."

"I'm glad I've seen them too," said Malcolm; "I nearly missed them. I was sitting so long over lunch—"

"You're a lucky man," said Mr. Bim.

"To have seen them?"

"No, to have sat over lunch," said Cherry with an inward groan. "My! I'd like to see what a lunch looks like."

Malcolm looked at the man with a new interest and a new sympathy.

"Broke?" he asked, and the other grinned.

"If I was only broke," he said, "there'd be no trouble. But what's the matter with me is that there ain't any pieces!"

Cherry Bim noticed the hesitation in Malcolm's face and said:

"I hope you're not worrying about hurting my feelings."

"How?" said the startled Malcolm.

"Why," drawled the other, "if it's among your mind that you'd like to slip me two dollars and you're afraid of me throwing it at you, why, you can get that out of your mind straightaway."

Malcolm laughed and handed half a sovereign to the man.

"Go and get something to eat," he said.

"Hold hard," said the other as Malcolm was turning away. "What is your name?"

"Does that matter?" asked the young man with amusement.

"It matters a lot to me," said the other seriously. "I like to pay back anything I borrow."

"Hay is my name—Malcolm Hay. It's no use giving you my address, because I shall be in Russia next week."

"In Russia, eh? That's rum!" Cherry Bim scratched his unshaven chin. "I'm always meeting Russians."

He looked at the young engineer thoughtfully, then, with a little jerk of his head and a "So long!" he turned and disappeared into the crowd.

Malcolm looked at his watch. He would try Kensky again, he thought; but again his mission was fruitless. He might have given up his search for this will-o'-the-wisp but for the fact that his new employers seemed to attach considerable importance to his making acquaintance with this notability of Kieff. He could hardly be out after dinner—he would try again.

He had dressed for the solitary meal, thinking that, if his quest again failed, he could spend the evening at a theatre. This time the elderly landlady of the house in which Mr. Kensky lodged informed him that her guest was at home; and a few moments later Malcolm was ushered into the presence of the old man.

Israel Kensky eyed his visitor keenly, taking him in from his carefully tied dress-bow to the tips of his polished boots. It was an approving glance, for Kensky, though he lived in one of the backwaters of civilization; though his attitude to the privileged classes of the world—in which category he placed Malcolm, did that young man but know it—was deferential and even servile; had very definite views as to what was, and was not, appropriate in his superior's attire.

He read through the letter which Malcolm had brought without a word, and then:

"Pray sit down, Mr. Hay," he said in English. "I have been expecting you. I had a letter from Mr. Tremayne."

Malcolm seated himself near the rough bench at which he cast curious eyes. The paraphernalia of Kensky's hobby still lay upon its surface.

"You are wondering what an old Jew does to amuse himself, eh?" chuckled Kensky. "Do you think we in South Russia do nothing but make bombs? If I had not an aptitude for business," he said (he pronounced the word "pizziness," and it was one of the few mispronunciations he made), "I should have been a bookbinder."

"It is beautiful work," said Malcolm, who knew something of the art.

"It takes my mind from things," said Kensky, "and also it helps me—yes, it helps me very much."

Malcolm did not ask him in what manner his craft might assist a millionaire merchant, for in those days he had not heard of the "Book of All-Power."

The conversation which followed travelled through awkward stages and more awkward pauses. Kensky looked a dozen times at the clock, and on the second occasion Malcolm, feeling uncomfortable, rose to go, but was eagerly invited to seat himself again.

"You are going to Russia?"

"Yes."

"It is a strange country if you do not know it. And the Russians are strange people. And to Kieff also! That is most important."

Malcolm did not inquire where the importance lay, and dismissed this as an oblique piece of politeness on the other's part.

"I am afraid I am detaining you, Mr. Kensky. I merely came in to make your acquaintance and shake hands with you," he said, rising, after yet another anxious glance at the clock on the part of his host.

"No, no, no," protested Kensky. "You must forgive me, Mr. Hay, if I seem to be dreaming and I do not entertain you. I am turning over in my mind so many possibilities, so many plans, and I think I have come to the right conclusion. You shall stay, and you shall know. I can rely upon your discretion, can I not?"

"Certainly, but—"

"I know I can!" said the old man, nodding "And you can help me. I am a stranger in London. Tell me, Mr. Hay, do you know the Café of the Silver Lion?"

The other was staggered by the question.

"No, I can't say that I do," he admitted. "I am a comparative stranger in London myself."

