

Le Queux William

The Price of Power



William Le Queux
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Содержание

Chapter One.	5
Chapter Two.	9
Chapter Three.	15
Chapter Four.	19
Chapter Five.	24
Chapter Six.	28
Chapter Seven.	31
Chapter Eight.	34
Chapter Nine.	38
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	39

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The Price of Power / Being Chapters from the Secret History of the Imperial Court of Russia

Chapter One. The Madcap

“M’sieur Colin Trewinnard?”

“That is my name, Captain Stoyanovitch,” I replied in surprise. “You know it quite well.”

“The usual formality, *mon cher ami!*”

And the tall, handsome equerry in the white uniform of the Imperial Guard laughed lightly, clicked his heels together, and handed me a letter which I saw bore the Imperial cipher upon its black seal.

“From His Imperial Majesty the Emperor,” he added in Russian.

I held my breath. Had the blow fallen?

With eager, trembling fingers I tore open the envelope and found therein a note in French, merely the words:

“His Imperial Majesty the Emperor commands Mr Colin Trewinnard to private audience to-day at 3:30 p.m.

“St. Petersburg, June 28th.”

“Very well,” I managed to reply. “Tell Colonel Polivanoff that – that I shall be there. Have a cigarette?” and I handed him the silver box of Bogdanoffs which were the common property of the staff of the Embassy.

Having flung himself into a big easy chair, he stretched out his long legs and lit up.

“Well,” I said, leaning against the edge of the writing-table, “I suppose the Emperor returned from Odessa early this morning – eh?”

“Yes,” replied the elegant officer, in English. “Thank Heaven, the journey is at last over. Ah! what a tour of the Empire! At Orel we held the great review, then on to Saratov, where there were more manoeuvres and a review. Afterwards we went down the Volga to Astrakhan to unveil the new statue to Peter the Great; then Kertch, more manoeuvres, and into the Crimea for a week’s rest. Afterwards across to Odessa, and then, by a three nights’ journey, back here to Petersburg. Faugh! How we all hate that armoured train!”

“But it is surely highly necessary, my dear Stoyanovitch,” I said. “With this abominable wave of anarchism which has spread over Europe, it behoves the Secret Police to take every precaution for His Majesty’s safety!”

“Ah! my dear friend,” laughed the equerry. “I tell you it is not at all pleasant to travel when one expects every moment that the train will be blown up. One’s sleeping-berth, though covered with a down quilt, is but a bed of torture in such conditions.”

“Yes,” I said. “But His Majesty – how does he bear it?”

“The Emperor has nerves of iron. He is the least concerned of any of us. But, *mon Dieu!* I would not be in his shoes for the wealth of all the Russias.”

“What – more conspiracies?” I exclaimed.

“Conspiracies!” sighed the Captain. “*Mon Dieu!* A fresh one is discovered by the political police every week. Only the day before the Emperor left for the country he found among the Ministers’ daily reports upon the table in his private cabinet an anonymous letter telling him that he will meet with a

tragic end on the sixth of the present month. How this letter got there nobody knows. His Majesty is seldom out of temper, but I never saw him so furiously angry before.”

“It is unfortunate,” I said. “Apparently he cannot trust even his immediate *entourage*.”

“Exactly,” answered the dark-haired handsome man. “The constant reports of General Markoff regarding the revolutionists must be most alarming. And yet he preserves an outward calm that is truly remarkable. But, by the way,” he added, “His Majesty, before I left the Palace with that letter, summoned me and gave me a message for you – a verbal one.”

“Oh! What was that?”

“He told me to say that he sent to you a word – let me see, I wrote it down lest I should forget,” and pulling down his left shirt cuff, he spelt:

“B-a-t-h-i-l-d-i-s.”

“Thank you,” I replied briefly.

“What does it mean? Is it some password?” Ivan Stoyanovitch asked with considerable curiosity.

“That’s scarcely a fair question,” I said in rebuke.

“Ah! of course,” he replied, with a touch of sarcasm. “I ought not to have asked you. Pardon me, my friend. I forgot that you enjoy His Majesty’s confidence – that – ”

“Not at all,” I protested. “I am but a humble attaché of a foreign Embassy. It is not likely that I am entrusted with the secrets of Russia.”

“Not with those of Russia, but those of the Emperor personally. Dachkoff was discussing you at the Turf Club one night not long ago.”

“That’s interesting,” I laughed. “And what had the old man to say?”

“Oh, nothing of a very friendly nature. But, you know, he never has a good word to say for anybody.”

“Gamblers seldom have. I hear he lost ten thousand roubles to Prince Savinski at the Union the night before last.”

“I heard it was more,” and the long-legged equerry leaned back his head and watched the blue rings of cigarette smoke slowly ascend to the ceiling of the room, through the long window of which was a view across the Neva, with the grim Fortress of Peter and Paul opposite. “But,” he went on, “we were speaking of these constant conspiracies. Though we have been back in Petersburg only a few hours, Markoff has already reported a desperate plot. The conspirators, it seems, had bored a tunnel and placed a mine under the Nevski, close to the corner of the Pushkinskaya, and it was arranged to explode it as the Emperor’s carriage passed early this morning on the way from the Nicholas station. But Markoff – the ever-watchful Markoff – discovered the projected attempt only at eleven o’clock last night – two hours before we passed. There have been thirty-three arrests up to the present, including a number of girl students.”

“Markoff is really a marvel,” I declared. “He scents a conspiracy anywhere.”

“And his spies are everywhere. Markoff takes a good deal of the credit, but it is his agents who do the real work. He has saved the Emperor’s life on at least a dozen occasions.”

I said nothing. I was thinking over the word – a very significant word – which the Emperor had sent me by his equerry. To me, that word meant a very great deal.

Our Ambassador, Sir Harding Lowe, being at home in England on leave, the Honourable Claude Saunderson, our Councillor of Embassy, was acting as Chargé d’Affaires. As far as we knew the political horizon was calm enough, save the dark little war cloud which perpetually hovers over the Balkans and grows darker each winter. The German negotiations with Russia had been concluded, and the foreign outlook appeared more serene than it had been for many months.

Yet within the great Winter Palace there was unrest and trouble. Jealousy, hatred and all uncharitableness were rife amid the Tzar’s immediate *entourage*, while the spirit of revolution was spreading daily with greater significance.

Within the past twelve months the two Prime Ministers, Semenov and Mouravieff, had been assassinated by bombs, five governors of provinces had met with violent deaths, and eight chiefs of police of various cities had fallen victims of the revolutionists, who had frankly and openly vowed to take the life of the Tzar himself.

Was it any wonder, then, that the Emperor lived in bomb-proof rooms both in Petersburg and Tzarskoie-Selo, as well as at Gatchina; that he never slept in the same bed twice, that all food served to him was previously tasted, that he never gave audience without a loaded revolver lying upon the table before him, and that he surrounded himself by hordes of police-agents and spies? Surely none could envy him such a life of constant apprehension and daily terror; for twice in a month had bombs been thrown at his carriage, while five weeks before he had had both horses killed by an explosion in Moscow and only escaped death by a sheer miracle.

True, the revolutionists were unusually active at that moment, and the throne of Russia had become seriously menaced. Any other but a man of iron constitution and nerves of steel would surely have been driven to lunacy by the constant terror in which he was forced to exist. Yet, though he took ample precaution, he never betrayed the slightest anxiety, a fact which held everyone amazed. He was a true Russian, an autocrat of dogged courage, quick decision, always forceful and impelling, a faithful friend, but a bitter and revengeful enemy; a born ruler and a manly Emperor in every sense of the word.

“The Grand Duchess Natalia has been with the Emperor. Did she return with you this morning?” I inquired.

“Yes,” drawled the equerry. “She’s been admired everywhere, as usual, and half our staff are over head and ears in love with her. She’s been flirting outrageously.”

“Then half your staff are fools,” I exclaimed bluntly.

“Ah, my dear Trewinnard, she is so sweet, so very charming, so exquisite, so entirely unlike the other girls at Court – so delightfully unconventional.”

“A little too unconventional to suit some – if all I hear be true,” I remarked with a smile.

“You know her, of course. She’s an intimate friend of yours. I overheard her one day telling the Emperor what an excellent tennis player you were.”

“Well, I don’t fancy His Majesty interests himself very much in tennis,” I laughed. “He has other, and far more important, matters to occupy his time – the affairs of his great nation.”

“Natalia, or Tattie, as they call her in the Imperial circle, is his favourite niece. Nowadays she goes everywhere with him, and does quite a lot of his most private correspondence – that which he does not even trust to Calitzine.”

“Then the Emperor is more friendly towards Her Imperial Highness than before – eh?” I asked, for truth to tell I was very anxious to satisfy myself upon this point.

“Yes. She has been forgiven for that little escapade in Moscow.”

“What escapade?” I asked, feigning surprise.

“What escapade?” my friend echoed. “Why, you know well enough! I’ve heard it whispered that it was owing to your cleverness as a diplomat that the matter was so successfully hushed up – and an ugly affair it was, too. The suicide of her lover.”

“That’s a confounded lie!” I said quickly. “He did not commit suicide at all. At most, he left Russia with a broken heart, and that is not usually a fatal malady.”

“Well, you needn’t get angry about it, my dear fellow,” complained my friend. “The affair is successfully hushed up, and I fancy she’s got a lot to thank you for.”

“Not at all,” I declared. “I know that you fellows have coupled my name with hers, just because I’ve danced with her a few times at the Court balls, and I’ve been shooting at her father’s castle away in Samara. But I assure you my reputation as the little Grand Duchess’s intimate friend is entirely a mythical one.” Captain Stoyanovitch only smiled incredulously, stretched out his long legs and shrugged his shoulders.

“Well,” I went on, “has she been very terrified about all these reports of conspiracies?”

“Frightened out of her life, poor child! And who would not be?” he asked. “We didn’t know from one hour to another that we might not all be blown into the air. Everywhere the railway was lined by Cossacks, of course. Such a demonstration is apt to lend an air of security, but, alas! there is no security with the very Ministry undermined by revolution, as it is.”

I sighed. What he said was, alas! too true. Russia, at that moment, was in very evil case, and none knew it better than we, the impartial onlookers at the British Embassy.

The warm June sun fell across the rather faded carpet of that sombre old-fashioned room with its heavy furniture, which was my own sanctum, and as the smart captain of the Imperial Guard lolled back picturesquely in the big armchair I looked at him reflectively.

They were strange thoughts which flooded my brain at that moment – thoughts concerning that pretty, high-born young lady whom we had just been discussing, the girl to whom, he declared, His Majesty entrusted the greatest secrets of the throne.

Stoyanovitch was an extremely elegant and somewhat irresponsible person, and the fact that the Emperor had allowed the Grand Duchess Natalia to write his private letters did not strike me as the actual truth. The Tzar was far too cautious to entrust the secrets of a nation to a mere girl who was certainly known to be greatly addicted to the gentle pastime of flirtation.

Whatever the equerry told us, we at the Embassy usually added the proverbial grain of salt. Indeed, the diplomat at any post abroad learns to believe nothing which he hears, and only half he actually sees.

