

Le Queux William

Whoso Findeth a Wife



William Le Queux
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Chapter One

A State Secret

“*Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the Lord.*” – Proverbs xviii, 22.

“Have those urgent dispatches come in from Berlin, Deedes?”

“Captain Hammerton has not yet arrived,” I answered.

“Eleven o’clock! Tut, tut! Every moment’s delay means greater risk,” and the Earl of Warnham, Her Majesty’s Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, strode up and down his private room, with his hat still on, impatiently snapping his bony fingers in agitation quite unusual to him.

“Hammerton wired from Berlin yesterday, when on the point of leaving,” I observed, taking a telegram from the table before me.

“In cipher?”

“Yes.”

“No accident is reported in the papers, I suppose?”

“Nothing in the *Times*,” I replied.

“Strange, very strange, that he should be so long overdue,” the Earl said, at last casting himself into his padded chair, and lounging back, his hands thrust deep into his pockets as he stared thoughtfully into space.

I resumed my writing, puzzled at the cause of the chief’s excited demeanour, but a few moments later sharp footsteps sounded outside in the corridor, followed by a loud rapping, and there entered the messenger, clad in his heavy fur-lined travelling coat, although a July morning, and carrying a well-worn leather dispatch-box, which he placed upon my table.

“Late, Hammerton. Very late,” snapped the Earl, glancing at his watch.

“There’s a dense fog in the Channel, your Lordship, and we were compelled to come across dead slow the whole distance. I’ve driven straight from the station,” the Captain answered good-humouredly, looking so spruce and well-groomed that few would credit he had been travelling for nearly twenty-four hours.

“Go and rest. You must return to-night,” his Lordship said testily.

“At seven-thirty?”

“Yes, at my house in Berkeley Square.”

Then, taking up the receipt I had signed for the dispatch-box, the messenger, to whom a journey to Constantinople or St Petersburg was about as fatiguing as a ride on the Underground Railway is to ordinary persons, walked jauntily out, wishing us both good-day.

When the door had closed, Lord Warnham quickly opened the outer case with his key, and drew forth a second box, covered with red morocco, and securely sealed. This he also opened, and, after rummaging for some moments among a quantity of papers, exclaimed, in a tone of satisfaction, —

“Ah! Here it is. Good! Seals not tampered with.”

Withdrawing from the box a large official envelope, doubly secured with the seal of the British Embassy at Berlin, and endorsed by Sir Philip Emden, our Ambassador, he walked hastily to one of the long windows overlooking the paved courtyard of the Foreign Office, and for some moments closely scrutinised both seals and signature.

“Did you fear that the papers might have been examined in transit?” I inquired of my grave-faced chief in surprise.

“No, Deedes, no. Not at all,” he answered, returning to his table, cutting open the envelope, and giving a rapid glance at its contents to assure himself that it was the same document he had sent to the German capital a week before. “Hammerton is trustworthy, and while dispatches are in his care I have no fear. The only apprehension I had was that an attempt might possibly have been made to ascertain the nature of this treaty,” the great statesman added, indicating the document beneath his hand.

“The result would be detrimental?” I hazarded.

“Detrimental!” he cried. “If the clauses of this secret defensive alliance became known to our enemies war would be inevitable. Russia and France would combine, and the whole of the Powers would become embroiled within a week. Exposure of these secret negotiations would be absolutely disastrous. It would, I verily believe, mean irretrievable ruin to England’s prestige and perhaps to her power.”

He uttered the ominous words slowly and distinctly, then carefully refolding the precious document, with its string of sprawly signatures, he placed it in another envelope, sealing it with his own private seal.

The great statesman, the greatest Foreign Minister of his time, upon whose tact, judgment and forethought the peace and prosperity of England mainly depended, was tall and thin, with scanty, white hair, a pale, refined face, slightly wizened by age, deep-sunken, steely eyes, shaggy brows, a sharp, straight nose, and a breadth of forehead indicating indomitable perseverance and an iron will. His reputation as brilliant orator and shrewd and skilful diplomat was a household word throughout the civilised world, whilst in our own land confidence always increased when he was at the head of Foreign Affairs. As his confidential private secretary, I, Geoffrey Deedes, had daily opportunities of observing how conscientiously he served his Sovereign and his country, and how amazing was his capacity for work. With him, duty was always of paramount consideration; he worked night and day to sustain England’s honour and welfare, for times without number I had gone to his great gloomy house in Berkeley Square in the middle of the night and roused him from his bed to attend to urgent dispatches.

Although a perfect martinet towards many in the various departments of the Foreign Office, he was to me always kind and generous. My father, Sir Reginald Deedes, had, as many will doubtless remember, represented Her Majesty at the Netherlands Court for fifteen years until his death. He was thus an old friend of the Earl, and it was this friendship that caused him to appoint me five years ago his private secretary, and, much to the chagrin of young Lord Gaysford, the Under Secretary, repose such implicit confidence in me that very frequently he entrusted to my care the keys of the ponderous safe wherein were deposited the State secrets of the nation.

“You’d better register this, and we’ll lock it away from prying eyes at once,” Lord Warnham said a few moments later, handing me the envelope after he had sealed it. Taking it, I went straight to my own room across the corridor at the head of the fine central staircase. It was part of my duty to receive the more important dispatches, number those which were sealed, and prior to depositing them in the safe, register the number in my book, stating the source whence they came, the date received, and the name of the messenger who brought them.

Alone in my room, I closed the door, took the register from my own small safe, numbered the precious envelope with the designation “B27,893,” and carefully made an entry in the book. Having finished, a clerk brought me two letters from other Departments, both of which needed immediate replies, therefore I sat down and scribbled them while he waited. Then, having been absent from the Chief’s room nearly a quarter of an hour, I went back with the dispatch in my hand. In the room I found Lord Gaysford, who, in reply to my question, stated that the Earl had been compelled to leave in order to attend a meeting of the Cabinet, which he believed would be a protracted one.

To me this was provoking, for the great statesman had taken with him the key of the safe; thus was I left with this important document in my possession. But I said nothing of the matter to the Under Secretary, and returning to my room placed the dispatch in my inner pocket for greater security, determined to keep it there until his Lordship returned. I feared to lock it away in my own safe lest anyone else might possess a key, and felt that in the circumstances my own pocket was the safest place.

For nearly two hours I continued my work, it being Friday, an unusually busy day, until, just as the clock at the Horse Guards chimed one o'clock, a clerk entered with the card of Dudley Ogle, my college chum, with whom I was now sharing, during the summer months, a cottage close to the Thames at Shepperton. On the card was the pencilled query, "Can you come and lunch with me?"

For a few moments I hesitated. I was busy, and I was compelled to deliver the dispatch in my pocket to Lord Warnham before he left for home. I knew, however, that the meeting of the Cabinet must be a long one, and recognising the fact that I must lunch somewhere, I gave the clerk a message that I would join Mr Ogle in the waiting-room in a few moments. Then, locking my safe, I assured myself that the dispatch was still in my pocket, brushed my hat, and joined my friend.

Dudley Ogle was the best of good fellows. After a rather wild college career, it had been his fancy to roam for about two years on the Continent, and on his return, his father, with whom he was not on the best of terms, conveniently died, leaving him possessor of about twenty thousand pounds. By this time he had, however, sown his wild oats, and instead of spending his money as most young men of his age would have done, he invested it, and now lived a careless, indolent existence, travelling where he pleased, and getting as much enjoyment out of life as was possible. He was about my own age – twenty-eight, well set-up, smart-looking, with rather aquiline features, dark hair, and a pair of merry eyes that were an index to a contented mind.

"Didn't expect me, I suppose, old fellow?" he exclaimed breezily, when we met. "I found after you'd left this morning that I was compelled to come up to town, and having nothing to do for an hour or so, it occurred to me that we might lunch together."

"I thought you intended to pull up as far as 'The Nook,'" I said, laughing.

"So I did, but I received a wire calling me to town on some rather urgent business. Where shall we lunch?"

In descending the stairs and turning into Downing Street we discussed the merits of various restaurants, and finally decided upon a small, old-fashioned, unpretentious, but well-known place a few doors from Charing Cross, in the direction of Whitehall, known as "The Ship." Here we ate our meal, spent an hour together, and then parted, he leaving to return to Shepperton, I to finish my work and rejoin him later at our riparian cottage.

On my return to the Foreign Office the Earl had, I found, just come in, and I handed him the secret document which some day, sooner or later, would control the destiny of an empire.

"This has, of course, not been out of your possession, Deedes?" inquired his Lordship, looking keenly at me with his grey eyes, as he stood before the open door of the great safe.

"Not for a single instant," I replied.

"Good. I trust you," he said, carefully placing the sealed envelope in a pigeon-hole to itself, and closing the door with a loud clang, locked it.

"I think," he said, his ascetic features relaxing into a self-satisfied smile, "I think we have once again checkmated our enemies, and swiftly too. The whole thing has been arranged and concluded within a week, thanks to the clever diplomacy of Emden at Berlin."

"And to your own forethought," I added, laughing.

"No, no. To Emden all credit is due, none to me, none," he answered modestly; then, turning, he gave me some instructions, and a few minutes later put on his hat and left for home. At four o'clock I also left, and driving to Waterloo, caught my train to Shepperton, where I found Dudley Ogle awaiting me. Ours was a pretty cottage. Facing the river, it was covered with creepers, sweet-smelling jasmine

and roses, with a rustic porch in front, and a large old-world garden around. Life was delightful there after the stuffiness of London chambers, and as we both had with us our men, in addition to Mrs Franks, my trusty housekeeper, we were prevented from being troubled by the minor worries of life.

“Hulloa, old chap!” cried Dudley, hastily rousing himself from a lazy attitude on the couch in our sitting-room as I entered. “Stifling hot, isn’t it? There’s a wire from the Laings. They want us to dine with them to-night. Going?”

I hesitated, and my reluctance did not escape him.

“Isn’t Ella’s company sufficient inducement?” he asked chaffingly.

“Going? Of course I am,” I answered quickly, glancing at my watch. “We have a full hour before dressing. Let’s go for a row. It’ll improve our appetites.”

Within a few minutes I had exchanged the frock coat of officialdom for flannels, and very soon we were pulling upstream towards a delightful backwater that was our goal. As we rowed, the silence being broken only by the sound of the oars in the row-locks, I calmly reviewed the situation. Why the Laings invited me that night puzzled me. Truth to tell, I loved Ella Laing with all the strength of my being, and had foolishly believed she reciprocated my affection until two nights ago, when I had called at the house near Staines, where she lived with her mother during the summer months. I had discovered her in the garden walking in lover-like attitude with Andrew Beck, a retired silk manufacturer, who had lived in France so long that he had become something of a cosmopolitan, and who had lately entered Parliament at a bye-election as representative of West Rutlandshire. I confess to having conceived an instinctive dislike to this man from the very first moment we had been introduced by a mutual friend in the Lobby of the House of Commons, for he was a parvenu of the most pronounced type, while his grey, beetling brows and flat, broad nose gave his face an expression anything but pleasing.

Nevertheless he walked jauntily, spoke loudly in bluff good-natured tones, gave excellent dinners, and, strangely enough, was voted a good fellow wherever he went. Yet there was an ostentatiousness about his actions that was sickening; his arrogant, self-assertive manner was, to me, extremely distasteful. The discovery that he was endeavouring to supplant me in Ella’s affections filled my cup of indignation to the full.