"Ah, but you can find it. You know all the reference books, which are so much Greek to me; you could discover it by inquiring of the police—inquiries made very discreetly, you understand, Mr. Hay?"

Malcolm wondered what he was driving at, but the old man changed the subject abruptly.

"To-night you will see a lady here. She is coming to me. Again I ask for your discretion and your silence. Wait!"

He shuffled to the window, pulled aside the blind and looked out.

"She is here," he said in a whisper. "You will stand just there."

He indicated a position which to Malcolm was ludicrously suggestive of his standing in a corner. Further explanations could neither be given nor asked for. The door opened suddenly and a girl came in, closing it behind her. She looked first at Kensky with a smile, and then at the stranger, and the smile faded from her lips. As for Malcolm, he was speechless. There was no doubt at all as to the identity. The straight nose, the glorious eyes, the full, parted lips.

Kensky shuffled across to her, bent down and kissed her hand.

"Highness," he said humbly, "this gentleman is a friend of mine. Trust old Israel Kensky, Highness!"

"I trust you, Israel Kensky," she replied in Russian, and with the sweetest smile that Malcolm had ever seen in a woman.

She bowed slightly to the young man, and for the rest of the interview her eyes and speech were for the Jew. He brought a chair forward for her, dusted it carefully, and she sat down by the table, leaning her chin on her palm, and looking at the old man.

"I could not come before," she said. "It was so difficult to get away."

"Your Highness received my letter?"

She nodded.

"But Israel," her voice almost pleaded, "you do not believe that this thing would happen?"

"Highness, all things are possible," said the old man. "Here in London the cellars and garrets teem with evil men."

"But the police—" she began.

"The police cannot shelter you, Highness, as they do in our Russia."

"I must warn the Grand Duke," she said thoughtfully, "and"—she hesitated, and a shadow passed over her face—"and the Prince. Is it not him they hate?"

Kensky shook his head.

"Lady," he said humbly, "in my letter I told you there was something which could not be put on paper, and that I will tell you now. And if I speak of very high matters, your Highness must forgive an old man."

She nodded, and again her laugh twinkled in her eyes.

"Your father, the Grand Duke Yaroslav," he said, "has one child, who is your Highness."

She nodded.

"The heir to the Grand Dukedom is—" He stopped inquiringly.

"The heir?" she said slowly. "Why, it is Prince Serganoff. He is with us."

Malcolm remembered the olive-faced young man who had sat on the seat of the royal carriage facing the girl; and instinctively he knew that this was Prince Serganoff, though in what relationship he stood to the Grand Ducal pair he had no means of knowing.

"The heir is Prince Serganoff," said the old man slowly, "and his Highness is an ambitious man. Many things can happen in our Russia, little lady. If the Grand Duke were killed—"

"Impossible!" She sprang to her feet. "He would never dare! He would never dare!"

Kensky spread out his expressive hands.

"Who knows?" he said. "Men and women are the slaves of their ambition."

She looked at him intently.

"He would never dare," she said slowly. "No, no, I cannot believe that."

The old man made no reply.

"Where did you learn this, Israel Kensky?" she asked.

"From a good source, Highness," he replied evasively, and she nodded.

"I know you would not tell me this unless there were some foundation," she said. "And your friend?" She looked inquiringly at the silent Hay. "Does he know?"

Israel Kensky shook his head.

"I would wish that the *gospodar* knew as much as possible, because he will be in Kieff, and who knows what will happen in Kieff? Besides, he knows London."

Malcolm did not attempt to deny the knowledge, partly because, in spite of his protest, he had a fairly useful working knowledge of the metropolis.

"I shall ask the *gospodar* to discover the meeting-place of the rabble."

"Do you suggest," she demanded, "that Prince Serganoff is behind this conspiracy, that he is the person who inspired this idea of assassination?"

Again the old man spread out his hands.

"The world is a very wicked place," he said.

"And the Prince has many enemies," she added with a bright smile. "You must know that, Israel Kensky. My cousin is Chief of the Political Police in St. Petersburg, and it is certain that people will speak against him."

The old man was eyeing her thoughtfully.

"Your Highness has much wisdom," he said, "and I remember, when you were a little girl, how you used to point out to me the bad men from the good. Tell me, lady, is Prince Serganoff a good man or a bad man? Is he capable or incapable of such a crime?"