But the Emperor had sent me, by the mouth of that smart young officer, the word “Bathildis” – which was an ancient woman’s Christian name – and to me it conveyed a secret message, an announcement which held me in surprise and apprehension.

What could have happened?

I dreaded to think.

Chapter Two. An Audience of the Emperor

“You understand, Trewinnard. There must be no scandal. What I have just revealed to you is in strictest confidence – an inviolable secret – a personal secret of my own.”

“I understand Your Majesty’s commands perfectly.”

“There is already a lot of uncharitable chatter in the Court circle regarding the other matter, I hear. Has anything reached you at the Embassy?”

“Not a whisper, as far as I am aware. Indeed, Your Majesty’s words have greatly surprised me. I did not believe the affair to be so very serious.”

“Serious!” echoed the Emperor Alexander, speaking in English, his dark, deep-set eyes fixed upon me. “I tell you it is all too serious, now that I find myself completely isolated – oh! yes, Trewinnard, isolated – with scarce one single friend. God knows! I have done my best for the nation, but, alas! everyone’s hand is raised against me.” And his firm mouth hardened behind his full, dark beard, and he drew his hand wearily across his broad, white brow.

The room in the Winter Palace in which we sat was cosy and luxuriantly furnished, the two windows looking forth upon a grey, cheerless quadrangle whence came the tramp of soldiers at drill.

Where we sat we could hear the sharp words of command in Russian, and the clang of the rifle-butts striking the stones.

The room was essentially English in its aspect, with its rich china-blue Axminster carpet, and silk upholstery with curtains to match, while the panelling from floor to ceiling was enamelled dead white, against which the fine water-colour drawings of naval scenes stood out in vivid relief. Upon a buhl table was a great silver bowl filled with Marshal Niel roses – for His Majesty was passionately fond of flowers – and beside it, large framed panel photographs of the Tzarina and his children. And yet those dead white walls and the shape of those square windows struck a curious incongruous note, for if the actual truth be told, those walls were of steel, and that private cabinet of the Emperor had been constructed by the Admiralty Department with armour-plates which were bomb-proof.

That apartment in the west angle of the Palace quadrangle was well-known to me, for in it His Majesty had given me private audience many times. That long white door which had been so silently closed upon me by the Cossack sentry when I entered was, I knew, of armour-plate, four inches in thickness, while beside the windows were revolving shutters of chilled steel.

There, at that great littered roll-top writing-table, upon which was the reading-lamp with its shade of salmon-pink silk with the loaded revolver beside it, the Emperor worked, attending to affairs of State. And in his padded chair, leaning back easily as he spoke to me, was His Majesty himself, a broad-shouldered, handsome man just past middle-age, dressed in a suit of navy blue serge. He was a big-faced, big-limbed, big-handed man of colossal physique and marvellous intelligence. Though haunted by the terror of violent death, he was yet an autocrat to the finger-tips, whose bearing was ever that of a sovereign; yet his eyes had a calm, sympathetic, kindly look, and those who knew him intimately were well aware that he was not the monster of oppression which his traducers had made him out to be before the eyes of Europe.

True, with a stroke of that grey quill pen lying there upon his blotting-pad he had sent many a man and woman without trial to their unrecorded doom, either in the frozen wastes of Northern Siberia, to the terrible mines of Nerchinsk, to the horrors of the penal island of Sakhalin, or to those fearful subterranean *oubliettes* at Schusselburg, whence no prisoner has ever returned. But, as an autocrat, he dealt with his revolutionary enemies as they would deal with him. They conspired to kill him, and he retaliated by consigning them to a lingering death.

On the other hand, I myself knew how constant was his endeavour to ferret out abuses of administration, to alleviate the sufferings of the poor, to give the peasantry education and all the benefits of modern civilisation as we in England know them, and how desperate, alas! were his constant struggles with that unscrupulous camarilla which ever surrounded him, constantly preventing him from learning the truth concerning any particular matter.

Thus, though striving to do his best for his subjects and for his nation, yet, surrounded as he was by a corrupt Ministry and a more corrupt Court, this big, striking man in blue serge was, perhaps, next to the Sultan of Turkey, the best-hated man in all Europe.

My own position was a somewhat singular one. A few months after my appointment to Petersburg from Brussels I had been able to render His Majesty a slight personal service. In fact, I had, when out one evening with two other attachés of the German Embassy, learned by mere accident of a desperate plot which was to be put into execution on the following day. My informant was a dancer at the Opera, who had taken too much champagne at supper. I sought audience of the Emperor early next day, and was fortunately just in time to prevent him from passing a certain spot near the Michailovski Palace, where six men were stationed with bombs of picric acid, ready to hurl. For that service His Majesty had been graciously pleased to take me into his confidence – a confidence which, I hope, I never abused. From me he was always eager to ascertain what was really happening beyond that high wall of untruth which the camarilla had so cleverly built up and preserved, and more than once had he entrusted me with certain secret missions.

I was not in uniform, as that audience was a private one; but as His Majesty, ruler of one hundred and thirty millions of people, passed me his finely-chased golden box full of cigarettes – and we both lit one, as was our habit – his brow clouded, and with a sigh he said:

“To tell the truth, Trewinnard, I am also very anxious indeed concerning the second matter – concerning the little rebel.”

“I know that Your Majesty must be,” I replied. “But, after all, Her Imperial Highness is a girl of exceptional beauty and highest spirits; and even if she indulges in – well, in a little harmless flirtation, she surely may be forgiven.”

“Other girls may be forgiven, but not those of the blood-royal,” he said in mild rebuke. “The Empress is quite as concerned about her as I am. Why, even upon this last journey of ours I found her more than once flirting with Stoyanovitch, my equerry. True, he’s a good-looking young fellow, and of excellent family, yet she ought to know that such a thing is quite unwarrantable; she ought to know that to those of the blood-royal love is, alas! forbidden.”

I was surprised at this. I had no idea that she and Ivan Stoyanovitch had become friends. He had never hinted at it.

“The fact is, Trewinnard,” the Emperor went on, blowing a cloud of cigarette smoke from his lips, “if this continues I shall be reluctantly compelled to banish her to the Caucasus, or somewhere where she will be kept out of mischief.”

“But permit me, Sire, to query whether flirting is really mischief,” I exclaimed with a smile. “Every girl of her age – and she is hardly nineteen – fancies herself in love, mostly with men much older than herself.”

“Our women, Trewinnard, are, alas! not like women of the people,” was the Sovereign’s calm reply, his deep, earnest eyes upon mine. “It is their misfortune that they are not. They can never enjoy the same freedom as those fortunate ones of the middle-class; they seldom are permitted to marry the man they love, and though they may live in palaces and move amid the gay society of Court, yet their ideas are warped from birth, and broken hearts, alas! beat beneath their diamonds.”

“Yes, I suppose what Your Majesty says is, alas! too true. Ladies of the blood-royal are forbidden freedom, love and happiness. And when one of them happens to break the iron bonds of conventionality, then scandal quickly results; the Press overflows with it.”

“In this case scandal would already have resulted had you not acted as promptly as you did,” His Majesty said. “Where is that lad Geoffrey Hamborough now?” asked the autocrat suddenly.

“Living on his father’s estate in Yorkshire,” I replied. “I hope I have been able to put an end to that fatal folly; but with a girl of the Grand Duchess’s type one can never be too certain.”

“Ah! the mischievous little minx!” exclaimed the Emperor with a kindly smile. “I’ve watched, and seen how cunning she is – and how she has cleverly misled even me. Well, she must alter, Trewinnard, she must alter – or she must be sent away to the Caucasus.”

“Where she would have her freedom, and probably flirt more outrageously than ever,” I ventured to remark.

“You seem to regard her as hopeless,” he said, looking sharply into my eyes as he leaned back in his chair.

“Not entirely hopeless, Sire, only as a most interesting character study.”

“I have been speaking to her father this morning, and I have suggested sending her to Paris, or, perhaps, to London; there to live *incognito* under the guardianship of some responsible middle-aged person, until she can settle down. At present she flirts with every man she meets, and I am greatly concerned about her.”

“Every man is ready to flirt with Her Imperial Highness – first, because of her position, and, secondly, because of her remarkable beauty,” I assured him.

“You think her beautiful – eh, Trewinnard?”

“I merely echo the popular judgment,” I replied. “It is said she is one of the most beautiful girls in all Russia.”

“Ah!” he laughed. “Next we shall have her flirting with you, Trewinnard. You are a bachelor. Do beware of the little dark-eyed witch, I beg of you!”

“No fear of such *contretemps*, Sire,” I assured him with a smile. “I am double her age, and, moreover, a confirmed bachelor. The Embassy is expensive, and I cannot afford the luxury of a wife – and especially an Imperial Grand Duchess.”

“Who knows – eh, Trewinnard? Who knows?” exclaimed the Sovereign good-naturedly. “But let’s return to the point. Am I to understand that you are ready and willing to execute this secret commission for me? You are well aware how highly I value the confidential services you have already rendered to me. But for you, remember, I should to-day have been a dead man.”

“No, Sire,” I protested. “Please do not speak of that. It was the intervention of Providence for your protection.”

“Ah, yes!” he said in a low, fervent tone, his brows contracting. “I thank God constantly for sparing me for yet another day from the hands of my unscrupulous enemies, so that I may work for the good of the beloved nation over which I am called to rule.”

There, in that room, wherein I had so often listened to his words of wisdom, I sat fully recognising that though an Emperor and an autocrat, he was, above all, a Man.

With all the heavy burden of affairs of State – and not even a road could be made anywhere in the Russian Empire, or a bridge built, or a gas-pipe laid, without his signature – with all the onus of the autocratic Sovereign-power upon his shoulders, and with that constant wariness which he was compelled to exercise against that cunning camarilla of Ministers, yet one of his chief concerns was with that pretty little madcap Natalia, daughter of his brother, the Grand Duke Nicholas.

He wished to suppress her superabundance of high spirits and stamp out her tomboy instincts.

“I am reading your thoughts, Trewinnard,” the Emperor remarked at last, pressing his cigarette-end slowly into the silver ashtray to extinguish it. “My request has placed you in a rather awkward position – eh?”

“What Your Majesty has revealed to me this afternoon has utterly amazed me. I feel bewildered, for I see how dire must be the result if the truth were ever betrayed.”

“It will never be. You are the only person who has suspicion of it besides myself.”

“And I shall never speak – never!” I assured him gravely.

“I know that you are entirely loyal to me. I am Emperor, it is true, but I am, nevertheless, a man of my word, just as you are,” he replied, his intelligent face dark and grave. “Yes. I thought you would realise the seriousness of the present situation, and I know that you alone I can trust. I have not even told the Empress.”

“Why not?”

“For obvious reasons.”

I was silent. I only then realised the motive of his hesitation.

“I admit that Your Majesty’s request has placed me in a somewhat awkward position,” I said at last, bending forward in my chair. “Truth to tell, I – well, I’m hardly hopeful of success, for the mission with which I am entrusted is so extremely difficult, and so – ”

“I am fully aware of that,” he interrupted. “Yet I feel confident that you, who have saved my life on one occasion, will not hesitate to undertake this service to the best of your ability. Use the utmost discretion, and you may get at the truth. I do not disguise from you the fact that upon certain contingencies, dependent on the success of your mission, depends the throne of Russia – the dynasty. Do you follow?” And he looked me straight in the face with those big, round brown eyes, an open, straight, honest look, as became a man who was fearless – an Emperor.