I had left the garden unobserved on that fateful night, returned at once to our riverside cottage, and written her an angry letter, charging her in plain terms with having played me false. In reply, next morning she sent by the gardener a long letter full of mild reproach, in which she asserted that she had no thought of love for anyone beside myself, and that I had entirely misconstrued her relations with Mr Beck. “Strange, indeed, it is that you, of all men, should declare that I love him,” she wrote. “Love! If you knew all, you would neither write nor utter that sacred word to me; and even though you are the only man for whom I have a thought, it may, after all, be best if we never again meet. You say you cannot trust me further. Well, I can only reply that my future happiness is in your hands. I am yours.”

Deeply had I pondered over this curious, half-hysterical, half-reproachful letter, re-reading it many many times, and becoming more and more puzzled over its vague, mysterious meaning. On several occasions I had been upon the point of calling and questioning her, but had refrained. Now, however, this formal invitation to dine had come no doubt through Ella, and I saw in it her desire to personally explain away my jealousy. So I accepted.

Chapter Two

“The Nook.”

When, a couple of hours later, we entered Mrs Laing’s garden, the first person we encountered was the man I hated, Andrew Beck, in his ill-fitting dress clothes and broad, crumpled shirt-front, with its great diamond solitaire, lounging in a wicker chair at the river’s brink, smoking, and in solitude enjoying the glorious sunset that, reflecting upon the water, transformed it into a stream of rippling gold. “The Nook,” as Mrs Laing’s house was called, was a charming old place facing the river at a little distance above Staines Bridge – long, low, completely covered with ivy and surrounded by a wide sweep of lawn that sloped down to the water’s edge, and a belt of old elms beneath the cool shade of which I had spent many delightfully lazy afternoons by the side of my well-beloved.

“Ah! Deedes,” exclaimed Beck, gaily, rising as we approached, “I was waiting for somebody to come. The ladies haven’t come down yet.”

“Have you seen them?” I asked.

“Not yet,” he replied; then turning to my friend Dudley, he began chaffing him about a young and wealthy widow he had rowed up to Windsor in our boat a few days before.

“We saw you, my boy. We saw you?” he laughed. “You were talking so confidentially as you passed, that Ella remarked that you were contemplating stepping into the dead man’s shoes.”

“No, no,” Dudley retorted good-humouredly. “No widows for me. She was merely left under my care for an hour or so, and I had to do the amicable. It’s really too bad of you all to jump to such rash conclusions.”

At that instant a soft, musical voice behind me uttered my name, and, turning, I met Ella, with a light wrap thrown about her shoulders, coming forward to me with outstretched hand. “Ah! Geoffrey, how are you?” she cried gaily, with joy in her brilliant, sparkling eyes. Then, as our hands clasped, she added in an undertone, “I knew you would come; I knew you would forgive.”

“I have not forgiven,” I answered, rather coldly, bending over her slim white hand.

“But I have committed no fault,” she said, pouting prettily.

“You have given me no satisfactory explanation.”

“Wait until after dinner. We will come out here together, where we can talk without being overheard,” she whispered hurriedly, then left me abruptly to greet Dudley and Andrew Beck. There was something significant in the swift, inquisitive glance she exchanged with the last-named man, and turning away I strode across the lawn annoyed. A moment later I met Mrs Laing herself. She was elderly and effusive; tall, and of stately bearing. Her hair was perfectly white but by no means scanty, her face was clever and refined without that grossness that too often disfigures a well-preserved woman of fifty, and in her dark eyes, undimmed by time, there was always an expression of calm contentment. Her husband had been a great traveller until his death ten years ago, and she, accompanying him on his journeys in the East, had become a clever linguist, an accomplishment which her only daughter, Ella, shared.

As we stood together chatting, and watching the boats full of happy youths and maidens gliding past in the brilliant afterglow, I thought that never had I seen Ella looking so handsome, as, standing with Dudley, she had taken up Beck’s theme, and was congratulating him upon his trip with the skittish widow.

Hers was an oval face, perfect in its symmetry, clear cut and refined, a trifle pale perhaps, but from her eyes of that darkest blue that sometimes sparkled into the brightness of a sapphire, sometimes deepened into softest grey like the sky on a summer night, there shone an inner beauty, indicative of a purity of soul. The mouth was mobile, short and full, with an exquisite finish about the curve of the lips, the nose short and straight, and the hair of darkest gold – the gold that cannot

be produced artificially, but has a slight dash of red in it, just sufficient to enrich the brown of the shadows and give a burnish to the ripples in the high lights. Her eyebrows were set rather high up from the eye itself, and were slightly drooped at the corner nearest the ear, imparting to her face a kind of plaintive, questioning look that was exceedingly becoming to her. Her gown was of soft clinging silk of palest heliotrope, that bore the unmistakable stamp of Paris, while on her slim wrist I noticed she wore the diamond bangle I had given her six months before. As she chatted with Dudley, she turned and laughed at me gaily over her shoulder from time to time, and when we entered the house a few minutes later, it was with satisfaction that I found myself placed beside her at table.

Dinner was always a pleasant, if slightly stately, meal at Mrs Laing's. She was a brilliant and accomplished hostess, whose entertainments at her house in Pont Street were always popular, and who surrounded herself with interesting and intellectual people. Bohemia was generally well represented at her receptions, for the lions of the season, whether literary, artistic, or musical, were always to be met there – a fact which induced many of the more exclusive set to honour the merry widow by their presence. Wearied, however, of the eternal small talk about new books, new plays, new pictures, and the newest fads, I was glad when, after smoking, we were free to rejoin the ladies in the quaint, oak-panelled drawing-room.

The moon had risen, and ere long I strolled with Ella through the French windows, and out upon the lawn, eager to talk alone with her.

“Well,” she said at length, when we were seated in the shadow beneath one of the high rustling elms, “so you want an explanation. What can I give?”

“Your letter conveys the suspicion that there exists some secret between Beck and yourself,” I said, as calmly as I could.

“My letter!” she exclaimed, in a voice that seemed a little harsh and strained. “What did I say? I really forget.”

“It's useless to prevaricate, Ella,” I said, rather impatiently. “You say that if I knew all I would never utter words of love to you. What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I wrote,” she answered huskily, in a low voice.

“You mean to imply that you are unworthy of the love of an honest man?” I observed in astonishment.

“Yes,” she gasped hoarsely. “I do not – I – cannot deceive you, Geoffrey, because I love you.” The last sentence she uttered passionately, with a fierce fire burning in her eyes. “You are jealous of Andrew Beck, a man old enough to be my father. Well, I confess I was foolish to allow him to walk with me here with his arm around my waist; yet at that moment the indiscretion did not occur to me.”

“But he was speaking to you – whispering into your ready ears words of love and tenderness. He spoke in persuasive tones, as if begging you to become his wife,” I said angrily, the very thought of the scene I had witnessed filling me with indignation and bitter hatred.

“No, you are entirely mistaken, Geoffrey. No word of love passed between us,” she said quietly, looking into my eyes with unwavering glance.

I smiled incredulously.

“You will perhaps deny that here, within six yards of this very spot, you stopped and burst forth into tears?” I exclaimed, with cold cynicism.

“I admit that. The words he uttered were of sufficient significance to bring tears to my eyes,” she replied vaguely.

“He must have spoken words of love to you,” I argued. “I watched you both.”

“I deny that he did, Geoffrey,” she cried fiercely, starting up. “To satisfy you, I am even ready to take an oath before my Creator that the subject of our conversation was not love.”

“What was Beck persuading you to do?” I demanded.

“No, no,” she cried, as if the very thought was repulsive to her. “No, do not ask me. I can never tell you, never!”

“Then there is a secret between you that you decline to reveal,” I said reproachfully.

She laughed a harsh metallic laugh, answering in a tone of feigned flippancy, —

“Really, Geoffrey, you are absurdly and unreasonably suspicious. I tell you I love no other man but yourself, yet merely because it pleases you to misconstrue what you have witnessed you brand me as base and faithless. It is unjust.”

“But your letter!” I cried.

“I had no intention of conveying the idea that any secret existed between Mr Beck and myself. He was, as you well know, an old friend of my father’s, and has known me since a child. Towards me he is always friendly and good-natured, but I swear he has never spoken to me of love.”

“But you cannot deny, Ella, that a secret – some fact that you are determined to keep from me – exists, and that if not of love, it was of that secret Beck spoke to you so earnestly in the garden here!”

Her dry lips moved, but no sound escaped them. She shivered. I saw my question had entirely nonplussed her, and I felt instinctively that I had uttered the truth.

At that instant, however, a servant crossed the lawn in the moonlight, and approaching, handed me a telegram, stating that Jukes, my man, had brought it over from Shepperton, fearing that it might be of importance.

Hastily I thrust it into my pocket unopened, and when the servant was out of hearing I repeated the plain question I had put to my well-beloved.

In the bright moonlight I watched how pale and agitated was her face, while involuntarily she shuddered, as if the thought that I might ascertain the truth terrified her.

“Geoffrey,” she said at last, in a low, plaintive voice as, sitting beside me, her slim fingers suddenly closed convulsively upon mine, “why cannot you trust me, when you know I love you so dearly?”

“Why cannot you tell me the truth instead of evading it? You say you are unworthy of my love. Why?”

“I – I cannot tell you,” she cried wildly, breaking into hysterical sobs. “Ah! You do not know how I have suffered, Geoffrey, or you would not speak thus to me. If you can no longer trust me, then we must, alas! part. But if we do, I shall think ever of you as one who misjudged me and cast me off, merely because of my inability to give you an explanation of one simple incident.”

“But I love you, Ella,” I cried. “Why should we part – why should – ”

“Hulloa, Deedes!” interrupted Beck’s high-pitched, genial voice. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere. We’re all going for a moonlight row. Come along.”

Further conversation was, I saw, out of the question, and a few minutes later we had all embarked, with the exception of Mrs Laing, and were gliding slowly down the stream, now glittering in the brilliant moonbeams. Dudley had brought Ella’s mandoline from the house, and as our prow cut the rippling waters he played a soft, charming gondolier’s song. My love sat beside me in the stern, and her eyes mutely asked forgiveness as ever and anon she turned to me. I saw how beautiful she was, how full of delicate grace, and how varying were her moods; yet she seemed nervous, highly-strung, with a strange harshness in her voice that I had never before noticed. She spoke no word to Beck, and I remarked within myself that she avoided him, while once, when he leant over to grasp her hand, she shrank shudderingly from its contact.

An hour later, when, after rowing down to Laleham, we had returned to the “Nook” and, at the instigation of the ladies, were enjoying cigars, I accidentally placed my hand in the breast-pocket of my dress-coat and there felt the telegram which I had until that moment entirely forgotten. Opening it, I was amazed to find it in cipher. The cipher signature was that of the Earl of Warnham, and I saw it had been transmitted over the private wire from Warnham, his seat in Sussex.

Taking a pencil from my pocket I at once proceeded to transcribe the mysterious array of letters, and when I at last discovered the purport of the message, I sat back in my chair, breathless and rigid, while the flimsy paper nearly fell from my nerveless fingers.

“Why, Geoffrey!” cried Ella, starting up in alarm and rushing towards me, “what’s the matter? You are as pale as death. Have you had bad news?”

“Bad news!” I answered, trying to laugh and slowly rousing myself. “No bad news at all, except that I must leave for town at once.”

“Well, you certainly look as if you’ve been hard hit over a race,” Beck exclaimed, laughing.

“You can’t possibly get a train now till 11:30. It’s hardly ten yet,” said my well-beloved, exchanging a strange, mysterious glance with Dudley.

“Then I must go by that,” I answered, again re-reading the pink paper, replacing it in my pocket, and endeavouring to preserve an outward calm.

Presently, when Ella was again alone with me, her first question was, —

“What bad news have you received, Geoffrey?”