She did not answer. In truth she could not answer; for all that Kensky had said, she had thought. She rose to her feet.

"I must go now, Israel Kensky," she said. "My car is waiting for me. I will write to you."

She would have gone alone, but Malcolm Hay, with amazing courage, stepped forward.

"If Your Imperial Highness will accept my escort to your car," he said humbly, "I shall be honoured."

She looked at him in doubt.

"I think I would rather go alone."

"Let the young man go with you, Highness," said Kensky earnestly. "I shall feel safer in my mind."

She nodded, and led the way down the stairs. They turned out of the garden into the street and did not speak a word. Presently the girl said in English:

"You must think we Russian people are barbarians, Mr.—"

"Hay," suggested Malcolm.

"Mr. Hay. That is Scottish, isn't it? Tell me, do you think we are uncivilized?"

"No, Your Highness," stammered Malcolm. "How can I think that?"

They walked on until they came in sight of the tail lights of the car, and then she stopped.

"You must not come any farther," she said. "You can stand here and watch me go. Do you know any more than Israel Kensky told?" she asked, a little anxiously.

"Nothing," he replied in truth.

She offered her hand, and he bent over it.

"Good night, Mr. Hay. Do not forget, I must see you in Kieff."

He watched the red lights of the car disappear and walked quickly back to old Kensky's rooms. Russia and his appointment had a new fascination.

CHAPTER IV

THE PRINCE WHO PLANNED

Few people knew or know how powerful a man Prince Serganoff really was in these bad old days. He waved his hand and thousands of men and women disappeared. He beckoned and he had a thousand sycophantic suppliants.

In the days before he became Chief of the Police to the entourage, he went upon a diplomatic mission to High Macedonia, the dark and sinister state. He was sent by none, but he had a reason, for Dimitrius, his sometime friend, had fled to the capital of the higher Balkan state and Serganoff went down without authority to terrify his sometime confidant into returning for trial. In High Macedonia the exquisite young man was led by sheer curiosity to make certain inquiries into the domestic administration of the country, and learnt things.

He had hardly made himself master of these before he was sent for by the Foreign Minister.

"Highness," said the suave man, stroking his long, brown beard, "how long have you been in the capital?"

"Some four days, Excellency," said the Prince.

"That is ninety-six hours too long," said the minister. "There is a train for the north in forty minutes. You will catch that, and God be with you!"

Prince Serganoff did not argue but went out from the ornate office, and the Minister called a man who was waiting.

"If his Highness does not leave by the four o'clock train, cut his throat and carry the body to one of the common houses of the town—preferably that of the man Domopolo, the Greek, who is a bad character, and well deserving of death."

"Excellency," said the man gravely, and saluted his way out.

They knew Serganoff in High Macedonia and were a little anxious. Had they known him better they would have feared him less. He did not leave by the four o'clock train, but by a special which was across the frontier by four. He sat in a cold sweat till the frontier post was past.

This man was a mass of contradictions. He liked the good things of life. He bought his hosiery in Paris, his shoes in Vienna, his suits and cravats in New York; and it is said of him that he made a special pilgrimage to London—the Mecca of those who love good leather work—for the characteristic attaché cases which were so indispensable to the Chief of Gendarmerie of the Marsh Town.

He carried with him the irrepressible trimness and buoyancy of youth, with his smooth, fallow face, his neat black moustache and his shapeliness of outline. An exquisite of exquisites, he had never felt the draughts of life or experienced its rude buffetings.

His perfectly-appointed flat in the Morskaya had been modelled to his taste and fancy. It was a suite wherein you pressed buttons and comfortable things happened. You opened windows and boiled water, or summoned a valet to your bedside by the gentle pressure you applied to a mother-of-pearl stud set in silver plate which, by some miracle, was always within reach.

He had an entire suite converted to bath-rooms, where his masseur, his manicurist and his barber attended him daily. He had conscripted modern science to his service, he had so cunningly disguised its application, that you might never guess the motive power of the old English clock which ticked in the spacious hall, or realize that the soft light which came from the many branched candelabra which hung from the centre of his drawing-room was due to anything more up to date than the hundred most life-like candles which filled the sockets.