“I regret that I do not exactly understand,” I ventured to exclaim, whereat he rose, tall, handsome and muscular, and strode to the window. The band of the Imperial Guard was playing below in the great paved quadrangle, as it always did each day at four o’clock when the Emperor was in residence. For a few seconds he stood peering forth critically at the long lines of soldiers drawn up across the square. Then the man whose word was law turned back to me with a sigh, saying:

“No, Trewinnard, I suppose you do not follow me. It is all a mystery to you, of course,” – and he paused – “as mysterious as the sudden disappearance of Madame de Rosen and her daughter Luba from Petersburg.”

“Disappearance?” I echoed, amazed. “They are still in Petersburg. I dined with them only last night!”

“They are not now in Petersburg,” replied the Emperor very quietly. “They left at nine o’clock this morning on a long journey – to Siberia.”

My heart gave a great bound.

“To Siberia!” I gasped, staring at him. “Are they exiled? Who has done this?”

“I have done it,” was his hard reply. “They are revolutionists – implicated in the attempt that was to be made upon me early this morning as I drove up the Nevski.”

“Markoff has denounced them?”

“He has. See, here is a full list of names of the conspirators,” and he took a slip of paper from his desk.

“And General Markoff told Your Majesty of my friendliness with Madame and her daughter?”

“Certainly.”

“Markoff lied when he denounced them as revolutionists!” I cried angrily. “They were my friends, and I know them very intimately. Let me here declare, Sire, that no subject of Your Majesty was more loyal than those two ladies. Surely the *agent-provocateur* has been at work again.”

“Unfortunately I am bound to believe the word of the head of my political police,” he said rather briefly.

I knew, alas! how fierce and bitter was the Emperor’s hatred of those who plotted against his life. A single word against man or woman was sufficient to cause them to be arrested and sent to the other side of Asia, never again to return.

“And where have the ladies been sent?” I inquired. The Emperor consulted a slip of paper, and then replied:

“To Parotovsk.”

“The most far-distant and dreaded of all the Arctic penal settlements!” I cried. “It is cruel and unjust! It is death to send a woman there, where it is winter for nine months in the year, and where darkness reigns five months out of the twelve.”

“I regret,” replied the Emperor, with a slight gesture of the hand. “But they were conspirators.”

“With all respect to Your Majesty, I beg to express an entirely different opinion. Markoff has long been Madame de Rosen’s enemy.”

His Majesty made a quick imperious gesture of impatience and said:

“Please do not let us discuss the matter further – at least, until you are in a position to prove your allegation.”

“I will,” I cried. “I know that your Majesty will never allow such injustice to be done to two innocent, delicate ladies.”

“If injustice has really been done, then those responsible shall suffer. Discover the truth, and report to me later,” he said.

“I will do my very utmost,” was my reply.

“And at the same time, Trewinnard, I trust you will endeavour to carry out the confidential mission which I have entrusted to you,” he said. “Recollect that I treat you, not as a foreign diplomat, but as a loyal and true personal friend of myself and my house. Ah!” he sighed again; “Heaven knows, I have but few trustworthy ones about me.”

“I am profoundly honoured by Your Majesty’s confidence,” I assured him, bowing low. “I certainly shall respect it, and act exactly as you desire.”

“The Court dislikes confidence being placed in any foreigner, even though he be an Englishman,” the Emperor said in a changed voice; “therefore, remain discreet always, and disclaim that I have ever treated you other than with the formal courtesy which is expected by all diplomats.”

“I quite understand,” I said.

“You will see Natalia at the Court ball to-night, and you can speak to her diplomatically, if opportunity occurs. But recollect that she must know nothing of what I have said. I believe you know Hartwig, chief of the criminal detective force.”

“Quite well,” was my reply.

“Then I will give him orders. Use him as you wish, but tell him nothing.”

“I shall remain silent.”

“And you are entitled to leave of absence – eh? You can return to England without arousing suspicion?”

“Yes. I have eight weeks due to me.”

“Excellent. I can do nothing more – except to thank you, Trewinnard, to thank you most sincerely for assisting me, and to await word from you. Sign it with ‘Bathildis,’ and I shall know.” And the great burly, bearded man held out his big, strong hand – the iron hand – as sign that my audience was at an end.

I bowed low over it, and next moment the heavy white door of enamelled steel swung open and I backed out of the Imperial presence, the bearer of a secret as strange and grim as it has ever been the lot of any man to lock within his breast.

What the Emperor had revealed to me was undreamed of by that gay, reckless and intriguing circle which comprised the Russian Court – undreamed of by the chancelleries of Europe.

The merest whisper of it would, I knew, stagger the world. And yet he had, in sheer desperation, confided in me a most amazing truth. As I descended that broad, handsome flight of thickly-carpeted marble steps, where flunkeys in brilliant grey and purple livery bowed at every turn, and equerries and officials in smart uniforms came and went, my brain was awl at the magnitude of the affair, and the terrible scandal which must result if ever the secret were betrayed – the secret of a throne.

A thought flashed across my mind – the knowledge of my own personal peril. I had enemies – bitter enemies. My heart sank within me as I stepped into the great gilded hall, for I had given a promise which I much feared I would never be permitted to live and fulfil.

Chapter Three. Contains Certain Confidences

Six hours later, accompanied by Saunderson, our tall, thin Chargé d’Affaires, and the Embassy staff, all in our uniforms and decorations, I entered the huge white-and-gold ballroom of the Winter Palace, where the Russian Court, the representatives of exclusive Society, the bureaucracy of the Empire and the *corps diplomatique* had assembled.

The scene was perhaps the most brilliant and picturesque that could be witnessed anywhere in the world. Beneath the myriad lights of those huge cut-glass chandeliers, and reflected by the gigantic mirrors upon the walls, were hundreds of gold-laced uniforms of every shade and every style. Across the breasts of many of the men were gay-coloured scarves of the various orders, with diamond stars, while others wore around their necks parti-coloured ribbons with enamelled crosses at their throat, or rows of decorations across their breasts.

And to this phantasmagoria of colour, as all stood in little groups chattering and awaiting Their Majesties, was added that of the splendid long-trained dresses of the women, nearly all of whom wore their diamond tiaras, or diamond ornaments in their corsage.

It was indeed, a cosmopolitan gathering, half of Russians and half of the diplomatic set, and around me, as I bowed over the hand of a well-known Baroness, wife of the Minister of War, I heard animated chatter in half a dozen tongues. The Emperor had returned, and there would now be a month of gaiety before he retired for the summer to Gatchina. The spring season in Petersburg had been cut short – first by the indisposition of the Empress, and afterwards by reason of the Emperor’s tour to the distant shore of the Caspian.

Therefore at this, the delayed Court ball, everybody who was anybody in Russia was present.

In one end of the huge Renaissance salon, with its wonderful painted ceiling and gilded cupids, was a great semicircular alcove, with a slightly raised dais, whereon sat the Dowager-Empress, the Grand Duchesses and those of the blood-royal, with their attendant ladies, while the male members of the Court lounged behind.

The opposite end of the great ballroom led to another salon with parquet floor, decorated in similar style, and with many mirrors, and almost as large, while beyond was a somewhat smaller room, the whole effect being one of gorgeous grandeur and immensity.

I had paused to chat with a stout lady in cream, who wore a beautiful tiara. Princess Lovovski, wife of the Governor-General of Finland, and she had commenced to tell me the latest tit-bit of scandal concerning the wife of a certain War Office official, a matter which did not interest me in the least, when suddenly there came three loud taps – the taps of the Grand Chamberlain – announcing the entrance of His Majesty. As by enchantment a wide door in the side of the ballroom flew open, and the glittering throng, bejewelled and perfumed, flashing colours amid plumes, aigrettes and flowers, laughing and murmuring to the clink of gala swords and sabres, was struck to silence.

His Majesty passed – a tall, commanding figure in a white uniform covered with the stars, crosses and many-coloured ribbons of the various European orders. Beneath the thousand lights the bare shoulders of the beautiful women inclined profoundly.

Then again the loud chatter recommenced.

The Emperor’s presence, tall, erect, muscular, was indeed a regal one. He looked every inch a ruler and an autocrat as he advanced to the alcove, where the whole Court had risen to receive him, and with a quick gesture he gave the signal for dancing to commence.

I retreated to the wall, being in no humour to dance, and stood gazing at him. He seemed, indeed, a different person to that deep-eyed, earnest man in dark-blue serge who had sat chatting with me so affably six hours ago. He was in that hour a man, but now the centre of that gay patrician throng,

he was ruler, the autocrat who by a stroke of the grey quill could banish to the mines or the *oubliettes* any of those of his subjects who bowed before him – sweep them out of existence as completely as though the grave had claimed them; for every exile lost his identity and became a mere number; his estate was administered as though he were dead, and apportioned, with the usual forfeiture to the State, among his heirs. So that it was impossible for an exile to be traced.

I thought of Madame Marya de Rosen and of poor little Luba. Ah! I wondered how many delicate women and handsome, intelligent men who had danced over that polished floor were now dragging out their weary lives in those squalid, filthy Yakut yaurtas of Eastern Siberia. How many, alas! had, in innocence, fallen victims to that corrupt bureaucracy which always concealed the truth from His Majesty.

To the camarilla, a dozen or so men who were present there in brilliant uniforms and wearing the Cross of St. Andrew, with the pale-blue ribbon, the highest Order of the Empire, bestowed upon them for their “fidelity,” that present reign of terror was solely due. It was to the interests of those men that the Emperor should be perpetually terrorised. Half those so-called conspiracies were the work of the Secret Police themselves and their *agents-provocateurs*; and hundreds of innocent persons were being spirited away without trial to the frozen wastes of Northern and Eastern Siberia, upon no other charge than the trivial one that they were “dangerous” persons!

Madame de Rosen and her pretty daughter had fallen victims of the bitter unscrupulousness of that short, stout, grey-moustached man, who at that moment was bowing so obsequiously before his Sovereign, the man who was one of the greatest powers in the Empire, General Serge Markoff, Chief of Secret Police.

The first dance was in progress. Pretty women, with their smart, good-looking cavaliers, were whirling about me to the slow, tuneful strains of one of the latest of Strauss’s waltzes, when Colonel Mellini, the Italian military attaché, halted before me to chat. He had just returned from leave, and had much Embassy gossip to relate to me from the Eternal City, where I had served for two years.

“I hear,” he remarked at last, “that another plot was discovered early this morning – a desperate one in the Nevski. Markoff really seems ubiquitous.”

I looked into his dark eyes and smiled.

“Ah! I see, *caro mio*,” he laughed. “Your thoughts are similar to mine – eh? These plots are a little too frequent to be genuine,” and, lowering his voice to a whisper, he added: “I can’t understand how His Majesty does not see through the transparency of it. They are terrorising him every day – every hour. A man of less robust physique or mental balance would surely be driven out of his mind.”