“None,” I answered, smiling. “It is a private matter, of really no importance at all.”

“Oh, I thought it must have been something very, very serious, your hand trembled so, and you turned so pale.”

“Did I?” I laughed cheerily. “Well, it’s nothing, dearest; nothing at all.”

Thus reassured, she continued to chat with that bright vivacity that was one of her most engaging characteristics. I have, however, no idea of what she said; I only answered her mechanically, for I was too full of gloomy apprehensions to heed her gossip, even though I loved her with all my soul.

Half-an-hour later, Dudley, finding that I had to go to town, announced his intention of walking back to Shepperton.

“The night is lovely, and the moon bright as day,” he said, as we all shook hands with him in the hall. “I shall enjoy the walk.”

“Beware of widows!” shouted Beck, standing at the top of the wide flight of steps. We all laughed heartily.

“None about to-night,” my friend shouted back good-humouredly, and, setting out briskly, disappeared a moment later down the long, winding carriage drive.

“It’s really too bad to tease Mr Ogle about widows,” Ella protested when we went in.

“He enjoys the joke hugely,” I said. “Dudley’s an excellent fellow. I’ve never in my life seen him out of temper.”

“In that case he ought to make a good husband,” she replied, laughing, as together we all entered Mrs Laing’s pretty drawing-room, with its shaded lamps and cosy-corners, where we spent another three-quarters of an hour chatting until, finding we had just time to catch our train, Beck and I made our adieux. When I shook hands with Ella she whispered an earnest appeal for forgiveness, which, truth to tell, I feigned not to hear. Then we parted.

With Beck at my side, I walked sharply down the drive, rendered dark by the thick canopy of trees overhead, and had almost gained the gate leading to the high road when suddenly, catching my foot against some unseen object in the pathway, I fell heavily forward upon the gravel, just managing to save my face by putting out both hands.

“Hulloa!” cried Beck; “what’s the matter?”

“The matter!” I gasped, groping at the mysterious object quickly with my hands. “I believe I’ve fallen over somebody.”

“Drunk, I suppose. Come along, or we sha’n’t catch our train.”

But, still kneeling, I quickly took my vestas from my pocket and struck one. By its fitful light I distinguished the prostrate body of a man lying face downwards, with arms outstretched beyond his head. Turning him over with difficulty, I lit another vesta and held it close down to his face.

Next second I drew back with a loud cry of dismay and horror. It was Dudley Ogle.

His bloodless features were hideously distorted, his limbs rigid, his wildly-staring eyes were already glazed, and his stiffened fingers icy cold.

In an instant I knew the truth. He was dead.

Chapter Three

A Mystery

“Why!” gasped Beck, recognising the cold, drawn features by the light of the match he struck. “It’s Dudley! Run back to the house and get assistance quickly. I’ll remain here. Life may not be extinct after all, poor fellow!” At this suggestion I sprang up, and dashing away along the drive, burst into the drawing-room from the lawn.

“Geoffrey!” cried Mrs Laing, starting up quickly from a cosy-corner wherein she had settled to read. “What has happened? You look scared.”

“A very painful thing has occurred,” I gasped breathlessly, striving to preserve a calm demeanour. “We have found poor Dudley lying in the drive yonder. He’s dead!”

“Dead!” she screamed hysterically. “Dudley dead!”

“Yes, alas!” I replied. “Beck is with him, awaiting assistance.”

“I can’t believe it,” she cried, clutching at a chair for support. Her face was ashen pale, and her bejewelled hands trembled violently. “Poor Dudley! If he is dead, it is certain that he has been the victim of foul play,” she added mechanically, in a low tone. Then suddenly recovering herself, she inquired the circumstances in which we had found him.

“I will explain later,” I cried impatiently. “May I ring for the servants?”

“No,” she cried, starting forward with a strange, wild look. “Return to him, and leave all to me. For the present the truth must be kept from Ella. There are reasons why my daughter should not know of this tragic affair until to-morrow. As you are aware, she is weak and unstrung to-night, and has already gone to her room. I fear that any sudden shock may prove extremely detrimental to her, and I therefore trust you will respect my wishes.”

“Certainly,” I answered. “But we are not yet convinced that life is extinct, so while you arrange for his removal here, I’ll go at once for a doctor.”

“Yes, do. Dr Allenby is nearest. The first house over the bridge,” she replied hastily, and as she rang the bell I sprang out again upon the lawn and rushed away along the drive.

Beck was still kneeling beside the prostrate man, supporting his head upon his knee, and approaching, I asked whether he had detected any signs of respiration.

“None whatever,” he answered. “I’m afraid, poor fellow, he has gone.”

Briefly I explained my errand and rushed off for medical assistance, returning to “The Nook” with the grey-haired practitioner a quarter of an hour later. We found Dudley lying in the drawing-room on the large couch of yellow silk, with Beck and Mrs Laing standing calmly on either side. In Mrs Laing’s eyes were traces of tears. The doctor, after a brief examination, shook his head gravely, saying, —

“Life has, unfortunately, been extinct for fully an hour.”

“What is the cause of death?” inquired Mrs Laing, eagerly.

“I have not yet examined the body, but there are no marks of violence whatever, as far as I can observe. At the *post-mortem* we may be able to discover something.”

She drew a deep breath. I chanced at that moment to glance at her, and was surprised to observe an unmistakable look of terror flit for a brief instant across her haggard countenance. It seemed as though the doctor’s hope of determining the cause of death had aroused within her a sudden apprehension. Dr Allenby, however, suggested, in polite terms, that she should leave the room, as he desired to examine the body, and she reluctantly consented, exclaiming, as she moved slowly out, —

“I would have given worlds to have avoided all this. One’s name will be bruited about in the papers; and there will be an inquest, I suppose, and all that sort of thing. And dear Ella – what a terrible blow it will be to her!” Then, when the door had closed, while I stood gazing upon my intimate

friend who, only an hour before, had been so full of life's enjoyment, buoyant spirits and *bonhomie*, surprised at Mrs Laing's extraordinary manner, and reflecting upon her sudden strange demeanour, the doctor, assisted by Beck, began a minute and careful examination. In a quarter of an hour, they satisfied themselves that no violence had been used, and just as they concluded, the police, who had been sent for, arrived. The local sub-divisional inspector, tall, red-faced, and inclined to obesity, a plain-clothes constable, and a sergeant in uniform, who entered the drawing-room, were at once informed of the mysterious circumstances in which the body had been discovered. The inspector scribbled some brief notes, took the names and addresses of all of us, remarking with politeness that we should be compelled to attend the inquest.

Afterwards, the body was removed to the billiard-room and the plain-clothes constable left in charge of it, while, with Beck and Dr Allenby, I entered the dining-room where Mrs Laing, pale, agitated and nervous, was eagerly awaiting us. The arrival of the police in her house had apparently filled her with dread, for almost the first question she asked me was, —

“Have they gone? Have they gone?”

“They have left one officer on duty to prevent the body being touched,” I answered.

“Then the police are absolutely in possession of my house! Will they search it?” she inquired hoarsely.

“Search it! Certainly not,” I answered. “Of course, if foul play were suspected, they might. Otherwise they have no power without a search-warrant properly signed by a magistrate.”

“But no violence is suspected,” she exclaimed in a half whisper, glancing over to where the doctor and Beck were standing in earnest conversation. “I shall therefore be spared the indignity of having my house searched, sha'n't I?”

“I trust so, Mrs Laing,” I replied. “But it is not such a dreadful ordeal, after all, to have one's place rummaged.”

“No, perhaps not,” she answered thoughtfully; then, smiling, she added, “Perhaps I am foolish to regret that this terrible affair has occurred at my very door. Poor Dudley has died suddenly, and it is only right that I, his intimate friend, should do what I can to ensure the last rite being carried out in decency. But the very thought of the police unnerves me! and I fear, too, on Ella's account. Only yesterday Dr Allenby told her that she must carefully avoid any shock.”

“But she must know the truth to-morrow,” I observed.

“Will you break the dreadful news to her?” she urged. “As her betrothed, you, perhaps, can tell her better than anyone else.”

“Unfortunately I shall be unable,” I said. “This evening I received a very urgent telegram which recalls me to town, and having now lost my last train, I must go by the 6:30 in the morning. I cannot get back before late in the evening, or it may be next day. But as soon as possible I will return straight here, and render you whatever assistance is in my power.”

“Thanks. But is your business so very urgent?” she asked.

“Of greatest importance. Poor Dudley's tragic end has delayed me, and even this brief delay may be of most serious consequence.”

“Ah! you men in the Foreign Office are always full of deep schemes and clever diplomacy,” she smiled, toying with her mass of rings.

I laughed, but did not reply.

“Is it on Foreign Office business that you are compelled to leave us?” she persisted, glancing at me keenly, I thought, as if intent upon ascertaining the purport of the telegram I had received.

“Yes,” I replied, in wonder that she should thus evince such a strong desire to glean the nature of my business. But next instant it occurred to me that possibly she might suspect me of being implicated in some mysterious manner with my friend's sudden end, and that, believing I desired to escape, was determined at least to know where I was going, and upon what errand.

At that moment Beck crossed to us, saying, —

“This affair is certainly most distressing, Mrs Laing. Dudley was such an excellent fellow that we must each one of us regret his loss very deeply indeed. I have just been discussing the matter with the doctor; but, of course, he can at present form no conjecture as to the cause of death.”

“Natural causes, no doubt,” chimed in the medical man, in a dry, business-like tone. “I think we may at once dismiss all idea that violence was used.”

“You think so?” inquired Mrs Laing, with eagerness. “You don’t believe, then, he has been a victim of foul play?”

“Not at all. Beyond the slight bruise on the forehead, evidently caused by the fall upon the gravel, there is no mark whatever,” the doctor answered. “Until I have made a thorough examination I cannot, of course, determine the nature of the fatal cause. By noon to-morrow we shall, I hope, know the truth.”

“He must have fallen and expired within ten minutes of leaving the house,” Beck exclaimed. “Yet when he shook hands with us he was in the highest possible spirits. How terribly sudden his end was.”

“Terrible!” I exclaimed, myself dazed by the peculiarly tragic and mysterious affair. “When he wished us adieu he could not have dreamed that his life had so nearly run its course.”

“He complained of no pain during the evening, I suppose?” the doctor inquired.

“Not to my knowledge,” Beck answered, and this statement I was compelled to endorse.

“He dined here?” Dr Allenby exclaimed, turning to Mrs Laing.

“Yes.”

“There are some remains of the food left, I presume?”

“No doubt,” she answered quickly. “But – but what do you suspect! Are the symptoms those of poisoning?” she gasped.

“I suspect nothing,” replied the doctor, with hesitation. “The fact that the hands are tightly clenched suggests a final paroxysm of pain which might possibly accrue from poison. The remains of the dinner may be required for analysis, therefore it would be advisable to keep them.”

“Very well,” she answered, a shadow of annoyance upon her face. “I’ll give orders to that effect. But surely, doctor, you do not think poor Dudley can have been poisoned in my house. If anything we had for dinner had been deleterious, all of us must have suffered.”

“No, pardon me for disagreeing,” he answered politely. “In many cases known to toxicologists, families have eaten of the same meal, and one person only has been seized with sudden illness that has proved fatal. By analysis we may obtain some clue as to the cause of Mr Ogle’s unfortunate end.”

Mrs Laing’s thin lips moved, but no sound escaped them. At last, turning suddenly, she covered her face with her hands, as if to shut out from her gaze the white, haggard countenance she had so recently looked upon.