Yet this suave gentleman with his elegant manners and his pretty taste in old china, this genius who was the finest judge in the capital of Pekinese dogs, and had been known to give a thousand-rouble fee to the veterinary surgeon who performed a minor operation on his favourite Borzoi, had

another aspect. He who shivered at the first chill winds of winter and wrapped himself in sables whenever he drove abroad after the last days of September, and had sent men and women to the bleakness of Alexandrowski without a qualm; he who had to fortify himself to face an American dentist (his fees for missed appointments would have kept the average middle-class family in comfort for a year), was ruthless in his dealings with the half-crazed men and women who strayed across the frontier which divided conviction from propaganda.

Physical human suffering left him unmoved—he hanged the murderer Palatoff with his own hands. Yet in that operation someone saw him turn very pale and shrink back from his victim. Afterwards the reason was discovered. The condemned man had had the front of his rough shirt fastened with a safety-pin which had worked loose. The point had ripped a little gash in the inexperienced finger of the amateur hangman.

He brought Dr. Von Krauss from Berlin, because von Krauss was an authority upon blood infection and spent a week of intense mental agony until he was pronounced out of danger.

He sat before a long mirror in his bedroom, that gave on Horridge's Hotel, and surveyed himself thoughtfully. He was looking at the only man he trusted, for it was not vanity, but a love of agreeable company that explained the passion for mirrors which was the jest of St. Petersburg.

It was his fourth day in London and a little table near the window was covered with patterns of cloth; he had spent an exciting afternoon with the representative of his tailor. But it was not of sartorial magnificence that he was thinking.

He stretched out his legs comfortably towards his reflection, and smiled.

"Yes," he said, as though answering some secret thought, and he and the reflection nodded to one another as though they had reached a complete understanding.

Presently he pushed the bell and his valet appeared.

"Has the Grand Duke gone?" he asked.

"Yes, Excellency," replied the man.

"And the Grand Duchess?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"Good!" Serganoff nodded.

"Is your Excellency's headache better?" asked the man.

"Much better," replied the Chief of Police. "Go to their Highness's suite, and tell their servant—what is the man's name?"

"Boolba, Excellency," said the valet.

"Yes, that is the fellow. Ask him to come to me. The Grand Duke mentioned a matter which I forgot to tell Boolba."

Boolba made his appearance, a suave domestic, wearing the inconspicuous livery of an English butler rather than the ornate uniform which accompanied his office in Kieff.

"That will do." Serganoff dismissed his valet. "Boolba, come here."

The man approached him and Serganoff lowered his voice.

"You have made a fool of me again, Boolba."

"Excellency," pleaded the man urgently, "I have done all that was possible."

"You have placed my fortune and my life in the hands of an American criminal. If that is your idea of doing all that is possible, I agree with you," said Serganoff. "Be careful, Boolba! The arm of the Bureau is a very long one, and greater men than you have disappeared from their homes."

"Illustrious Excellency," said the agitated man, "I swear to you I did all that you requested. There were many reasons why I should not entrust this matter to the men of the secret society."

"I should like to hear a few," said Serganoff, cleaning his nails delicately.

"Excellency, the Grand Duke stands well with the society. He had never oppressed them, and he is the only popular member of the Imperial House with our—their society."

"Our society, eh?" said Serganoff, noticing the slip. "Go on."

"Besides, Excellency," said Boolba, "it was necessary not only to kill the Grand Duke, but to shoot down his assassin. Our plan was to get this American to shoot him in the park, where he walks in the morning, and then for one of the society to shoot the American. That was a good plan, because it meant that the man who could talk would talk no more, and that the comrade who shot down the murderer would stand well with the Government."

Serganoff nodded.

"And your plan has failed," he said, "failed miserably at the outset. You dog!"

He leapt to his feet, his eyes blazing, and Boolba stepped back.

"Highness, wait, wait!" he cried. "I have something else in my mind! I could have helped Highness better if I had known more. But I could only guess. I had to grope in the dark all the time."

"Do you imagine I am going to take you into my confidence?" asked Serganoff. "What manner of fool am I? Tell me what you have guessed. You may sit down; nobody will come in, and if they do you can be buttoning my boots."

Boolba wiped his damp face with a handkerchief and leaned nearer to the man.

"If the Grand Duke dies, a certain illustrious person succeeds to his estates," he said, "but not to his title."

Serganoff looked at him sharply. The man had put into words the one difficulty which had occupied the mind of the Chief of Police for months.

"Well?" he said.

"The title is in the gift of the Czar," said Boolba. "He alone can create a Grand Duke who succeeds but is not in the direct line. Therefore, the killing of Yaroslav would bring little but the property to the illustrious person. Only if His Imperial Majesty decided upon a worthier holder, or if the Grand Duke fell under a cloud at Court, could it pass to the illustrious person."