“I agree with you entirely, my dear friend. But,” I added, “this is not the place to discuss affairs of State. Ah, Madame!” and turning, I bent over the gloved hand of old Madame Neilidoff, one of the leaders of Society in Moscow, with whom I stood chatting for a long time, and who kindly invited me for a week out at her great country estate at Sukova in Tver.

Captain Stoyanovitch, gay with decorations, hurried past me on some errand for the Emperor, and gave me a nod as he went on, while young Bertram Tucker, our third secretary, came up and began to chat with the yellow-toothed old lady, who was such a power in the Russian social circle.

I suppose it must have been nearly two o’clock, when, after wandering through the *salons*, greeting many men and women I knew, I suddenly heard a voice behind me exclaim in English:

“Hulloa, old Uncle Colin! Am I too small to be recognised?”

I turned quickly and confronted the pretty laughing girl of nineteen of whom I had been in search all the night – Her Imperial Highness the Grand Duchess Natalia Olga Nicolaievna.

Tall, slim, with a perfect figure, she was dressed in cream, a light simple gown which suited her youth and extreme beauty admirably. Across her dark, well-dressed hair she wore a narrow band of forget-me-nots; at her throat was a large single emerald of great value, suspended by a fine chain of platinum, a present from His Majesty, while on the edge of her low-cut corsage she wore a bow of pale-blue ribbon embroidered in silver with a Russian motto, and from it was suspended a medallion

set with diamonds and bearing in the centre the enamelled figure of Saint Catherine – the exclusive Order of Saint Catherine bestowed upon the Grand Duchesses.

“How miserable you look, Uncle Colin!” exclaimed the dark-eyed girl before I could reply. “Whatever is the matter? Is the British Lion sick – or what?”

“I really must apologise to Your Imperial Highness,” I said, bowing. “I was quite unaware that I looked miserable. I surely could never look miserable in your presence.”

We both laughed, while standing erect and defiant, before me she held up a little ivory fan, threatening to chastise me with it.

“Well,” I said, “and so you are safely back again in Petersburg, after all your travels! Why, it’s surely eight weeks since we were at the ball at the Palace of your uncle, the Grand Duke Serge.”

“Where you danced with me. Do you remember how we laughed? You said some nasty sarcastic things, so I punished you. I told Captain Stoyanovitch and some of the others that you had flirted with me and kissed me. So there!”

I looked at her in stern reproach.

“Ah!” I said. “So that is the source of all those rumours – eh? You’re a very wicked girl,” I added, “even though you are a Grand Duchess.”

“Well, I suppose Grand Duchesses are in no way different to other girls – eh?” she pouted. “Sometimes I wish I were back again at school at Eastbourne. Ah! what grand times I used to have in those days – hockey and tennis and gym, and I was not compelled to perform all sorts of horrible, irksome etiquette, and be surrounded by this crowd of silly dressed-up apes. Why, Uncle Colin, these are not men – all these tight-uniformed popinjays at Court.”

“Hush, my child!” I said. “Hush! You will be overheard.”

“And I don’t care if I am. Surely a girl can speak out what she thinks!”

“In England, yes, in certain circumstances, but in Russia – and especially at Court – never!”

“Oh, you are so horribly old-fashioned, Uncle Colin. When shall I bring you up-to-date?” cried the petted and spoiled young lady, whose two distinctions were that she was one of the most beautiful girls in all Russia, and the favourite niece of the Tzar Alexander. She had nicknamed me “Uncle,” on account of my superior age, long ago.

“And you are utterly incorrigible,” I said, trying to assume an angry look.

“Ah! You’re going to lecture me!” she exclaimed with another pout. “I suppose I ought never to dance at all – eh? It’s wicked in your eyes, isn’t it? You are perhaps, one of those exemplary people that I heard so much of when in England – such an expressive name – the Kill-joys!”

“No, Your Highness,” I protested. “I really don’t think I’m a killjoy. If I were, I couldn’t very well be a diplomat. I – ”

“But all diplomats are trained liars,” she asserted with abrupt frankness. “The Emperor told me so only the other day. He said they were men one should never trust.”

“I admit that, without the lie *artistique*, diplomacy would really be non-existent,” I said, with a laugh. “But is not the whole political world everywhere in Europe a world of vain promise, intrigue and shame?”

“Just as our social world seems to me,” she admitted.

“Ah! Then you are beginning to realise the hollow unreality of the world about you – eh?” I said.

“Dear me!” she exclaimed, “you talk just like a bishop! I really don’t know what has come to my dear old Uncle Colin. You must be ill, or something. You never used to be like this,” she added, with a sigh and a well-feigned look of regret that was really most amusing, while at the same time she made eyes at me.

Truly, she was a most charming little madcap, this Imperial Grand Duchess – the most charming in all Europe, as the diplomatic circle had long ago agreed.

So she had taken revenge upon me for uttering words of wisdom by telling people that I had flirted with and kissed her! She herself was responsible for the chatter which had gone round, with

many embellishments, concerning myself, and how deeply I was in love with her. I wondered if it had reached the Emperor's ears?

I felt annoyed, I here confess. And yet so sweet and irresponsible was she, so intelligent and quick at repartee, that next moment I had forgiven her.

And I frankly told her so.

"My dear Uncle Colin, it would have been all the same," she declared airily. "You shouldn't have lectured me. I assure you I have had enough of that at home. Ever since I came back from England everybody seems to have conspired to tell me that I'm the most terrible girl in Russia. Father holds up his hands; why, I really don't know."

"Because you are so extremely unconventional," I said. "A girl of the people can act just as she likes; but you are a Grand Duchess – and you can't."

"Bother my birth. That's my misfortune. I wish I were a shopgirl, or a typist, or something. Then I should be free!" she exclaimed impatiently. "As it is, I can't utter a word or move a little finger without the whole of Russia lifting up their hands in pious horror. I tell you, Uncle Colin," she added, her fine, big, dark eyes fixed upon me, "I'm sick of it all. It is simply unbearable. Ah! how I wish I were back at dear old Southdene College. I hate Russia and all her works!"

"Hush!" I cried again. "You really must not say that. Remember your position – the niece of His Majesty."

"I repeat it!" she cried in desperation, her well-formed little mouth set firmly. "And I don't care who hears me – even if it's Uncle Alexander himself!"

Chapter Four. Concerns Madame de Rosen

At Her Highness's side I had strolled through the smaller salon and along the several great corridors to the splendid winter garden, on the opposite side of the palace. It was one of the smaller courtyards which had been covered in with glass and filled with high palms and tropical flowers ablaze with bloom. There, in that northern latitude, Asiatic and African plants flourished and flowered, with little electric lights cunningly concealed amid the leaves.

Several other couples were seated there, away from the whirl and glitter of the Court; but taking no notice, we halted at two wicker chairs set invitingly in a corner. Into one of these she flung herself with a little sigh, and, bowing, I took the other.

I sat and watched her. Her beauty was, indeed, exquisite. She had the long, tender, fluent lines of body and limb, the round waist, the deep chest and small bust, the sturdy throat of those ancient virgins that the greatest sculptors of the world worshipped and wrought into imperishable stone. She was not very tall, though she appeared so. It was something in pose and movement that did it. A beautiful soul looked from Her Highness's beautiful eyes whenever she smiled upon me.

I found myself examining every line and turn and contour of the prettily-poised head. She was dark, with that lovely complexion like pure alabaster tinted with rose sometimes seen in Russian women. Her eyes, under the sweeping lashes, seemed capable of untold depths of tenderness. Hers was the perfect oval of a young face across whose innocent girlishness experience had written no line, passion cast no shadow.

"One thing I've heard to-day has greatly pained me," I said presently to my dainty little companion. "You'll forgive me for speaking quite frankly – won't you?"

"Certainly, Uncle Colin," she replied, opening her big eyes in surprise. "But I thought you had brought me here to flirt with me – not to talk seriously."

"I must talk seriously for a moment," I said apologetically. "It is in Your Highness's interests. Listen. I heard something to-day at which I know that you yourself will be greatly annoyed. I heard it whispered that Geoffrey Hamborough had killed himself because of you."

"Geoffrey dead!" she gasped, starting up and staring at me, her face blanched in an instant.

"No. He is not dead," I replied calmly, "for as soon as I heard the report I sent him a wire to Yorkshire and to the Travellers', in London. He replied from the club half an hour before I came here."

"But who could have spread such a report?" the girl asked. "It could only be done to cast opprobrium upon me – to show that because – because we parted – he had taken his life. It's really too cruel," she declared, and I saw hot tears welling in her beautiful eyes.

"I agree. But you must deny the report."

"Who told you?"

"I regret that I must not say. It was, however, a friend of yours."

"A man?"

I nodded in the affirmative.

"Ah!" she cried impatiently. "You diplomats are always so full of secrets. Really you must tell me. Uncle Colin."

"I can't," was my brief reply. "I only ask you to refute the untruth."

"I will – at once. Poor Geoffrey."

"Have you heard from him lately?" I asked.

"You're very inquisitive. I have not."

“I’m very glad of that,” I answered her. “You know how greatly the affair annoyed the Emperor. You were awfully injudicious. It’s a good job that I chanced to meet you both at the station in Moscow.”

“Well,” she laughed, “I was going to England with him, and we had arranged to be married at a registrar’s office in London. Only you stopped us – you nasty old thing!”

“And you ought to be very glad that I recognised you just in the nick of time. Ten minutes later and you would have left Moscow. Think of the scandal – the elopement of a young Imperial Grand Duchess of Russia with an English commoner.”

“Well, and isn’t an English commoner as good, and perhaps better, than one of these uniformed and decorated Russian aristocrats? I am Russian,” she added frankly, “but I have no love for the Muscovite man.”

“It was a foolish escapade,” I declared; “but it’s all over now. The one consolation is that nobody knows the actual truth.”

“Except His Majesty. I told him everything; how I had met Geoffrey in Hampshire when I went to stay with Lady Hexworthy; how we used to meet in secret, and all that,” she said.

“Well now,” I exclaimed, looking straight into her face, “I want to ask you a plain open question. I have a motive in doing so – one which I will explain to you after you have answered me honestly and truthfully. I – ”

“At it again!” cried the pretty madcap. “You’re really not yourself to-night, Uncle Colin. What is the matter with you?”

“Simply I want to know the truth – whether there is still any love between Geoffrey and yourself?”

“Ah! no,” she sighed, pulling a grimace. “It’s all over between us. It broke his heart, poor fellow, but some kind friend, at your Embassy, I think, wrote and told him about Paul Urusoff and – well, he wrote me a hasty letter. Then I replied, a couple of telegrams, and we agreed to be strangers for ever. And so ends the story. Like a novel, isn’t it?” she laughed merrily.

My eyes were fixed upon her. I was wondering if she were really telling me the truth. As the Emperor had most justly said, she was an artful little minx where her love-affairs were concerned.

Colonel Polivanoff, the Grand Chamberlain of the Court, crossed the great palm-garden at that moment, and bowed to my pretty companion.

“But,” she added, turning back to me, “people ought not to say that he’s been foolish enough to do away with himself on my account. It only shows that I must have made some enemies of whom I’m quite unaware.”