“Come,” exclaimed the doctor, sympathetically, laying his hand upon her arm. “You are trembling. This unfortunate occurrence has no doubt upset you, but you must bear up. Immediately I get home I shall send you a draught that will brace up your nerves. Take care how the sad news is broken to Miss Ella. The slightest undue excitement may affect her very seriously.”

“I have not forgotten your words yesterday, doctor,” she replied. “You are very kind. Good-night!”

They shook hands, and Dr Allenby, taking up his hat, left – an example Beck and I soon afterwards followed, passing the night at the Angel Hotel.

Throughout the dark, breathless hours sleep came not to my eyes, so full was my mind of the tragic discovery. As I lay awake, hour after hour, listening to the chiming bells, and watching the dawn struggling in between the curtains, I reflected deeply upon the strange events of that evening, and the more I pondered, the more mysterious appeared the circumstances. Foremost in my mind was the strange, inviolable secret that I felt convinced existed between Ella and Beck. Although strenuously denied by her, she had nevertheless admitted her unworthiness of my love. Yet I adored

her. No woman had ever stirred my soul as she had; no woman had so completely held me under her spell. I remembered how she had seemed a trifle wan and distressed; yet that look enhanced rather than detracted from her refined beauty. Her steady refusal to enlighten me regarding the subject of her earnest conversation with Beck when I had watched them in the garden, and the significant glances she had exchanged with him across the dinner-table, had aroused within me a suspicion that, notwithstanding her declaration, she loved Beck. Again, the tone of her letter was, I now saw distinctly, such as a woman would write if she desired to break off her engagement. Yet had I not a right to demand full explanation of her extraordinary statement? had I not a right to seek the truth of her relations with this loud-spoken parvenu? Nevertheless, as I pondered, I felt half inclined to believe that my estimate of Beck was a distorted one, for his regret at the death of Dudley, and his sympathy for Mrs Laing were, I felt assured, deep, heartfelt and genuine. When at last I carefully analysed my feelings towards him, I was bound to admit within myself that jealousy was now the only cause of my bitter antipathy.

Again, other incidents increased the mystery. Mrs Laing's dread that Ella should know of Dudley's death was very curious, and her exclamations and inquiries of the doctor regarding his conjecture of poison seemed to point to the fact that she entertained certain suspicions, or was aware of certain facts. But, after fully reviewing the tragic affair in all its phases, I arrived at the conclusion that Dr Allenby did not anticipate for one moment finding poison at the *post-mortem*. On the contrary, from the words he had let drop, he undoubtedly believed death due to heart-disease. I could not, however, rid myself of a vague suspicion that Ella's mother feared analysis of the remains of the dinner, and that the presence of the police unnerved her, as it invariably does those who are guilty.

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

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

Chapter Four

The Click of the Telegraph

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

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

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

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

"Hardly that, I think," he replied, with a knowing look, stroking his pointed brown beard. "If burglars had visited the place, he would have asked for a clever officer or two, not for a personal interview with me." With this view I was compelled to agree, then, lighting cigarettes, we sat back calmly contemplating the beautiful, fertile country through which we were driving. The road, leaving the quaint old town, descended sharply for a short distance, then wound uphill through cornfields lined by high hedges of hawthorn and holly. On, past a quaint old water-mill we skirted Warnham Pond, whereon Shelley in his youthful days sailed paper boats, then half-a-mile further entered the handsome lodge-gates of Warnham Park. Through a fine avenue, with a broad sweep of park on either side well stocked with deer, emus and many zoological specimens, we ascended, until at last, after negotiating the long, winding drive in front of the Hall, the carriage pulled up with a sudden jerk before its handsome portico.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why did he do so?” he inquired quickly.

“Because he thought it might be urgent.”

“Did he open it?”

“No. Even if he had it was in cipher.”

“Is your man absolutely trustworthy?” he asked.

“He has been in the service of my family for fifteen years. He was my father’s valet at the Hague.”

“Is his name Jukes?” he inquired.

“Yes.”

“Ah! I know him. He is absolutely trustworthy; a most excellent man.”

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

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

“Since yesterday, Deedes, a catastrophe has occurred.”

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

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

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

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

“Greatest excitement caused here by receipt by telegraph an hour ago of verbatim copy of secret defensive alliance between England and Germany. Have seen telegram, which was handed in at 369, Strand, London, at 3:30. Just called at Embassy and informed Lord Strathavon. Council of Ministers has been summoned.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He snapped his bony fingers impatiently, saying, —

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

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

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

“I went out to lunch,” I said.

“With the document in your pocket?”

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

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

“Proof!” I gasped. “Show it to me.”

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

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

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

The paper was blank!

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

“That is what you handed me on my return from the Cabinet Council,” he said, with knit brows.

“Now, what explanation have you to offer?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

I turned over the envelope and looked. It bore the designation “B27,893,” just as I had written it, and the writing was either my own or such a marvellously accurate imitation that I was compelled to confess my inability to point out any discrepancy.

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

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

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

“That is impossible,” I answered.

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

“Because he is dead.”

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

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

“An important message from St Petersburg, your Lordship.”

“Read it as it comes through,” the Earl replied breathlessly, walking towards the instrument and bending eagerly over it.

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

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

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

Chapter Five

Lord Warnham's Admission

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

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

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

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

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

"The Premier is in town, your Lordship."

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

"Tell Gaysford to inform Lord Maybury at once of the contents of this last dispatch from St Petersburg, and say that I will meet the Premier at 5:30 at the Foreign Office." The telegraphist touched the key, and in a few moments the Minister's orders were obeyed. Then, taking a sheet of note-paper and a pencil, he wrote in a private cipher a telegram, which he addressed to Her Majesty at Osborne. This, too, the clerk dispatched at once over the wire, followed by urgent messages to members of the Cabinet Council and to Lord Kingsbury, Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, asking them to meet informally at six o'clock that evening at the Foreign Office.

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

"Anything more, your lordship?"

"Nothing for the present," he answered. "Leave us." Then, when he had gone, the Earl rose slowly, and with bent head, and hands clasped behind his back, he strode up and down the library in silent contemplation. Suddenly he halted before me where I stood, and abruptly asked, —

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

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

"And his profession?"

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

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

"A landowner."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

The Earl slightly raised his shaggy grey brows, then continued, —

"How long have you known this friend?"

"Several years."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But Russia dare not take the initiative,” I blurted forth.

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

“How the secret agents of the Tzar obtained knowledge of the treaty surpasses comprehension,” I exclaimed.

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

“I am neither,” I shouted in a frenzy of rage, interrupting him. “If you were a younger man, I’d – by Heaven! I’d knock you down. But I respect your age, Lord Warnham, and I am not forgetful of the fact that to you I owe more than I can ever repay. My family have faithfully served their country through generations, and I will never allow a false accusation to be brought upon it, even though you, Her Majesty’s Foreign Secretary, may choose to make it.” He halted, glancing at me with an expression of unfeigned surprise.

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

“I can! I will!” I cried.

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

“I cannot, I – ”

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

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

“It’s a deliberate lie,” he cried, as he turned in anger to face me again. “I opened the dispatch, read it through to ascertain there was no mistake, and, after sealing it with my own hands, gave it to

you. Yet, in return, you hand me this!” and he took from the table the ingeniously-forged duplicate envelope and held it up.

Then, casting it down again passionately, he added, —

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

“But does not London swarm with Russian agents?” I said. “Have we not had ample evidence of that lately?”

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

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

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

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

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

“From your words, when Hammerton arrived from Berlin, it was plain that you suspected treachery. On what ground were your suspicions founded?”

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

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

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

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

“Well?”

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

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

As I stood gazing at this marvellous forgery, open-mouthed in abject dismay, there broke upon my ear a short, harsh laugh – a laugh of triumph.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Six

The Veil

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

"Going?" he inquired.

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

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

I went forward, plunged deeply in thought, until passing a small gate I left the park, and found myself in Warnham Churchyard. For a moment I stood on the peaceful spot where I had often stood before, admiring the quaint old church, with its square, squat, ivy-covered tower, its gilded clock face, and its ancient doors that, standing open, admitted air and sunshine. Before me were the plain, white tombs of the departed earls, the most recent being that in memory of the Countess, one of the leaders of London society, who had died during her husband's absence on his official duties; while across the well-kept lawn stood a quaint old sun-dial that had in silence marked the time for a century or so. From within the church the organ sounded softly, and I could see the Vicar's daughter, a pretty girl still in her teens, seated at the instrument practising.

Warnham was a quiet Sussex village unknown to the world outside, unspoiled by modern progress, untouched by the hand of the vandal. As presently I passed the lych-gate and entered its peaceful street, it wore a distinctly old-world air. At the end of the churchyard wall stood the typical village blacksmith, brown-faced and brawny, swinging his hammer with musical clang upon his anvil set beneath a great chestnut tree in full bloom; further along stood the schools, from the playground of which came the joyous sound of children's voices; and across the road was the only inn – the Sussex Arms – where, on more than one occasion, I had spent an hour in the bare and beery taproom, chatting with the garrulous village gossips, the burly landlord and his pleasant spouse. The air was heavy with the scent of June roses and the old-fashioned flowers growing in cottage gardens, whilst the lilacs sent forth a perfume that in my perturbed state of mind brought me back to a realisation of my bitterness. Lilac was Ella's favourite scent, and it stirred within me thoughts of her. How, I wondered, had she borne the news of Dudley's tragic and mysterious end? How, I wondered, would she greet me when next we met?

Yet somehow I distrusted her, and as I walked on through the village towards the Ockley road, nodding mechanically to a man I knew, I was seriously contemplating the advisability of never again seeing her. But I loved her, and though I strove to reason with myself that some secret tie existed between her and Beck, I found myself unable to break off my engagement, for I was held in her toils by the fascination of her eyes.

For fully an hour I walked on, ascending the hill swept by the fresh breeze from the Channel, only turning back on finding myself at the little hamlet at Kingsfold. In that walk I tried to form resolutions – to devise some means to regain the confidence of the Earl, and to conjecture the cause of Dudley’s death – but all to no purpose. The blows which had fallen in such swift succession had paralysed me. I could not think, neither could I act.

Re-passing the Sussex Arms, I turned in, dusty and thirsty. In the bare taproom, deserted at that hour, old Denman, a tall, tight-trousered, splay-footed, grey-haired man, who drove the village fly, and acted as ostler and handy man about the hostelry, was busy cleaning some pewters, and as I entered, looked up and touched his hat.

“Well, Denman,” I said, “you don’t seem to grow very much older, eh?”

The man, whose hair and beard were closely-cropped, and whose furrowed face had a habit of twitching when he spoke, grinned as he answered, —

“No, sir. People tells me I bear my age wonderful well. But won’t you come into the parlour, sir?”

Declining, I told him to get me something to drink, and when he brought it questioned him as to the latest news in the village. Denman was an inveterate gossip, and in his constant drives in the rickety and antiquated vehicle known as “the fly,” to villages and towns in the vicinity, had a knack of picking up all the news and scandal, which he retailed at night for the delectation of customers at the Sussex Arms.

“I dunno as anything very startling has happened lately in Warnham. The jumble sale came off at the schools last Tuesday fortnight, and there’s a cricket match up at the Lodge next Saturday. Some gentlemen are coming down from London to play.”

“Anything else?”

Denman removed his hat and scratched his head.

“Oh, yes,” he said suddenly. “You knows Mr Macandrew what’s steward for Mr Thornbury? Well, last Monday week an old gentleman called at his house up street and asked to see him. His wife asked him into the parlour, and Mr Macandrew went in. ‘Are you Mr Macandrew?’ says the old gent. ‘I am,’ says Mr Macandrew. ‘Well, I shouldn’t ’ave known you,’ says the old man. And it turned out afterwards that this old man was actually Mr Macandrew’s father, who’s lived ever so many years in America, and hasn’t seen Mr Macandrew since he wor a boy. I did laugh when I heard it.”