"That I know," said Serganoff. "Well?"

"Well, Highness, would it not be better if the Grand Duke were disgraced, if he were brought to St. Petersburg to answer certain charges which the illustrious person formulated? After, the Grand Duke might die—that is a simple matter. Russia would think that he had been put to death by the Court party as a matter of policy. Yaroslav is not in favour at the Court," he added significantly; but Serganoff shook his head.

"He is not sufficiently out of favour yet," he said. "Go on, man, you have something in your mind."

Boolba edged closer.

"Suppose the Grand Duke or the Grand Duchess were involved in some conspiracy against the Imperial House?" he said, speaking rapidly. "Suppose, on evidence which could not be disputed, such as the evidence of the London police, it was proved that either the Grand Duke or his daughter was in league with an anarchist society, or was attending their meetings—does your Excellency see?"

"I see," said Serganoff, "but they do not attend meetings."

Boolba hesitated.

"Yet," he said, speaking slowly, "I would guarantee that I could bring the Grand Duchess Irene to such a meeting, and that I could arrange for the place to be raided whilst she was there."

Serganoff put down his orange stick and eyed the other keenly.

"You have brains, Boolba," he said. "Some day I shall bring you to St. Petersburg and place you on my staff—if you do not know too much."

He paced the apartment, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Suppose you get in touch with this American again, bring him to the meeting, unless he's afraid to come, and then boldly suggest to him that he goes to St. Petersburg to make an attempt upon the life of the Czar himself."

"He would reject it," said Boolba, shaking his head.

"What if he did—that doesn't matter," said Serganoff impatiently. "It is sufficient that the suggestion is made. Suppose this man is amongst these infamous fellows when the London police raid and arrest them, and he makes a statement that he was approached to destroy the Imperial life, and the Grand Duchess Irene is arrested at the same time?"

Boolba's eyes brightened.

"That is a wonderful idea, Highness," he said admiringly.

Serganoff continued his pacing, and presently stopped.

"I will arrange the police raid," he said. "I am in communication with Scotland Yard, and it will be better if I am present when the raid is conducted. It is necessary that I should identify myself with this chapter," he said, "but how will you induce the Grand Duchess to come?"

"Leave that to me, Highness," replied the man, and gave some details of his scheme.

CHAPTER V

THE RAID ON THE SILVER LION

Sophia Kensky was a loyal and faithful adherent to the cause she had espoused, and her report, written in the weird caligraphy of Russia, greatly interested the butler of the Grand Duke Yaroslav. From that report he learned of the visit which the Grand Duchess Irene had paid; learned, too, that she had been escorted to her car by an Englishman, whose name the woman did not know; and was to discover later that the said "Englishman" had been sent out by Israel Kensky on a special mission. That mission was to discover the Silver Lion, a no very difficult task. In point of fact, it was discoverable in a London telephone directory, because the upper part of the premises were used legitimately enough in the proprietor's business as restaurateur.

Malcolm Hay had lunch at the place and saw nothing suspicious in its character. Most of the clientèle were obviously foreign, and not a few were Russian. Pretending to lose his way, he wandered through the service door, and there made the important discovery that the kitchen was on the top floor, and also that meals were being served somewhere in the basement. This he saw during the few minutes he was allowed to make observations, because there was a service lift which was sent down to the unseen clients below.

He apologized for his intrusion and went out. Officially there was no basement-room, nor, from the restaurant itself, any sign of stairs which led down to an underground chamber. He made a further reconnaissance, and found the back door which Sophia Kensky had described in her hypnotic sleep, and the location of which the old man had endeavoured to convey to his agent.

Malcolm Hay was gifted with many of the qualities which make up the equipment of a good detective. In addition, he had the education and training of an engineer. That the underground room existed, he knew by certain structural evidence, and waited about in the street until he saw three men come out and the door close behind them. After awhile, another two emerged. There was nothing sinister or romantic about the existence of a basement dining-room, or even of a basement club-room.

The character of this club was probably well known to the police, he thought, and pursued his inquiries to Marlborough Street police station. There he found, as he had expected, that the club was registered and known as "The Foreign Friends of Freedom Club." The officer who supplied him with the information told him that the premises were visited at frequent intervals by a representative of the police, and that nothing of an irregular character had been reported.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.