“Everyone has enemies,” I answered her. “You are no exception. But, is it really true that Geoffrey is no longer in your thoughts?” I asked her very seriously.

“Truth and honour,” she declared, with equal gravity.

“Then who is the fortunate young man at present – eh?”

“That’s my own secret. Uncle Colin,” she declared, drawing herself up. “I’ll ask you the same question. Who is the lady you are in love with at the present moment?”

“Shall I tell you?”

“Yes. It would be interesting.”

“I’m in love with you.”

“Ah?” she cried, nodding her head and laughing. “I thought as much. You’ve brought me out here to flirt with me. I wonder if you’ll kiss me – eh?” she asked mischievously.

“I will, if you tempt me too much,” I said threateningly. “And then the report you’ve spread about will be the truth.”

She laughed merrily and tapped my hand with her fan.

“I never can get the better of you, dear old uncle,” she declared. “You always have the last word, and you’re such a delightfully old-fashioned person. Now let’s try and be serious.” And she settled herself and, turning to me, added: “Why do you wish to know about Geoffrey Hamborough?”

“For several reasons,” I said. “First, I think Your Highness knows me quite well enough to be aware that I am your very sincere friend.”

“My best friend,” she declared quickly; her manner changed in an instant from merry irresponsibility to deep earnestness. “That night on the railway platform at Moscow you saved me making a silly fool of myself. It was most generous of the Emperor to forgive me. I know how you pleaded for me. He told me so.”

“I am your friend,” I replied. “Now, as to the future. You tell me that you find all the Court etiquette irksome, and that you are antagonistic to this host of young men about you. You are, in brief, sorry that you are back in Russia. Is that so?”

“It is so exactly.”

“And how about Prince Urusoff – eh?”

“I haven’t seen him for fully three months, and I don’t even know where he is. I believe he’s with his regiment, the 21st Dragoons of White Russia, somewhere away in the Urals. I heard that the Emperor sent him there. But he certainly need not have done so. I found him only a foolish young boy.”

Her Imperial Highness was a young lady of very keen intelligence. After several governesses at home, she had been sent to Paris, and afterwards to a college at Eastbourne – where she was known as Miss Natalia Gottorp, the latter being one of the family names of the Imperial Romanoffs – and there she had completed her education. From her childhood she had always had an English governess, Miss West, consequently, with a Russian’s adaptability, she spoke English almost without a trace of accent. Though so full of fun and frolic, and so ready to carry on a violent flirtation, yet she was, on the other hand, very thoughtful and level-headed, with a keen sense of humour, and a nature extremely sympathetic with any person in distress, no matter whom they might be. Hers was a bright, pleasant nature, a smiling face, and ever-twinkling eye full of mischief and merriment.

“Well,” I said, looking into her face, “I’ve been thinking about you a good deal since you’ve been away – and wondering.”

“Wondering what?”

“Whether, as you have no love for Russia, you might not like to go back to England?” I said slowly.

“To England!” she cried in delight. “Ah! If I only could! I love England, and especially Eastbourne, with the sea and the promenade, the golf, and the concerts at the Devonshire Park, and all that. Ah! I only wish I could go.”

“But if you went you’d fall in love with some young fellow, and then we should have another scandal at Court,” I said.

“I wouldn’t. Believe me, I wouldn’t, really, Uncle Colin,” she pleaded, looking up into my face with almost childish simplicity.

I shook my head dubiously.

“All I’ve told you is the real truth,” she assured me. “I’ve only amused myself. Every girl likes men to make love to her. Why should I be so bitterly condemned?”

“Because you are not a commoner.”

“That’s just it. But if I went to England and lived again as Miss Natalia Gottorp, nobody would know who I am, and I could have a really splendid time. Here,” she cried, “all the glitter and etiquette of Court life stifle me. I’ve been bored to death on the tour round the Empire, but couldn’t you try and induce the Emperor to let me go back to England? Do, Uncle Colin, there’s a dear. A word from the Emperor, and father would let me go in a moment. I wish poor mother were alive. She would soon let me go, I know.”

“And what would you do in England if you went back?”

“Why, I’d have my old governess, Miss West – the one I had at Strelna – to live with me, and I’d be ever so happy. I’d take a house on the sea-front at Eastbourne, so as to be near the old college, and see the girls. Try what you can do with Uncle Alexander, won’t you? there’s a dear old uncle,” she added, in her most persuasive tones.

“Well,” I said, with some show of reluctance, “if I succeed, you will be responsible to me, remember. No flirtations.”

“I promise,” she said. “Here’s my hand,” and she put her tiny white-gloved hand into mine.

“And if I heard of any affectionate meetings I should put down my foot at once.”

“Yes, that’s agreed,” she exclaimed, with enthusiasm. “At once.”

“And I should, perhaps, want you to help me in England,” I added slowly, looking into her pretty face the while.

“Help you, in what way?” she asked.

“At present, I hardly know. But if I wanted assistance might I count on you?”

“Count on me, Uncle Colin!” she echoed. “Why, of course, you can! Look at my indebtedness to you, and it will be increased if you can secure me permission to go back to England.”

“Well,” I said, “I’ll do what I can. But you have told me no untruths to-night, not one – ?” I asked very seriously. “If so, admit it.”

“Not one. I swear I haven’t.”

“Very well,” I said. “Then I’ll do my best.”

“Ah! you are a real dear!” cried the girl enthusiastically. “I almost feel as though I could hug and kiss you!”

“Better not,” I laughed. “There are some people sitting over there, and they would talk – ”

“Yes,” she said slowly. “I suppose really one ought to be a bit careful, after all. When will you see the Emperor?”

“Perhaps to-morrow – if he gives me audience.” Then I related to her the story of the attempt in the Nevski on the previous morning, and the intention of assassinating the Emperor as he drove from the Nicholas station to the Palace.

“Ah, yes!” she cried. “It is all too dreadful. For seven weeks we have lived in constant terror of explosions. I could not go through it again for all the world. Those days in that stuffy armoured train were simply awful. His Majesty only undertook the journey in order to defy those who declared that some terrible catastrophe would happen. The Empress knew nothing of the danger until we had started.”

“And yet the only danger lay within half a mile of the Palace on your return,” I said. “There have, I hear, been thirty-three arrested to-day, including my friends Madame de Rosen and Luba. You knew them.”

“Marya de Rosen!” gasped the Grand Duchess, staring at me. “She is not under arrest?”

“Alas! she is already on her way, with her daughter, to Eastern Siberia.”

“But that is impossible. She was no revolutionist. I knew them both very intimately.”

“General Markoff was her enemy,” I said in a whisper. “Ah, yes! I hate that man!” cried Her Highness. “He is a clever liar who has wormed himself completely into the Emperor’s confidence, and now, in order to sustain a reputation as a discoverer of plots, he is compelled to first manufacture them. Hundreds of innocent men and women have been exiled by administrative order during the past twelve months for complicity in conspiracies which have never had any existence save in the wicked imagination of that brutal official. I know it — *I can prove it!*”

“Hush!” I said. “You may be overheard. You surely do not wish the man to become your enemy. Remember, he is all-powerful here – in Russia.”

“I will speak the truth when the time comes,” she said vehemently. “I will show the Emperor certain papers which have come into my own hands which will prove how His Majesty has been misled, tricked and terrorised by this Markoff, and certain of his bosom friends in the Cabinet.”

“It is really most unwise to speak so loudly,” I declared. “Somebody may overhear.”

“Let them overhear!” cried the girl angrily. “I do not fear Markoff in the least. I will, before long, open the Emperor’s eyes, never fear – and justice shall be done. These poor wretches shall not be sent to the dungeons beneath the lake at Schusselburg, or to the frozen wastes of Yakutsk, in order that Markoff shall remain in power. Ah! he little dreams how much I know!” she laughed harshly.

“It would hardly be wise of you to take any such action. You might fail – and – then – ”

“I cannot fail to establish at least the innocence of Madame de Rosen and of Luba. The reason why they have been sent to Siberia is simple. Into Madame de Rosen’s possession there recently came certain compromising letters concerning General Markoff. He discovered this, and hence her swift exile without trial. But, Uncle Colin,” she added, “those letters are in my possession! Madame de Rosen gave them to me the night before I went south with the Emperor, because she feared they might be stolen by some police-spy. And I have kept them in a place of safety until such convenient time when I can place them before His Majesty. The latter will surely see that justice is done, and then the disgraceful career of this arch-enemy of Russian peace and liberty will be at an end.”

“Hush!” I cried anxiously, for at that moment a tall man, in the bright green uniform of the Lithuanian Hussars, whose face I could not see, passed close by us, with a handsome middle-aged woman upon his arm. “Hush! Do, for heaven’s sake, be careful, I beg of you!” I exclaimed. “Such intention should not even be whispered. These Palace walls have ears, for spies are everywhere!”

Chapter Five. The Man in Pince-Nez

Next day was Wednesday.

At half-past five in the afternoon I was seated in my room at the Embassy, busy copying out the last of my despatches which were to be sent that week by Foreign Office messenger to London.

The messenger himself, in the person of my friend Captain Hubert Taylor, a thin, long-limbed, dark-haired cosmopolitan, was stretched lazily in my chair smoking a cigarette, impatient for me to finish, so that the white canvas bag could be sealed and he could get away.

The homeward Nord express to Ostend was due to leave at six o'clock; therefore he had not much time to spare.

"Do hurry up, old man," he urged, glancing at his watch. "If it isn't important, keep it over until Wednesday week. Despatches are like wine, they improve with keeping."

"Shut up!" I exclaimed, for I saw I had a good deal yet to copy – the result of an important inquiry regarding affairs south of the Caspian, which was urgently required at Downing Street. Our Consul in Baku had been travelling for three months in order to supply the information.

"Well, if I miss the train I really don't mind, my dear Colin. I can do quite well with a few days' rest. I was down in Rome ten days ago; and, besides, I only got here the night before last."

"I do wish you'd be quiet, Taylor," I cried. "I can't write while you chatter."

So he lit a fresh cigarette and repossessed himself in patience until at last I had finished my work, stuck down the long envelope with the printed address, and placed it with thirty or forty other letters into the canvas bag; this I carefully sealed with wax with the Embassy seal.

"There you are!" I exclaimed at last. "You've plenty of time for the train – and to spare."

"I shouldn't have had if I hadn't hurried you up, my dear boy. Everyone seems asleep here. It shows your chief's away on leave. You should put in a day in Paris. They're active there. It would be an eye-opener for you."

"Paris isn't Petersburg," I laughed.

"And an attaché isn't a foreign service messenger," he declared. "Government pays you fellows to look ornamental, while we messengers have to travel in hot haste and live in those rocking sleeping-cars of the wagon-lits."

"Horribly hard work to spend one's days travelling from capital to capital," I said, well knowing that this remark to a foreign service messenger is as a red rag to a bull.

"Work, my dear fellow. You try it for a month and see," Taylor snapped.

"Well," I asked with a laugh, "any particular news in London?" for the messengers are bearers of all the diplomatic gossip from embassy to embassy.