“Extraordinary. Have you had any visitors down from London?” I inquired, for sometimes people took the houses of the better-class villagers, furnished for the season.

“We had a lively young gent staying here in the inn for four days last week. He was a friend of somebody up at the Hall, I think, for he was there a good deal. He came from London. I wonder whether you’d know him.”

“What was his name?”

“Funny name,” Denman said, grinning. “Ogle, Mr Ogle.”

“Ogle!” I gasped. “What was his Christian name?”

“Dudley, I fancy it was.”

“Dudley Ogle,” I repeated, remembering that he had been absent from Shepperton for four days, and had told me he had been in Ipswich visiting some friends. “And he has been here?”

“Yes, sir. We made him as comfortable as we could, and I think he enjoyed hisself.”

“But what did he do – why was he down here?” I inquired eagerly.

“Do you know him, sir? Jolly gentleman, isn’t he? Up to all manners o’ tricks, and always chaffing the girls.”

“Yes, I knew him, Denman,” I answered gravely. “Tell me, as far as you know, his object in coming to Warnham. I’m very interested in his doings.”

“As far as I know, sir, he came to see somebody up at the Hall. I drove him about a good deal, over to Ockley, to Cowfold, and out to Handcross; and I took him into Horsham every day.”

“Do you know who was his friend at the Hall?”

“No, I don’t, sir. He never spoke about it; but I did have my suspicions,” he answered, smiling.

“Oh! what were they?” I asked.

“I fancy he came to see Lucy Bryden, the housekeeper’s daughter. She’s a good-looking girl, you know,” and the old man winked knowingly.

“What made you think that, eh?”

“Well, from something I was told,” he replied mysteriously. “He was seen walking with a young lady across the park one night, and I ’eard as ’ow it was Mrs Bryden’s daughter. But next day I ’ad a surprise. A young lady called here for him, and she was dressed exactly as the young woman who had been in the park with him was. But it wasn’t Mrs Bryden’s daughter.”

“Then who was it?”

“I heard him call her Ella. She came from London.”

“Ella?” I gasped. “What the deuce do you mean, Denman? What sort of a girl was she? A lady?”

“Yes, sir, quite a lady. She was dressed in brown, and one thing I noticed was that she had on a splendid diamond bracelet. It was a beauty.”

“A diamond bracelet!” I echoed. There was no doubt that Ella had actually been to Warnham without my knowledge, for the bracelet that the old ostler, in reply to my eager questions, described accurately, was the one I had given her.

“What time in the day did she call? Where did they go?” I demanded, in surprise.

“She came about mid-day, and they both went for a walk towards Broadbridge Heath. They were gone, I should reckon, about three hours, and when they returned, it was evident from her eyes that she’d been crying.”

“Crying! Had Ogle been talking to her angrily, do you think?”

“No. I don’t believe so. They remained here and had some tea together in the parlour, and then I drove ’em to Horsham, and they caught the 6:25 to London.”

I was silent. There was some remarkable, unfathomable mystery in this.

“Now, Denman,” I said at last, “I know you’ve got a sharp pair of ears when you’re perched up on that box of yours. Did you overhear their conversation while driving them to Horsham?”

Again the old man removed his battered hat and calmly scratched his head.

“Well, sir, to tell you the truth, I did ’ear a few words,” he answered. “I ’eard the young lady say as ’ow she wor powerless. He seemed to be a-begging of her to do something which horrified her. I ’eard her ask him in a whisper whether he thought they would be discovered, and he laughed at her fear, and said, ‘If you don’t do it, you know the consequences will be fatal.’”

“Do you think they went up to the Hall when they went out walking?”

“I don’t know, sir. They could, of course, have got into the park that way. But you don’t look very well, sir. I hope what I’ve told you isn’t – isn’t very unpleasant,” the old ostler added, with a look of apprehension.

“No. Get me some brandy, Denman,” I gasped.

While he was absent I rose and walked unsteadily to the window that overlooked a comfortable-looking corner residence surrounded by a belt of firs, a wide road, and a beautiful stretch of valley and blue downs beyond. The landscape was peaceful and picturesque, and I sought solace in gazing upon it. But this latest revelation had unnerved me. Dudley and Ella had met in that quiet, rural place for some purpose which I could not conceive. Their meeting had evidently been pre-arranged, and their object, from the words the old man had overheard, was apparently of a secret and sinister character.

The strange, inquiring look I had detected in Ella’s face whenever she had glanced surreptitiously at Dudley on the previous night was, I now felt assured, an index of guilty conscience; and Mrs Laing’s dread that Ella should know the truth of my friend’s tragic end appeared to prove, in a certain degree, the existence of some secret knowledge held by all three.

Yet I could not bring myself to believe that my well-beloved had wilfully deceived me. From what Denman had said, it appeared as if Ogle had held her under some mysterious thrall, and was trying to compel her to act against her better judgment. Her pure, womanly conscience had, perhaps, revolted against his suggestion, and she had shed the tears the old ostler had noticed; yet he had persisted and held over her a threat that had cowed her, and, perhaps, for aught I knew, compelled her to submit.

My thought that the man who was my friend should have thus treated the woman I adored filled me with fiercest anger and hatred. With bitterness I told myself that the man in whom I placed implicit confidence, and with whom I had allowed Ella to spend many idle hours punting or sculling while I was absent at my duties in London, was actually my enemy.

With sudden resolve I determined to travel back to Staines and, by possession of the knowledge of her mysterious visit to that village, worm from her its object. At that moment Denman entered, and I drank the brandy at one gulp, afterwards ordering the fly and driving back to Horsham station, whence I returned to London.

At my flat in Rossetti Mansions, Chelsea, I found a telegram from the Staines police summoning me to the inquest to be held next morning at eleven o'clock, and also one from Ella asking me to return. The latter I felt inclined to disregard; the former I could not. Her words and actions were, indeed, beyond comprehension, but in the light of this knowledge I had by mere chance acquired, it seemed plain that her declaration of her unworthiness of my love was something more than the natural outcome of highly-strung nerves and a romantic disposition. Women of certain temperaments are prone to self-accusation, and I had brought myself to believe her words to be mere hysterical utterances; but now, alas! I saw there was some deep motive underlying them. I had been tricked. I had, it seemed, been unduly jealous of Beck, and unsuspecting of my real enemy, the man whose lips were closed in death.

I now regretted his end, not as a friend regrets, but merely because no effort would be availing to compel his lying tongue to speak the truth. Yet, if he were my rival for Ella's hand, might he not have lied when questioned regarding the events of that fateful afternoon when the secret defensive alliance had been so mysteriously exchanged for a dummy? Jealousy knows neither limit nor remorse.

Next morning, after spending the greater part of the night sitting alone smoking and endeavouring to penetrate the ever-increasing veil of mystery that had apparently enveloped her, I travelled down to Staines, arriving there just in time to take a cab to the Town Hall, where the inquest was to be held. The town was agog, for a crowd of those unable to enter because the room was already filled to overflowing, stood in the open space outside, eagerly discussing the tragic affair in all its various aspects, and hazarding the wildest and most impossible theories. Entering the hall, I elbowed my way forward, and as I did so I heard my name shouted loudly by a police constable. I was required as a witness, and succeeded in struggling through to the baize-covered table whereat the grave-faced Coroner sat.

He stretched forth his hand to give me the copy of Holy Writ whereon to take the oath, when suddenly my eyes fell upon a watch and a collection of miscellaneous articles lying upon the table, the contents of the dead man's pockets.

One small object alone riveted my attention. Heedless of the Coroner's words I snatched it up and examined it closely.

Next second I stood breathless and aghast, dumbfounded by an amazing discovery that staggered belief.

Chapter Seven

Ella's Suspicions

The formula of the oath fell upon my ears in a dull monotone, as mechanically I raised the Bible to my lips, afterwards replying to the Coroner's formal questions regarding my name, address and occupation. The discovery I had made filled me with fierce, bitter hatred against my dead companion, and, dazed by the startling suddenness of the revelation, I stood like a man in a dream.

Dr Diplock, the Coroner, noticed it, and his sharp injunction to answer his question brought me back to a knowledge of my surroundings. I was standing in full view of an assembly of some three hundred persons, so filled by curiosity, and eager to hear my story, that the silence was complete.

"I beg your pardon, but I did not hear the question," I said, bracing myself with effort.

"The deceased was your friend, I believe?"

"Yes," I answered. "He shared a furnished cottage with me at Shepperton. I have known him for some time."

"Were you with him at the day of his death?"

"I left him at Shepperton in the morning, when I went to town, and he called upon me at the Foreign Office about one o'clock. We lunched together, and then, returning to Downing Street, parted. We met again at Shepperton later, and came here, to Staines, in response to an invitation to dinner at 'The Nook.' I – "

A woman's low, despairing cry broke the silence, and as I turned to the assembly I saw, straight before me, Ella, rigid, almost statuesque. Her terror-stricken gaze met mine; her eyes seemed riveted upon me.

"Kindly proceed with your evidence," exclaimed the Coroner, impatiently.

"We dined at 'The Nook,'" I went on, turning again to face him. "Then we went for a row, and on our return Mr Ogle left us to walk back to Shepperton."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Why did you not accompany him?"

"Because I had, during the evening, received a telegram summoning me away."

"Who was the message from?"

"The Earl of Warnham," I replied. Then obeying his request to continue, I explained how, on leaving "The Nook" about an hour later to catch my last train, I had stumbled upon the body of my friend.

Then, when I had concluded, the Coroner commenced his cross-examination. Many of his questions were purely formal in character, but presently, when he began to take me through the events which occurred at the Foreign Office, I experienced a very uncomfortable feeling, fearing lest I should divulge the suspicions that had during the last half-hour been aroused within me. It was, I recognised, absolutely necessary that I should keep my discovery a strict secret, for upon my ability to do so everything depended.

"Was there any reason why he should call for you at the Foreign Office and ask you to lunch with him? Was he in the habit of doing this?" inquired the Coroner.

"No; there seemed no reason, beyond the fact that he was compelled to come to town, and merely wanted to pass an idle hour away," I said.

"Why did he go to London?"

"I have no idea what business took him there."

"He never told you that he had any enemy, I suppose?" the official asked, with an air of mystery.

"Never. He was, on the contrary, most popular."

“And no incident other than what you have related occurred at the Foreign Office? You are quite certain of this?”

For a moment I hesitated, half inclined to relate the whole story of the mysterious theft of the secret convention; but risking perjury rather than an exposure of facts that I saw must remain hidden, I answered as calmly as I could, —

“No other incident occurred.”

“Have you any reason to suspect that he was a victim of foul play?” the Coroner continued, looking at me rather suspiciously, I thought.

At that moment I glanced at Ella, and was astounded to see how intensely excited she appeared, with her white face upturned, her mouth half open, her eyes staring, eagerly drinking in every word that fell from my lips. Her whole attitude was of one who dreaded that some terrible truth might be brought to light.

“I have no reason to suspect he was murdered,” I answered in a low tone, and as I surreptitiously watched the face of the woman I loved I saw an instant transformation. Her breast heaved with a heavy sigh of relief as across her countenance there passed a look of satisfaction she was unable to disguise. She was in deadly fear of something, the nature of which I could not conjecture.

“You have no suspicion whatever that the deceased had an enemy?” asked the foreman of the jury, who had the appearance of a local butcher.

“None whatever,” I answered.

“I frequently saw Mr Ogle on the river of an afternoon with Miss Laing,” the man observed. “Was there, as far as you are aware, any affection between them?”

Glancing at Ella, I saw she had turned even paler than before, and was trembling. The question nonplussed me. In my heart I strongly suspected that some attachment existed between them; but resenting this impertinent question from a man who struck me as a local busybody, I made a negative reply.

“Then jealousy, it would appear, was not the cause of the crime,” the foreman observed to his fellow-jurymen.

The Coroner, however, quickly corrected him, pointing out that they had not yet ascertained whether death had, or had not, been due to natural causes.

Turning to me, he said, —

“I believe I am right in assuming that you are engaged to be married to Miss Laing, am I not?”

“I was engaged to her,” I replied hoarsely.

“Then you are not engaged at the present moment? Why was the match broken off?”

I hesitated for several moments, trying to devise some means to avoid answering this abrupt question. The bitter thought of Ella’s double dealing occurred to me, and with foolish disregard for consequences I resolved not to spare her.

“Because of a confession she made to me,” I said.

“A confession! What of?”

“Of unworthiness.”

“She acknowledged herself unfaithful to you, I presume?” observed one of the jurymen who had not before spoken; but to this I made no reply.

“Now, have you any suspicion that any secret affection existed between her and the deceased?” the Coroner asked, in a dry, distinct voice, that could be heard all over the room.

“I – I cannot say,” I faltered.

The movement among the audience showed the sensation my reply had caused, and it was increased by Ella suddenly rising from her place and shrieking hysterically: “That answer is a lie – a foul lie!”

“Silence!” shouted the Coroner, who, above all things, detested a scene in his Court. “If that lady interrupts again, she must be requested to leave.”

“Have you any further question to ask Mr Deedes?” he inquired, turning to the jury; but as no one replied, he intimated that the examination was at an end, and I felt that I had, at last, successfully passed through the ordeal I had dreaded.

Retiring to a seat, my place as a witness was at once taken by Beck; but scarcely had I sunk into a chair near where Ella was sitting when I felt within my hand the object I had taken from among the things found in the dead man’s possession. It had not been missed, and I wondered whether its loss would ever be detected. To keep it was, I felt, extremely dangerous; nevertheless I sat holding it in my palm, listening to the evidence of the well-known member for West Rutlandshire. His story, related in that loud, bombastic tone that had at first so prejudiced me against him, was much to the same effect as mine regarding the discovery of the body, its removal into the house, and the subsequent examination by the doctor, until there commenced the minute cross-examination.

“How long have you known the deceased?” the Coroner inquired, looking up suddenly from his notes.

“A few months. About six, I should think,” he answered.

“Have you any suspicion that he had an enemy?”

“No. He was about the last man in the world who would arouse the hatred of anybody. In fact, he was exceedingly popular.”

“You say you have been a frequent visitor at Mrs Laing’s. Now, from your own observations, have you seen anything that would lead you to the belief that he loved Miss Laing?”

“Nothing whatever,” he replied. “Ella was engaged to Mr Deedes, and although she was on the river a great deal with Ogle, I am confident she never for a moment regarded him as her lover.”

“Why are you so confident?”

“Because of certain facts she has confided in me.”

“What are they?”

He was silent. Evidently he had no intention of being led on in this manner, but, even finding himself cornered, his imperturbable coolness never deserted him, for he calmly replied, with a faint smile, —

“I refuse to answer.”

“Kindly reply to my question, sir, and do not waste the time of the Court,” exclaimed the Coroner, with impatience. “What were these facts?”

Again he was silent, twisting his gloves around his fingers uneasily.

“Come, answer if you please.”

“Well,” he replied, after considerable hesitation, “briefly, she gave me to understand that she loved Deedes, and had refused to listen to the deceased’s declaration of affection.”

“How came she to confide this secret of hers to you?” the Coroner asked eagerly.

Through my memory at that moment there flashed the scene I had witnessed in secret in the garden on that memorable night when I had detected this man with his arm around Ella’s waist, and I looked on in triumph at his embarrassment.

“I am a friend of the family,” he answered, with a calm, irritating smile a moment later. “She has told me many of her secrets.”

I knew from the expression upon his face that he lied. Was it not far more likely that on that night when I had discovered them he was uttering words of affection to her, and she, in return, had confessed that she loved me?

“Are you aware whether Mr Deedes had any knowledge that the deceased was his rival for Miss Laing’s hand?” inquired the Coroner, adding, self-apologetically, “I much regret being compelled to ask these questions, for I am aware how painful it must be to the family.”

“I believe he was utterly ignorant of it,” Beck replied. “He regarded Mr Ogle as his closest friend.”

“A false one, to say the least,” Dr Diplock observed in tones just audible. Beck shrugged his shoulders, but did not reply.

The inquisitive foreman of the jury then commenced a series of clumsy, impertinent questions, many of which the witness cleverly evaded. He resented this man’s cross-examination just as I had done, and during the quarter of an hour’s fencing with the tradesman no noteworthy fact was elicited. The Coroner, seeing this, suddenly put an end to the foreman’s pertinacious efforts to draw from the Member of Parliament further facts regarding home life at “The Nook,” and called Dr Allenby.

The doctor, who had apparently had long experience of inquests, took the oath in a business-like manner, and related the facts within his knowledge clearly and succinctly, describing how I had summoned him, his visit to “The Nook,” and the appearance of the dead man.

“Have you made a *post-mortem*?” the Coroner asked, without looking up from the notes he was making.

“I made an examination yesterday, in conjunction with Dr Engall. We found no trace of disease, with the exception of a slight lung trouble of recent date.”

“Was it sufficient to cause death?”

“Certainly not; neither was the bruise upon the forehead, which had, no doubt, been caused by the fall upon the gravel. The heart was perfectly normal, and we failed utterly to detect anything that would result fatally. The contents of the stomach have been analysed by Dr Adams, of the Home Office, at the instigation of the police, I believe.”

“Then, as far as you are concerned, you are unable to determine the cause of death?”

“Quite. It is a mystery.”

The next witness was a thin, white-haired, dapper little man, who, in reply to questions, explained that he was analyst to the Home Office, and had, at the request of the police, submitted the contents of the deceased’s stomach to analysis, the position of the hands pointing to a slight suspicion of poison.

“And what have you discovered?” inquired the Coroner, the Court being so silent that the proverbial pin, if it had been dropped at that moment, might have been heard.

“Nothing,” he answered clearly. “There was no sign of anything of a deleterious nature whatsoever. The deceased was certainly not poisoned.”

The assembly of excited townspeople again shifted uneasily, as it was wont to do after every important reply which might elucidate the mystery. It seemed as though a rumour had been circulated that Dudley had been poisoned, and this declaration of the renowned analyst set at rest for ever that wild, unfounded report. People turned to one another, whispering excitedly, and a shadow of disappointment rested upon their inquisitive countenances. They had expected it to be pronounced a case of murder, whereas it would now be proved that death had occurred from some natural but sudden and unknown cause.

“Then you have no opinion to offer as to the cause of death!” the Coroner exclaimed.

“None whatever,” was the reply, and that concluded the analyst’s important testimony.

The foreman of the jury expressed a wish to put a question to Ella, and a few moments later she stood where I had stood, and removing her glove, took the oath with trembling voice.

“Have you any reason to suppose, Miss Laing, that Mr Ogle’s declaration of love to you had aroused the enmity of Mr Deedes?” asked the man, seriously.

“No,” she answered in a tone so low that I could scarcely distinguish the word.

“Mr Deedes was your lover, wasn’t he?”

“I am still engaged to him,” she replied, tears welling in her eyes. “He tells a falsehood when he says that our love is at an end.”

“Then why did you not tell him of Mr Ogle’s declaration?”

“Because they were friends, and I did not wish to arouse animosity between them.”

Slight applause followed this reply, but it was instantly suppressed.

The Coroner, to bring matters to a conclusion, asked, “Now, knowing Mr Ogle as intimately as you did, do you suspect that he might have been murdered?”

She gasped, swayed slowly forward and gripped the corner of the baize-covered table to steady herself.

“Yes,” she answered in a clear but tremulous voice. “I – I believe he was murdered.”

A thrill of excitement and wonder ran through the onlookers. Her handsome face was ashen pale, and her breast, beneath her blouse of cool-looking muslin, rose and fell quickly, showing how intense was her agitation.

“And what causes you to believe this?” asked the Coroner, raising his brows in interrogation.

“I have suspicions,” she answered in a low voice, striving to remain calm, and glancing quickly around the silent assembly.

“You suspect some person of having been guilty of murder?” he asked, interested.

“Not exactly that,” she said quickly. “That Mr Ogle was murdered I feel confident, but who committed the crime I am unaware. It is a mystery. Knowing Mr Ogle so well as I did, he entrusted to me knowledge of certain facts that he strenuously kept secret from others. Yet I cannot conceive who would profit by his death.”

At this point the inspector of police rose and expressed a desire to know, through the Coroner, whether she had quarrelled with Mr Ogle.

“The day prior to his death we had a few words,” she faltered.

“Upon what subject?” asked the Coroner.

She at first refused to reply, but after being pressed, said, “We quarrelled about my engagement to Mr Deedes.”

So she acknowledged with her own lips that the dead man had been my bitter enemy, as I, too late, had discovered.

“He wished you to marry him?” suggested the Coroner. She did not answer, but burst into a fit of hysterical tears, and a few moments later was led out of the Court.

“I think, gentlemen,” the Coroner observed, turning to the jury, “no end can be obtained in pursuing this very painful inquiry further. You have heard the evidence, and while on the one hand the exact cause of death has not been established, on the other we have Miss Laing declaring that the unfortunate gentleman was murdered. The evidence certainly does not point to such a conclusion, and there are two courses that may be pursued; either to adjourn the inquiry, or to return an open verdict and leave the elucidation of the mystery in the hands of the police.”

The jury, after consulting among themselves, retired, but only for five minutes, coming back into court and returning an open verdict of “Found dead.”

Then, as the Coroner thanked the twelve tradesmen for their attendance, I rose and crossed to Beck, afterwards walking with him to “The Nook.”

Chapter Eight

“I Dare Not!”

“What do you think of Ella’s statement?” Beck asked, as we were crossing Staines Bridge on our way to Mrs Laing’s.

“I can’t understand it,” I replied.

“Neither can I,” he said. “Girls of her excitable temperament are apt to make statements of that character utterly without foundation. No doubt Dudley was her intimate friend, and finding him dead, her romantic mind at once conjured up visions of murder.”

“Yes. There is a good deal in your argument,” I admitted, with a touch of sorrow at the remembrance that Ogle had aspired to her hand.

“I never spoke to you on the subject, for fear of making mischief, but I have many times been amazed at your blindness when Dudley and Ella used to flirt openly before your very eyes,” he observed, glancing at me.

“Ah! you are right,” I cried angrily. “I foolishly trusted him, believing implicitly in his honour and in Ella’s purity.”

“Of the latter you surely have no cause for suspicion,” he exclaimed quickly.

“I am not so certain,” I replied with bitterness. “The more deeply I attempt to probe this mystery, the more sorrow I heap upon myself. I was happy in the belief that she loved no other man except me, yet apparently she is as tactful as an adventuress, and delights in toying with a man’s affections.”

“Every woman is fickle,” my friend remarked sympathetically. “If she is thrown into the society of one man frequently, and passes idle hours alone with him, she either ends in loving him or hating him. There is little purely platonic friendship between men and women nowadays.”

“Yes, alas!” I echoed, as we entered the carriage drive and passed the well-remembered spot where I had discovered the body. “There is very little indeed.”