"Oh, well – old Petheridge, in the Treaty Department, is retiring this month, and Jack Scrutton is going to be transferred from Rome to Lima. Some old fool in the Commons has, I hear, got wind of that bit of scandal in Madrid – you know the story, Councillor of Embassy and Spanish Countess – and threatens to put down a question concerning it. I hear there's a dickens of a row over it. The Chief is furious. Oh! – and I saw your Chief in the St. James's Club the day I left London. He'd just come from Windsor – been kissing hands, or something. Well," he added, "I suppose I may as well have some cigarettes before I go, even though you don't ask me. But they are always *pro bono*, I know. The Embassy at Petersburg is always noted for its hospitality and its cigarettes!" And he emptied the contents of my cigarette-box into the capacious case he took from his pocket.

"Here you are," I said, taking from my table another sealed despatch bearing a large blue cross upon it, showing that it was a confidential document in cipher upon affairs of State.

"Oh, hang!" he cried. "I didn't know you had one of those."

And then, unbuttoning his waistcoat, he fumbled about his waist, and at last placed it carefully in the narrow pocket of the belt he wore beneath his clothes, buttoning the flap over the pocket.

“Well,” he said at last, putting on his overcoat, “so long, old man. I’ll just have time. I wonder what old Ivanoff, in the restaurant-car, will have for dinner to-night? Borstch, of course, and caviare.”

“You fellows have nothing else to think about but your food,” I laughed.

“Food – yes, it’s railway-food with a vengeance in this God-forgotten country. Lots to drink, but nothing decent to eat.”

And taking the little canvas bag he shook my hand heartily and strode out.

I stood for some time gazing through the open window out upon the sunlit Neva across to the grim fortress on the opposite bank – the prison of many terrible tales.

My thoughts were running, just as they had run all day, upon that strange suspicion which the Emperor had confided to me. It seemed too remarkable, too strange, too amazing to be true.

And again before my vision there arose the faces of those two refined and innocent ladies, Madame de Rosen and her daughter, who had been so suddenly hurried away to a living tomb in that far-off Arctic region. I remembered what the little Grand Duchess had told me, and wondered whether her allegations were really true.

I was wondering if she would permit me to see those incriminating letters which Madame had given to her for safe-keeping, for at all costs I felt that, for the safety of the Emperor and the peace and prosperity of Russia, the country should be rid of General Serge Markoff.

And yet the difficulties were, I knew, insurmountable. His Majesty, hearing of these constant plots being discovered and ever listening to highly-coloured stories of the desperate attempts of revolutionists, naturally believed his personal safety to be due to this man whom he had appointed as head of the police of the Empire. To any word said against Serge Markoff he turned a deaf ear, and put it down to jealousy, or to some ingenious plot to withdraw from his person the constant vigilance which his beloved Markoff had established. More than once I had been bold enough to venture to hint that all those plots might not be genuine ones; but I had quickly understood that such suggestion was regarded by the Emperor as a slur cast upon his favourite official and personal friend.

The more I reflected, the more unwise seemed that sudden outburst of my pretty little companion in the winter garden on the night before. If anyone had overheard her threat, then no doubt it would reach the ears of that man who daily swept so many innocent persons into the prisons and *étapes* beyond the Urals. I knew, too well, of those lists of names which he placed before the Emperor, and to which he asked the Imperial signature, without even giving His Majesty an opportunity to glance at them.

Truly, those were dark days. Life in Russia at that moment was a most uncertain existence, for anyone incurring the displeasure of General Markoff, or any of his friends, was as quickly and effectively removed as though death’s sword had struck them.

Much perturbed, and not knowing how to act in face of what the Emperor had revealed to me, I was turning from the window back to my writing-table, when one of the English footmen entered with a card.

“Oh, show him up, Green. And bring some cigarettes,” I said.

My visitor was Ivan Hartwig, the famous chief of the Russian Criminal Detective Service – an entirely distinct department from the Secret Police.

A few moments later he was ushered in by Green, and, bowing, took the hand I offered him.

A lean, bony-faced man, of average height, alert, clean-shaven, and aged about forty-five. His hair was slightly streaked with grey, and his eyes, small and shrewd, beamed behind a pair of round gold-rimmed pince-nez. I had never seen him in glasses before, but I only supposed that he had suddenly developed myopia for some specific purpose. As he smiled in greeting me, his narrow jaws widened, displaying an even row of white teeth, while the English he spoke was as perfect as my own.

At that moment, in his glasses, his black morning-coat and grey trousers, he looked more like a grave family physician than a police officer whose career was world-famous.

And yet he was a man of striking appearance. His broad white forehead, his deep-set eyes so full of fire and expression, his high, protruding cheek-bones, and his narrowing chin were all characteristics of a man of remarkable power and intelligence. His, indeed, was a face that would arrest attention anywhere; hence the hundred and one disguises which he so constantly adopted.

“I have had private audience of His Majesty this afternoon, Mr Trewinnard,” he said, as he took the chair I offered him. “He has sent me to you. You wish to see me.”

“Yes,” I said. “I need your assistance.”

“So His Majesty has told me, but he explained nothing of the affair. He commanded me to place myself entirely at your disposal,” replied the man, who, in himself, was a man of mystery.

His nationality was obscure to most people, yet we at the Embassy knew that he was in reality a British subject, and that Ivan Hartwig was merely the Russian equivalent of Evan Hardwicke.

I handed him the box of cigarettes which Green had replenished, and took one myself.

As he slowly lit his, I recollected what a strange career he had had. Graduating from Scotland Yard, where on account of his knowledge of German and Russian he had been mainly employed in the arrest of alien criminals in England, he had for several years served under Monsieur Goron, Préfet of Police of Paris, and after being attached to the Tzar on one of his visits to the French capital, had been personally invited by the Emperor to become head of the Criminal Investigation Department of Russia.

He was a quiet-spoken, alert, elusive, but very conscientious man, who had made a study of crime from a psychological standpoint, his many successes being no doubt due to his marvellously minute examination of motives and his methodical reasoning upon the most abstruse clues. There was nothing of the ordinary blunt official detective about him. He was a man of extreme refinement, an omnivorous reader and a diligent student of men. He was a passionate collector of coins, a bachelor, and an amateur player of the violin. I believe that he had never experienced what fear was, and certainly within my own knowledge, he had had a dozen narrow escapes from the vengeance of the Terrorists. Once a bomb was purposely exploded in a room into which he and his men went to arrest two students in Moscow, and not one present escaped death except Hartwig himself.

And as he now sat there before me, so quiet and attentive, blinking at me through those gold-rimmed pince-nez, none would certainly take him for the man whose hairbreadth escapes, constant disguises, exciting adventures and marvellous successes in the tracking of criminals all over Europe had so often amazed the readers of newspapers the world over.

“Well, Mr Hartwig,” I said in a low voice, after I had risen and satisfied myself that Green had closed the door, “the matter is one of strictest confidence – a suspicion which I may at once tell you is the Emperor’s own personal affair. To myself alone he has confided it, and I requested that you might be allowed to assist me in finding a solution of the problem.”

“I’m much gratified,” he said. “As an Englishman, you know, I believe, that I am ever ready to serve an Englishman, especially if I am serving the Emperor at the same time.”

“The inquiry will take us far afield, I expect – first to England.”

“To England!” he exclaimed. “For how long do you anticipate?”

“Who knows?” I asked. “I can only say that it will be a very difficult and perhaps a long inquiry.”

“And how will the department proceed here?”

“Your next in command will be appointed in your place until your return. The Emperor arranged for this with me yesterday. Therefore, from to-morrow you will be free to place yourself at my service.”

“I quite understand,” he said. “And now, perhaps, you will in confidence explain exactly the situation, and the problem which is presented,” and he settled himself in his chair in an attitude of attention.

“Ah! that, I regret, is unfortunately impossible. The Emperor has entrusted the affair to me, and to me alone. I must direct the inquiry, and you will, I fear, remain in ignorance – at least, for the present.”

“In other words, you will direct and I must act blindly – eh?” he said in a rather dubious voice. “That’s hardly satisfactory to me, Mr Trewinnard, is it? – hardly fair, I mean.”

“I openly admit that such an attitude as I am compelled to adopt is not fair to you, Hartwig. But I feel sure you will respect the Emperor’s confidence, and view the matter in its true light. The matter is a personal one of His Majesty’s, and may not be divulged. He has asked me to tell you this frankly and plainly, and also that he relies upon you to assist him.”

My words convinced the great detective, and he nodded at last in the affirmative.

“The problem I alone know,” I went on. “His Majesty has compelled me to swear secrecy. Therefore I am forbidden to tell you. You understand?”

“But I am not forbidden to discover it for myself?” replied the keen, wary official.

“If you do, I cannot help it,” was my reply.

“If I do,” he said, “I promise you faithfully, Mr Trewinnard, that His Majesty’s secret, whatever it is, shall never pass my lips.”

Chapter Six. Relates a Sensation

Ten days had gone by. I had applied to Downing Street for leave of absence, and was awaiting permission.

One afternoon I had again been commanded to private audience at the Palace, and in uniform, had spent nearly two hours with the Emperor, listening to certain confidential instructions which he had given me – instructions for the fulfilment of a somewhat difficult task.

Twice during our chat I had referred to the case of my friends Madame and Mademoiselle de Rosen, hoping that he would extend to them the Imperial clemency, and by a stroke of that well-worn quill upon the big writing-table recall them from that long and weary journey upon which they had been sent.

But His Majesty, who was wearing the undress uniform of a general with a single cross at his throat, uttered an expression of regret that I had been friendly with them.

“In Russia, in these days, a foreigner should exercise the greatest caution in choosing his friends,” he said. “Only the day before yesterday Markoff reported it was to those two women that the attempt in the Nevski was entirely due. The others, thirty or so, were merely tools of those clever women.”

“Forgive me, Your Majesty, when I say that General Markoff lies,” I replied boldly.

“Enough! Our opinions differ, Trewinnard,” he snapped, with a shrug of his broad shoulders.

It was on the tip of my tongue to make a direct charge against his favourite official, but what was the use when I held no actual proof. Twice recently I had seen Natalia, but she refused to allow me sight of the letters, telling me that she intended herself to show up the General in her own way – and at her own time.

So the subject had dropped, for I saw that mention of it only aroused the Emperor’s displeasure. And surely the other matter which we were discussing with closed doors was weighty enough.

At last His Majesty tossed his cigarette-end away, and, his jewelled cross glittering at his throat, rose with outstretched hand, as sign that my audience was at an end.

That eternal military band was playing in the grey courtyard below, and the Emperor had slammed-to the window impatiently to keep out the sound. He was in no mood for musical comedy that afternoon. Indeed, I knew that the military music often irritated him, but Court etiquette – those iron-bound, unwritten laws which even an Emperor cannot break – demanded it. Those same laws decreed that no Emperor of Russia may travel *incognito*, as do all other European sovereigns; that at dinner at the Winter Palace there must always be eight guests; and that the service of gold plate of Catherine the Great must always be used. At the Russian Court there are a thousand such laws, the breach of a single one being an unpardonable offence, even in the case of the autocratic ruler himself.

“Then you understand my wishes – eh, Trewinnard?” His Majesty said at last in English, gripping my hand warmly.

“Perfectly, Sire.”

“I need not impress upon you the need for absolute and entire discretion. I trust you implicitly.”

“I hope Your Majesty’s trust will never be betrayed,” I answered fervently, bowing over the strong outstretched hand.

And then, backing out of the door, I bowed and withdrew.

Through the long corridor with its soft red carpet I went, passing Calitzine, a short, dark man in funereal black, the Emperor’s private secretary, to whom I passed the time of day.

Then, reaching the grand staircase with its wonderful marble and gold balustrades and great chandeliers of crystal, I descended to the huge hall, where the echoes were constantly aroused

by hurrying footsteps of ministers, officials, chamberlains, courtiers and servants – all of them sycophants.

The two gigantic sentries at the foot of the stairs held their rifles at the salute as I passed between them, when of a sudden I caught sight of the Grand Duchess Natalia in a pretty summer gown of pale-blue, standing with a tall, full-bearded elderly man in the brilliant uniform of the 15th Regiment of Grenadiers of Tiflis, of which he was chief, and wearing many decorations. It was her father, the Grand Duke Nicholas.

“Why, here’s old Uncle Colin!” cried my incorrigible little friend in pleased surprise. “Have you been up with the Emperor?”

I replied in the affirmative, and, bowing, greeted His Imperial Highness, her father, with whom I had long been on friendly terms.

“Where are you going?” asked the vivacious young lady quickly as she rebuttoned her long white glove, for they had, it seemed, been on a visit to the Empress.

“I have to go to the opening of the new wing of the Naval Hospital,” I said. “And I haven’t much time to spare.”

“We are going there, too. I have to perform the opening ceremony in place of the Emperor,” replied the Grand Duke. “So drive with us.”

“That’s it, Uncle Colin!” exclaimed his daughter. “Come out for an airing. It’s a beautiful afternoon.”

So we went forth into the great courtyard, where one of the Imperial state carriages, an open one, was in waiting, drawn by four fine, long-tailed Caucasian horses.

Behind it was a troop of mounted Cossacks to act as escort.

We entered, and the instant the bare-headed flunkeys had closed the door the horses started off, and we swung out of the handsome gateway into the wide Place, in the centre of which stood the grey column of Peter the Great.

Turning to the left we went past the Alexander Gardens, now parched and dusty with summer heat, and skirted the long façade of the War Office.

“I wonder what tales you’ve been telling the Emperor about me, Uncle Colin?” asked the impudent little lady, laughing as we drove along, I being seated opposite the Grand Duke and his daughter.

“About you?” I echoed with a smile. “Oh, nothing, I assure you – or, at least, nothing that was not nice.”

“You’re a dear, I know,” declared the girl, her father laughing amusedly the while. “But you are so dreadfully proper. You’re worse about etiquette than father is – and he’s simply horrid. He won’t ever let me go out shopping alone, and I’m surely old enough to do that!”

“You’re quite old enough to get into mischief, Tattie,” replied her father, speaking in French.

“I love mischief. That’s the worst of it,” and she pouted prettily.

“Yes, quite true – the worst of it, for me,” declared His Imperial Highness. “I thought that when you went to school in England they would teach you manners.”

“Ordinary manners are not Court manners,” the girl argued, trying to rebutton one of her gloves which had come unfastened.

“Let me do it,” I suggested, and quickly fastened it.

“Thank you,” she laughed with mock dignity. “How charming it is to have such a polished diplomat as Mr Colin Trewinnard to do nice things for one. Now, isn’t that a pretty speech? I suppose I ought to study smart things to say, and practise them on the dog – as father does sometimes.”

“Really, Tattie, you forget yourself, my dear,” exclaimed her father, with distinct disapproval.

“Well, that’s nothing,” declared my charming little companion. “Don’t parsons practise preaching their sermons, and lawyers and statesmen practise their clever untruths? You can’t expect a woman’s mouth to be full of sugar-plums of speech, can you?”

My eyes met those of the Grand Duke, and we both burst out laughing at the girl's quaint philosophy.

"Why, even the Emperor has his speeches composed and written for him by silly old Calitzine," she went on. "And at Astrakhan the other day I composed a most telling and patriotic speech for His Majesty, which he delivered when addressing the officers of the Army of the Volga. I sat on my horse and listened. The old generals and colonels, and all the rest of them, applauded vociferously, and the men threw their caps in the air. I wonder if they would have done this had they known that I had written those well-turned patriotic sentences, I – a mere chit of a girl, as father sometimes tells me!"

"And the terror of the Imperial family," I ventured to add.

"Thank you for your compliment. Uncle Colin," she laughed. "I know father endorses your sentiments. I see it in his face."

"Oh, do try and be serious, Tattie," he urged. "See all those people! Salute them, and don't laugh so vulgarly." And he raised his white-gloved hand to his shining helmet in recognition of the shouts of welcome rising from those assembled along our route.

Whereat she bowed gracefully again with that slight and rather frigid smile which she had been taught to assume on public occasions.

"If I put up my sunshade they won't see me, and it will avoid such a lot of trouble," she exclaimed suddenly, and she put up her pretty parasol, which matched her gown and softened the light upon her pretty face.

"Oh, no, Uncle Colin!" she exclaimed suddenly, as we turned the corner into the Yosnesenskaya, a long, straight street where the throng, becoming greater, was kept back by lines of police in their grey coats, peaked caps and revolvers. "I know what you are thinking. But it isn't so. I'm not in the least afraid of spoiling my complexion."

"Then perhaps it is a pity you are not," I replied. "Complexions, like all shining things, tarnish quickly."

"Just like reputations, I suppose," she remarked, whereupon her father could not restrain another laugh.

Then again, at word in an undertone from the Grand Duke, both he and his daughter saluted the crowd, our horses galloping, as they always do in Russia, and our Cossack-escort clattering behind.

There were a good many people just at this point, for it was believed that the Emperor would pass on his way to perform the opening ceremony, and his loyal subjects were waiting to cheer him.

On every hand, the people, recognising the popular Grand Duke and his daughter, set up hurrahs, and while His Imperial Highness saluted, his pretty daughter, the most admired girl in Russia, bowed, and I, in accordance with etiquette, made no sign of acknowledgment.

As we came to the narrow bridge which spans the canal, the road was flanked on the left by the Alexander Market, and here was another huge crowd.

Loud shouts of welcome in Russian broke forth from those assembled, for the Grand Duke and his daughter were everywhere greeted most warmly.

But as we passed the market, the police keeping back the crowd, I saw a thin, middle-aged man in dark clothes lift his hand high above his head. Something came in our direction, yet before I had time to realise his action a blood-red flash blinded me, my ears were deafened by a terrific report, a hot, scorching breath swept across my face, and I felt myself hurled far into space amid the mass of falling débris.

It all occurred in a single instant, and I knew no more. I had a distinct feeling that some terrific explosion had knocked the breath clean out of my body. I recollect seeing the carriage rent into a thousand fragments just at the same instant that black unconsciousness fell upon me.

Chapter Seven. Tells Tragic Truths

When, with extreme difficulty, I slowly struggled back to a knowledge of things about me, I found myself, to my great surprise, in a narrow hospital-bed, with a holy *ikon* upon the whitewashed wall before me, and a Red Cross sister bending tenderly over me.

Beside her stood two Russian doctors regarding me very gravely, and at their side was Saunderson, our Councillor of Embassy.

“Well, how are you feeling now, Colin, old man?” the latter whispered cheerfully.

“I – I don’t know. Where am I?” I asked. “What’s happened?”

“My dear fellow, you can thank your lucky stars that you’ve escaped from the bomb,” he said.

“The bomb!” I gasped, and then in a flash all the horrors of that sudden explosion crowded upon me. “What happened?” I inquired, trying to raise myself, and finding my head entirely enveloped in surgical bandages. “What happened to the others?”

“The Grand Duke was, alas! killed, but his daughter fortunately escaped only with a scratch on her arm,” was his reply. “The carriage was blown to atoms, the two horses and their driver and footman were killed, while three Cossacks of the escort were also killed and two injured.”

“Then – then she – she is alive!” I managed to gasp, dazed at the tragic truth he had related to me.

“Yes – it was a desperate attempt. Fifteen arrests have been made up to the present.”

And while he was speaking, Captain Stoyanovitch advanced to my bedside, and leaning over, asked in a low voice:

“How are you, Trewinnard? The Emperor has sent me to inquire.”

“Tell His Majesty that I – I thank him. I’m getting round – I – I hope I’ll soon be well. I – I – ”

“That’s right. Take great care of yourself, *mon cher*,” he urged.

And then the doctors ordered my visitors away, and I sank among my pillows into a state of semi-consciousness.

How long I lay thus I do not know. I remember seeing soldiers come and go, and at length discovered that I was in the hospital attached to the artillery barracks on the road to Warsaw Station. Beside me always sat a grave-eyed nursing sister, silent and watchful, while ever and anon one or other of the doctors would approach, bend over me, and inquire of her my condition.

Saunderson came again some hours later. It was then night. And from him, now that I was completely conscious, I learnt how, after the explosion, the police had in the confusion shot down two men, afterwards proved to be innocent spectators, and made wholesale indiscriminate arrests. It was believed, however, that the man I had seen, the perpetrator of the dastardly act, had escaped scot-free.

Dozens of windows in the market-hall opposite where the outrage was committed had been smashed, and many people besides the killed and injured had been thrown down by the terrific force of the explosion.

“The poor Grand Duke Nicholas has, alas! been shattered out of recognition,” he told me. “His body was taken at once to his palace, where it now lies, while you were brought here together with the Grand Duchess Natalia. But her wound being quite a slight one, was dressed, and she was driven at once to the Winter Palace, at the order of the Emperor. Poor child! I hear that she is utterly prostrated by the fearful sight which her father presented to her eyes.”

I drew a long breath.

“I suppose I was struck on the head by some of the débris and knocked insensible – eh?” I asked.

“Yes, probably,” he replied. “But the doctors say the wound is only a superficial one, and in a week’s time you’ll be quite right again. So cheer up, old chap. You’ll get the long leave which you put in for the other day, and a bit more added to it, no doubt.”

“But this state of things is terrible,” I declared, shifting myself upon my side so that I could better look into his face. “Surely the revolutionists could have had no antagonism towards the Grand Duke Nicholas! He was most popular everywhere.”

“My dear fellow, who can gauge the state of the Russian mind at this moment? Plots seem to be of daily occurrence.”

“If you believe the reports of the Secret Police. But I, for one, don’t,” I declared frankly.

“No, no,” he said reprovingly. “Don’t excite yourself. Be thankful that you’ve escaped. You might have shared the same fate as those poor Cossacks.”

“I know,” I said. “I thank God that I was spared. But it will be in the London papers, no doubt. Reuter’s man will send it; therefore, will you wire to my mother at once. You know her address – Hayford Manor, near Newquay, Cornwall. Wire in my name, and tell her that the affair is greatly exaggerated, and that I’m all right, will you?”

He promised.