A quarter of an hour later I stood alone before the window of the bright morning-room which commanded a beautiful view of the brilliant, sunlit Thames, and the row of tall, swaying poplars and drooping, wind-whitened willows on the opposite shore. I was awaiting Ella, who had, her maid told me, gone to her room.

Presently, pale-faced and trembling, she entered, and, closing the door, moved slowly towards me, stretching forth her hand in silence, her tearful eyes downcast. I grasped the slim, white fingers, and found them cold as marble.

“Geoffrey,” she exclaimed, low and huskily. “Geoffrey, forgive me!”

“Forgive! For what reason?” I inquired sternly, looking at her in admiration, yet determined to be firm. This was, I resolved, to be our last interview.

“Because I – I was foolish and weak, and – ” She paused, sighing deeply.

“Well?” I said cynically. “What other excuse?”

“Yes, yes,” she cried brokenly. “I know they are mean, paltry excuses. I know I am trying to make you believe it was not my own fault, yet – ” and pausing again, she raised her clear blue eyes to mine with passionate glance, “and yet, Geoffrey, I love you in a manner I have loved no other man before.”

“You have a strange way of exhibiting this so-called affection,” I observed coldly. “You actually encouraged the advances of the man in whom I reposed foolish and ill-placed confidence.”

“For a purpose. I never loved him – never,” she protested, trembling.

“You had a reason? A strange one, I should think,” I exclaimed angrily. “Indeed, at this very moment you are mourning the loss of this man.”

“Dudley Ogle was not your enemy, Geoffrey. He was your friend,” she answered, with a tremor in her voice. “Some day I will prove this to you. I cannot now. It is impossible.”

“Why?”

“I dare not!”

“Dare not! What do you fear?” I demanded in surprise, instantly releasing her hand.

“The consequences would be fatal to our love,” she gasped. Then, after a pause, she clutched my arm, and, burying her beautiful face upon my shoulder, sobbed bitterly.

“Our love!” I echoed contemptuously. Notwithstanding the fierceness of my anger, I smoothed her dark gold hair, and presently, when she grew a trifle calmer, endeavoured to discover the meaning of her strange, enigmatical words.

“You cannot know – you will never know – how dearly I have loved you, Geoffrey,” she cried, in answer to my eager questions. “Neither will you ever know how much I have suffered, how hard I have striven for your sake.”

“For my sake! Yet you admit having allowed Dudley Ogle to utter words that I alone had a right to utter!”

“Yes, I admit all,” she said, with a tragic touch of sorrow in her strained voice. “I deny nothing.”

“And you come to me asking forgiveness, believing that I can again trust you without hearing any explanation of your recent strange conduct with Beck, as well as with Dudley! I think you must regard me, Ella, as a weak, impressionable fool,” I added, with bitter sarcasm.

“No, I do not,” she cried quickly. “I appeal to your generosity towards a woman. I have been compelled to act against my own inclinations, compelled, in order to outwit my enemies, to act a part despicable and revolting. I can now only ask forgiveness,” and, throwing herself suddenly upon her knees before me, she cried, “See! Geoffrey, I crave one grain of pity from you, my old friend, the only man I have loved!”

“No, Ella,” I answered, quickly withdrawing my hand that she was pressing to her hot, fevered lips. “I may pity you, but forgive you never.”

“Never!” she gasped, clasping her breast with her hands as if to stay the wild beating of her heart, and struggling unevenly to her feet. “Why never?”

“Because you have deceived me.”

“Yes, yes!” she wailed. “I admit it, I admit it all, but I swear my actions were imperative. Ah! alas that you cannot know everything, or you would kiss me as fondly as you used to do. You, Geoffrey, would love me with a love even more tender and passionate than before, if only you were aware of what I have suffered for your sake.”

I turned from her in disgust. Her tragic attitude filled me with loathing and contempt, for I knew she was lying.

“Can you never again trust me?” she asked, in a low, hoarse voice. “Will you never forgive?”

“I can have no further confidence in a woman who has practised such artful deception as you have,” I answered, turning again towards her, and noticing the look of unutterable sadness in her tearful eyes.

“Deception!” she cried, starting. “What do you mean? What have I done?”

“You acknowledge having deceived me wilfully with all the deep cunning of an adventuress, yet you refuse me one word of explanation, either in regard to Beck or Dudley?”

“There is nothing to explain, as far as Mr Beck is concerned,” she answered demurely. “He is an old friend, and your suspicions that there was any love between us are absolutely absurd.”

“Why, then, did you confess in your letter that you were unworthy of my love!” I demanded with warmth, walking towards her.

She hung her head. There was a deep silence, broken only by the low ticking of the clock. In a few moments her hand stole in search of mine, and, engrossed in my own sad thoughts, I let it linger there.

“Geoffrey,” she said at length, timidly.

I gazed out upon the sunlit river, watching a boatful of happy holiday folk pass by, and remained stolidly unconscious.

“Geoffrey,” she repeated, “I tried ever so long to refrain from that confession, yet was unable. But I did not allude to Mr Beck. It was my conduct with Dudley that caused me to become a conscience-stricken wretch. I feared from day to day that you might discover our many long excursions and the idle afternoons we spent up the backwaters; he lazy and indolent, I using all my woman’s wiles to fascinate him and bring him to my feet.”

“And you succeeded,” I interrupted huskily.

“Yes, I succeeded,” she went on, speaking slowly, almost mechanically. “I had set my mind upon victory, and I achieved it after weeks and weeks of striving, dreading always that you might discover the truth, and fearing lest my conduct should appear in your eyes too serious for forgiveness. The blow that I dreaded has now fallen,” she cried, with a choking sob. “Dudley is dead, and I, compelled to speak the truth, have publicly acknowledged myself unworthy of your love.”

“Is it not best that I should know the truth?” I asked seriously. “You render your behaviour the more unpardonable by the absurd falsehoods you wish me to believe.”

“I do not wish you to believe any falsehoods,” she cried resentfully, her bright eyes flashing as she glanced at me. “What I have now told you is the truth. I swear it before Heaven!”

“You deliberately flirted with Dudley, with an object in view. Oh, no!” I laughed with contempt, “that is too lame a tale.”

“It is the truth,” she said, looking me straight in the face, her nervous hands toying with her rings. “Even though you may believe ill of me, I have lost neither honour nor self-respect. I acted under compulsion, to achieve one object.”

“And I hope you have gained the mysterious end you had in view,” I said, with bitter sarcasm.

“Yes, I have,” she replied, with an intenseness in her voice that surprised me. “I have gained my object even at risk of being discarded by you, Geoffrey, and being branded as a base adventuress.”

“Even at the cost of the life of the man you deceived?” I hazarded.

She started at my words. Her pale lips trembled, and in her eyes was a strange look, as if haunted by some spectral fear. The effect of this remark was extraordinary, and I at once added, —

“Remember, you suspect that Dudley’s death was not due to natural causes.”

“Suspect?” she cried. “I know he was foully murdered.”

“By whom?” I inquired, with breathless eagerness.

“I have yet to discover that,” she answered, in a low voice. “But I will make the elucidation of the mystery the one object of my life. It is I alone who will avenge his murder.”

“Your very words betray your love for him,” I exclaimed, disgusted.

“I tell you it is not because I loved him,” she protested, with indignation.

“Then why do you seek revenge?” I demanded ruthlessly.

“For reasons known to myself – reasons I refuse for the present to disclose,” she replied, regarding me with unwavering glance.

“And you expect me to again repose confidence in you, notwithstanding your steady refusal to explain anything?” I observed, with a laugh.

“All I have told you now, Geoffrey, is the truth,” she replied, looking earnestly into my eyes. “Once I deceived you, but I will never do so in future. I promise some day before long to explain all the facts to you; when I do so they will astound you. For the success of my plans I am compelled at present to preserve my secret, even from you.”

“What are your plans?”

“Be patient, and you shall see.”

“You intend to avenge Dudley’s death?”

“I do; and something further,” she said. “Only by the most careful investigation and the strictest secrecy can my plans be successfully carried out. Trust in me, Geoffrey. Tell me that you will reconsider your decision not to forgive me,” she whispered, leaning upon my shoulder with one arm entwined affectionately about my neck, as was her habit. “And I will yet prove to you that I am an honest woman who has acted only in your interests.”

“In my interests? How?” I asked, amazed.

“You shall know all later, when I have ascertained the truth.”

“Tell me one thing, Ella,” I exclaimed, after a pause. “Have you any idea whether Dudley had any occupation?”

“Occupation? I always understood he had enough money to be independent.”

Then taking from my vest pocket the object I had picked up from among the contents of the dead man’s pockets displayed on the table in the Coroners’s Court, I held it up to her, saying seriously, —

“Now, tell me truthfully, Ella, have you ever seen this in Dudley’s possession?”

She glanced at it for an instant, holding her breath, as across her blanched countenance there passed an expression of bewildered amazement.

The object I held beneath her gaze was insignificant in itself, merely a small brass seal, but it bore the Warnham arms in exact imitation of the cut amethyst worn by the Earl. It was the seal which had been used to manufacture the duplicate of the envelope containing England’s secret alliance with Germany.

The suddenness with which I had produced it startled and nonplussed her. As I transfixed her blue eyes with my keen, suspicious gaze, her white lips moved, but no sound fell from them. Embarrassment held her dumb.

Chapter Nine

The Bond of Secrecy

I held the small brass stamp towards her, inviting her to examine it, but she shrank back with an expression of terror and repulsion, refusing to touch it.

“Have you ever seen Dudley with this in his hand?” I asked, repeating my question seriously, determined upon learning the truth.

“Where did you find it?” she inquired, a look of bewilderment upon her haggard face.

“You have not answered my question, Ella,” I said sternly.

“Your question? Ah!” she cried, as if in sudden remembrance of my words. “I – I have never seen Dudley with it. I – I swear I haven’t.”

“Is that the absolute truth?” I asked in doubt.

“The truth!” she echoed. “Did I not, a moment ago, promise you I would never again deceive you by word or action? Can you never have confidence in me?” she asked, in a tone of mingled regret and reproach.

“But this was found in Dudley’s possession,” I said, holding it nearer my gaze, and detecting in the bright sunlight streaming through the window small portions of black wax still adhering to the cleverly-cut coat of arms. Black wax, I remembered, had been used to secure the dummy envelope.

“And even if that were so, is it such a very remarkable fact that a man should carry a seal?” she asked suddenly, raising her brows and assuming a well-feigned air of surprise. At that instant it occurred to me that she was an adept in preserving a mystery; she could practice deception with a verisimilitude little short of marvellous.

“But this,” I observed, “is no ordinary seal.”

“It looks ordinary enough,” she answered, smiling. “It’s only brass.”

“But its discovery forms a clue to a most serious and startling crime,” I said.

“A crime!” she gasped. “What do you mean? Dudley’s murder?”

I did not fail to notice that she used the word “murder” as if she had absolute proof that death had not been due to natural causes. Yet the effect of my announcement had been to fill her with sudden apprehension. She strove to appear amazed, but I thought I could detect in her attitude and bearing a fear that I had knowledge of her secret.

“It is most probably connected with that tragic event,” I answered meaningfully, looking her straight in the face. “The police will no doubt pursue their investigations and clear up the matter.”

“The police!” she whispered hoarsely, just as Mrs Laing had done when the officers had entered her house. “Do you think they will discover the cause of poor Dudley’s death?”

“I cannot say,” I answered calmly. “They will, however, discover the reason he had this seal in his possession.”

“I tell you it was not his – I mean I never saw him with it,” she protested.

“But he may have had it in his pocket and not shown it to you. Indeed, there were reasons that he should not do so because it was used for a nefarious purpose.”

“For what?” she asked, suddenly evincing an interest in the stamp, taking it from my hand and examining it closely.

It was on my tongue to relate to her the whole circumstances, but suddenly remembering that for the present the secret of England’s peril must be preserved if the identity of the spy were to be discovered, I refrained, and answered, —

“The man who used that seal committed one of the worst crimes of which a man can be guilty.”

“What was it; tell me?” she asked quickly. “Surely Dudley never committed any offence!”

“I am not certain,” I answered gloomily. “An enemy who would pose as a friend, as he has done, might be capable of any deceit.”

“Have I not already told you that he was not your enemy, Geoffrey?” she observed calmly.

“Ah, Ella,” I cried in disgust, “all these falsehoods only render your conduct the more despicable. You will deny next that you went down to Warnham to meet him surreptitiously.”

“To Warnham?” she cried, white to the lips.

“Yes. Do you deny it?”

“No. I – it is quite true that I met him there,” she faltered.

“You spent the day with my rival, unknown to me,” I went on bitterly. “Yet you declare that you never loved him?”

Her breath came and went in short, quick gasps, her haggard eyes were fixed; she stood silent, unable to make reply.

“It is useless to further prolong this painful interview,” I exclaimed at last, turning from her.

“I swear I never loved him,” she cried suddenly. “Some day, when you know the truth, you will bitterly regret how you have misjudged me, how, while striving to serve you, I have fallen under suspicion.”

“But your visit to Warnham!” I said. “Is that an act such as can be overlooked without explanation?”

“I only ask you to place trust in me, and I will prove ere long that I acted under compulsion.”

“You want me to believe that he held you irrevocably in his power, I suppose?” I said with biting sarcasm.

She nodded, and held her head in downcast, dejected attitude.

“It is easy enough to allege all this, now that he is dead,” I observed doubtfully.

“I have told you the truth. I feared him, and was compelled to obey,” she exclaimed hoarsely.

“What was the object of your visit? Surely you can explain that?”

“No. I cannot.”

“You absolutely refuse?”

“Absolutely,” she answered, in a low, strained voice, looking straight at me with an expression of determination.

“Then we must part,” I said, slowly but firmly disengaging myself from her embrace.

“No, no,” she wailed, sobbing bitterly and clinging more closely to me. “Do not be so cruel, Geoffrey. You would never utter these words could you know all.”

“But you will not tell me,” I cried.

“At present I dare not. Wait; be patient, and you shall know everything.”

“How long must I remain in doubt and ignorance?” I asked.

“I know not. To-morrow the bond of secrecy may be removed from my lips, or it may be many months ere I can fearlessly speak and explain,” she answered in a strange voice, almost as if speaking to herself.

“From your words it would appear that some person still holds power over you, even though Dudley is dead,” I said, looking into her eyes seriously.

She sighed deeply, and her hand, resting upon my shoulder, trembled violently. “Yes, you guess the truth,” she answered. “I would tell you all – explain all these facts that no doubt puzzle you and cause me to appear base, heartless and deceitful – yet I fear the consequences. If I did so we should be parted for ever.”

“But if you told the truth and cleared your conduct, I should then have confidence again, and love you. How should we be parted?”

Pale and silent she stood, with her eyes resting upon the distant line of drooping willows. Not until I had repeated my question did she move and answer in a voice almost inaudible, as she clung to me, —

“We should be parted by death,” she whispered hoarsely.

“By death!” I cried, dismayed. “What do you mean, Ella? Do you fear that the same tragic fate that has overtaken Dudley will overtake you?”

She shuddered, and burying her white face upon my shoulder, again burst into a torrent of tears. Hers was indeed a woeful figure, bent, dejected and grief-stricken. Raising her head at last, she stifled her sobs with an effort, and implored with earnestness, —

“Tell me, Geoffrey, that you will not prejudge me. Tell me with your own lips that you will be content to wait in patience until I can present the facts to you in their true light. I am not an adventuress, as you think. I have never, I swear before Heaven, looked upon any other man with thought of affection. I have told you of my inability to speak; I can tell you no more.”

I made a movement, steady, stern and deliberate, to put her from me; but, with her arms around my neck, she cried in an agonised tone, —

“No, Geoffrey. At least show me a single grain of pity. Be patient. If you desire it I will not come near you until I can reply to your questions and clear my conduct of the stigma upon it; I will do anything you ask so long as you give me time to pursue my investigations and free myself from this terrible thralldom. Say you will, and bring back peace to my mind and happiness to my heart. I love you, Geoffrey, I love you!” and her hot, passionate lips met mine in a manner that showed plainly her terrible agitation, and her fear lest I should cast her off.

Slowly, during those moments of painful silence that followed, my anger and bitterness somewhat abated, and, even against my better judgment, feelings of pity swayed my mind. It seemed to me, as I reflected upon the past, that Dudley Ogle had been unfortunate in his early surroundings and education; his character had received a wrong bias from the very beginning, and the possession of wealth had increased it. And yet, in spite of all that, there had been something pleasant and good in him. No man is altogether hideous when truly known, and I had not yet accurately ascertained the character of his mysterious relations with my well-beloved. I had, during this interview, caught glimpses of the real, true woman beneath the veil of falsehood and evasion of the truth; I had seen a wistful look occasionally in Ella’s eyes, as though she were haunted constantly by some terrible dread.

Yea, I pitied her. Perhaps, if I waited, the time would come when her nature would recover from the blight that had fallen upon it; when the alien element that had grafted itself upon her true life would be expelled by those avenging powers that vex and plague the erring soul, not in mockery, but to save it from the death that cannot die.

The strangeness of her manner, and the tragic apprehension of her words would, I knew, never fade from my memory; yet half inclined to believe I had misjudged her, I at length, although feeling that the world could never again be quite the same for me, drew her slight form towards me, and imprinting a long, passionate kiss upon her ready lips, said, —

“I will try and think of you as a woman who has been wronged, Ella. I will wait until you can explain, but remember that until you relate to me truthfully the whole of the facts there can be no love between us.”

“No love!” she wailed in a voice of poignant grief. “Is your love for me so utterly dead, then, that you should say this?”

“No,” I answered, caressing her, stroking her wealth of gold-brown hair fondly as of old. “I love you still, Ella; yet, speaking candidly, I cannot trust you further until you explain the truth.”

“But you will be patient, will you not?” she urged. “Remember that I have before me a task so difficult that it may require all my woman’s tact and cunning to accomplish it. But I will — I must succeed; failure will mean that I lose you, my best beloved. Therefore wait, and ere long I will convince you that I have not lied.”

“Yes, I will wait,” I said, kissing her once again. “Until you have cleared yourself, however, remember that I cannot love you as I have done.”

“Very well,” she answered, her tear-stained face brightening. “If such is your decision, I am content. Before long I will explain all the facts, and then, I feel confident, you, noblest and dearest, will love me even better than before.”

“I trust I shall,” I answered with heartfelt earnestness, taking her small hand and pressing it softly; “for I love you, Ella.”

“I care for nothing else,” she answered, raising her face to mine and smiling through her tears. “I am happy in the knowledge that you still think of me. You have enemies; yes, many. But there was one that loved you always – ay, and loves you now, and ever shall love you.”

For a moment I gazed into the deep blue depths of her clear, trusting eyes, still grasping her tiny hand in mine, but almost at that instant the door opened and Mrs Laing, fussy, good-natured, and full of sympathy, entered, and seating herself, commenced to chat about the events of that memorable morning.

Chapter Ten

England's Peril

By the discovery of the duplicate of Lord Warnham's private seal in the possession of my dead companion, it became impressed upon my mind that Dudley Ogle, the man in whom I had placed implicit trust, had not only abused my confidence by making love to Ella, but was a spy in the Russian secret service. Try how I would I could see no extenuating circumstances, and as next morning, when sitting alone in my London flat, moody and disconsolate, I calmly reflected upon the startling events of the past few days, I saw plainly, from Ella's attitude when I had exhibited the brass stamp, that, notwithstanding her declaration to the contrary, she had seen it before.

It seemed placed beyond all doubt that Dudley had acted in conjunction with certain agents, who had by some means ascertained the very day and hour that the secret convention would arrive from Berlin. Then Dudley, armed with the forged duplicate, called upon me, and while we were together extracted the document from my pocket and substituted the envelope. Yet there was the registration mark upon it, so cleverly imitated as to defy detection. How that had been placed upon the dummy puzzled me, for the designation I had written could not be known until the envelope, with its precious contents, had been filched from my pocket.

The reason of Dudley's visit to Warnham was now, to a certain extent, explained. More than probable it seemed that through bribery he had obtained from one of the servants an impression in wax of the Earl's private seal, and from it the brass stamp had been cut. The theft of the document had been accomplished with a neatness that seemed almost miraculous; and if Dudley really had stolen it, he must have been a most adroit pickpocket. Nevertheless, even though his every action had now corroborated up to the hilt the suspicion that he was a spy, I could not, somehow, believe him capable of such crafty, nay devilish, deception. Friends that we were, I could have trusted him with any secret, or with any of my possessions; but these revelations startled and amazed me.

Still there was a more remarkable and puzzling phase of the mystery. If Ella's fears were well grounded, why had he been murdered, and by whom?

The mysterious secret possessed by the woman I adored, the woman who held me under the spell of her marvellous beauty, was of a tragic and terrible nature, I felt assured. No doubt it had some connection with Dudley's death, and that sinister circumstance, once elucidated, would, I knew, furnish a very valuable clue to the identity of the spy, if perchance the innocence of my companion should be established, as I hoped it might be.

There was still one fact, too, that required explanation, one that seemed to prove conclusively that Dudley was in the pay of our enemies. I had found, on looking over his possessions in our cottage at Shepperton, some pieces of crumpled foolscap. He had evidently intended to throw them away, but being unable to get rid of them at the moment, had placed them in a drawer and locked them up. On smoothing them out, I found another piece of paper inside. To my astonishment I saw it was a letter written by me, while the pieces of foolscap accompanying it were covered with words and sentences in ink and pencil, showing how carefully he had studied and copied all the characteristics of my handwriting. These papers were, in themselves, sufficient evidence that he had practised the forger's art.

I had, after leaving Staines, returned straight to Shepperton, and in company with a detective carefully investigated all my friend's belongings. We spent the afternoon and evening in reading through heaps of letters, but discovered nothing that would lead to any suspicion of foul play. The detective made notes of one or two of the addresses of the writers, and took charge of several letters relating to money matters. When, however, we had removed all the correspondence from the small

wooden box in which it had been kept, the detective ascertained that there was a false bottom, and unable to find out the secret whereby it might be opened, we forced it with a chisel.

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

“What’s this, I wonder?” the detective said, puzzled by the unfamiliar characters in the writing.

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, sir,” he exclaimed, with an expression of displeasure when he saw me, “to what, pray, do I owe this intrusion?”

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

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

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

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

“A traitor who will sell his country’s honour is capable of any falsehood whereby to justify himself,” he snapped savagely.

“I am no traitor,” I protested in anger.

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

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

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

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

“Yes, falsely.”

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

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

“By what means?”

“By documentary evidence.”

“Documentary evidence!” he exclaimed. “Of what kind?”

“You will remember that I told you of the death of the only man who could speak regarding my absence from the office and my return.”

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

“No,” I said with emphasis. “I am not a murderer.”

“Then why did this woman – what’s her name? – Ella Laing,” he said, referring to the letter, “why did she allege foul play?”

“I cannot tell; but all the facts I have ascertained point to the same conclusion, although the medical evidence negated any such suggestion.”

“Then what is your contention?”

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

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

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

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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