I knew with what eagerness my aged mother always followed all my movements, for I made it a practice to write to her twice every week with a full report of my doings. I was as devoted to her as she was to me. And perhaps that accounted for the fact that I had never married. My father, the Honourable Colin Trewinnard, had been one of the largest landowners in Cornwall, and my family was probably one of the oldest in the county. But evil times had fallen upon the estate in the last years of my father’s life; depreciation in the value of agricultural land, failing crops and foreign competition had ruined farming, and now the income was not one-half that it had been fifty years before. Yet it was sufficient to keep my mother and myself in comfort; and this, in addition to my pay from the Foreign Office, rendered me better off than a great many other men in our Service.

Through Stoyanovitch, on the following morning, I received a message from Natalia. He said:

“Her Highness, whom I saw in the Palace an hour ago, told me to say that she sent you her best wishes for a speedy recovery. She is greatly grieved over the death of her father, and, of course, the Court has gone into mourning for sixty days. She told me to tell you that as soon as you are able to return to the Embassy she wishes to see you on a very important matter.”

“Tell her that I am equally anxious to see her, and that she has all my sympathy in her sad bereavement,” I replied.

“Terrible, wasn’t it?” the Imperial equerry exclaimed. “The poor girl looks white, haggard and entirely changed.”

“No wonder – after such an awful experience.”

“There were, I hear, twenty more arrests to-day. Markoff had audience with His Majesty at ten o’clock this morning, and eight of the prisoners of yesterday have been sent to Schusselburg.”

“From which they will never emerge,” I said, with a shudder at the thought of that living tomb as full of horrors as was the Bastille itself.

“Well, I don’t see why they should, my dear friend,” the Captain replied. “If I had had such an experience as yours, I shouldn’t feel very lenient towards them – as you apparently do.”

“I am not thinking of the culprit,” I said. “He certainly deserves a death-sentence. It is the innocents who, here in Russia, suffer for the guilty, with whom I deeply sympathise. Every day unoffending men and women are arrested wholesale in this drastic, unrelenting sweeping away of prisoners to Siberia. I tell you that half of them are loyal, law-abiding subjects of the Tzar.”

The elegant equerry-in-waiting only grinned and shrugged his shoulders. He was too good a Russian to adopt such an argument. As personal attendant upon His Majesty, he, of course, supported the Imperial autocracy.

“This accursed system of police-spies and *agents-provocateurs* manufactures criminals. Can a man wrongly arrested and sent to the mines remain a loyal subject?”

“The many have to suffer for the few. It is the same in all lands,” was his reply. “But really the matter doesn’t concern me, my dear Trewinnard.”

“It will concern you one day when you are blown up as I have been,” I exclaimed savagely.

Shortly afterwards he left, and for hours I lay thinking, my eyes upon that square gilt holy picture before me, the *ikon* placed before the eyes of every patient in the hospital. Nurses in grey and soldiers in white cotton tunics passed and repassed through the small ward of which I was the only occupant.

The pains in my head were excruciating. I felt as though my skull had been filled with boiling water. Sometimes my thoughts were perfectly normal, yet at others my mind seemed full of strange, almost ridiculous phantasies. My whole career, from the days when I had been a clerk in that sombre old-fashioned room at Downing Street, through my service at Madrid, Brussels, Berlin and Rome to Petersburg – all went before me, like a cinema-picture. I looked upon myself as others saw me – as a man never sees himself in normal circumstances – a mere struggling entity upon the tide of that sea of life called To-day.

We are so very apt to think ourselves indispensable to the world. Yet we have only to think again, and remember that the unknown to-morrow may bring, us death, and with it everlasting oblivion, as far as this world is concerned. Queen Victoria and Pope Leo XIII were the two greatest figures of our time; yet a month after their deaths people had to recall who they were, and what they had actually done to earn distinction.

These modern days of rush and hurry are forgetful, irresponsible days, when public opinion is manufactured by those who rule the halfpenny press, and when the worst and most baneful commodities may be foisted upon the public by means of efficient advertisement.

The cleverest swindler may by payment become a baronet of England, even a peer of the realm, providing he subscribes sufficient to Somebody’s Newspaper Publicity Agency; and any blackguard with money or influence may become a Justice of the Peace and sentence his fellows to fourteen days’ imprisonment.

But the reader will forgive me. Perhaps remarks such as these ill become a diplomat – one who is supposed to hold no personal opinions. Yet I assert that to-day there is no diplomat serving Great Britain in a foreign country who is not tired and disgusted with his country’s antiquated methods and her transparent weaknesses.

The papers speak vigorously of Britain’s power, but men in my service – those who know real international truths – smile at the defiant and well-balanced sentences of the modern journalist, whose blissful ignorance of the truth is oftentimes so pathetic. Yes, it is only the diplomat serving at a foreign Court who can view Great Britain from afar, and accurately gauge her position among modern nations.

For ten days I remained in that whitewashed ward, many of my friends visiting me, and Stoyanovitch coming daily with a pleasant message from His Majesty. Then one bright morning the doctors declared me to be fit enough to drive back to the Embassy.

An hour later, with my head still bandaged, I was seated in my own room, in my own big leather armchair, with the July sun streaming in from across the Neva.

Saunderson was sitting with me, describing the great pomp of the funeral of the Grand Duke Nicholas, and the service at the Isaac Church, at which the Tzar, the Court, and all the *corps diplomatique* had attended.

“By the way,” he added, “a note came for you this morning,” and he handed me a black-edged letter, bearing on the envelope the Imperial arms embossed in black.

I tore it open and found it to be a neatly-written little letter from the Grand Duchess Natalia, asking me to allow her to call and see me as soon as ever I returned to the Embassy.

“I must see you, Uncle Colin,” she wrote. “It is most pressing. So do please let me come. Send me word, and I will come instantly. I cannot write anything here. *I must see you at once!*”

Chapter Eight. Describes a Mysterious Incident

Two days later, the ugly bandages having been removed from my head, Natalia was seated in the afternoon in my den.

Exquisitely neat in her dead black, with the long crape veil, she presented an altogether different appearance to the radiant girl who had sat before me on that fatal drive. Her sweet face was now pale and drawn, and by the dark rings about her eyes I saw how full of poignant grief her heart had lately been.

She had taken off her long, black gloves and settled herself cosily in my big armchair, her tiny patent-leather shoe, encasing a shapely silk-clad ankle, set forth beneath the hem of her black skirt.

“I was so terrified. Uncle Colin, that you were also dead!” the girl was saying in a low, sympathetic voice, after I had expressed my deepest regret regarding the unfortunate death of her father, to whom she had been so devoted.

“I suppose I had a very narrow escape,” I said cheerfully. “You came out best of all.”

“By an absolute miracle. The Emperor is furious. Twenty of those arrested have already been sent to Schusselburg,” she said. “Only yesterday, he told me that he hoped you would be well enough in a day or two to go to the Palace. I was to tell you how extremely anxious he is to see you as soon as possible.”

“I will obey the command at the earliest moment I am able,” I replied. “But how horribly unfortunate all this is,” I went on. “I fully expected that you would be in England by this time.”

“As soon as you are ready, Uncle Colin, I can go. The Emperor has already told me that he has placed me under your guardianship. That you are to be my equerry. Isn’t it fun?” she cried, her pretty face suddenly brightening with pleasure. “Fancy you! dear old uncle, being put in charge of me – your naughty niece!”

“His Majesty wished it,” I said. “He thinks you will be better away from Court for a time. Therefore, I have promised to accept the responsibility. For one year you are to live *incognito* in England, and I have been appointed your equerry and guardian – and,” I added very seriously, “I hope that my naughty niece will really behave herself, and do nothing which will cause me either annoyance or distress.”

“I’ll really try and be very good, Uncle Colin,” declared the girl with mock demureness, and laughing mischievously. “Believe me, I will.”

“It all remains with you,” I said. “Remember I do not wish it to be necessary that I should furnish any unfavourable report to the Emperor. I want us to understand each other perfectly from the outset. Recollect one point always. Though you may be known in England as Miss Gottorp, yet remember that you are of the Imperial family of Russia, and niece of the Emperor. Hence, there must be no flirtations, no clandestine meetings or love-letters, and such-like, as in the case of young Hamborough.”

“Please don’t bring up that affair,” urged the little madcap. “It is all dead, buried and forgotten long ago.”

“Very well,” I said, looking straight into her big, velvety eyes so full of expression. “But remember that your affection is absolutely forbidden except towards a man of your own birth and station.”

“I know,” she cried, with a quick impatience. “I’m unlike any other girl. I am forbidden to speak to a commoner.”

“Not in England. Preserve your *incognito*, and nobody will know. At His Majesty’s desire, I have obtained leave of absence from the service for twelve months, in order to become your guardian.”

“Well, dear old Uncle Colin, you are the only person I would have chosen. Isn’t that nice of me to say so?” she asked, with a tantalising smile.

“But I tell you I shall show you no leniency if you break any of the rules which must, of necessity, be laid down,” I declared severely. “As soon as I find myself well enough, you will take Miss West, your old governess, and Davey, your English maid, to England, and I will come and render you assistance in settling down somewhere in comfort.”

“At Eastbourne?” she cried in enthusiasm. “We’ll go there. Do let us go there?”

“Probably at Brighton,” I said quietly. “It would be gayer for you, and – well, I will be quite frank – I think there are one or two young men whom you know in Eastbourne. Hence it is not quite to your advantage to return there.”

She pouted prettily in displeasure.

“Brighton is within an hour of London, as you know,” I went on, extolling the praises of the place.

“Oh, yes, I know it. We often went over from Eastbourne, to concerts and things. There’s an aquarium there, and a seaside railway, and lots of trippers. I remember the place perfectly. I love to see your English trippers. They are such fun, and they seem to enjoy themselves so much more than we ever do. I wonder how it is – they enjoy their freedom, I suppose, while we have no freedom.”

“Well,” I said cheerfully, “in a week or ten days I hope I shall be quite fit to travel, and then we will set out for England.”

“Yes. Let us go. The Emperor leaves for Peterhof on Saturday. He will not return to Petersburg until the winter, and the Court moves to Tzarskoie-Selo on Monday.”

“Then I will see His Majesty before Saturday,” I said. “But, tell me, why did Your Highness write to me so urgently three days ago? You said you wished to see me at once.”

The girl sprang from her chair, crossed to the door, and made certain it was closed.

Then, glancing around as though apprehensive of eavesdroppers, she said:

“I wanted to tell you, Uncle Colin, of something very, very curious which happened the other evening. About ten o’clock at night I was with Miss West in the blue boudoir – you know the room in our palace, you’ve been in it.”

“I remember it perfectly,” I said.

“Well, I went upstairs to Davey for my smelling-salts as Miss West felt faint, and as I passed along the corridor I saw, in the moonlight, in my own room a dark figure moving by the window. It was a man. I saw him searching the drawers of my little writing-table, examining the contents by means of an electric-torch. I made no sound, but out of curiosity, drew back and watched him. He was reading all my letters – searching for something which he apparently could not find. My first impulse was to ring and give the alarm, for though I could not see the individual’s face, I knew he must be a thief. Still, I watched, perhaps rather amused at the methodical examination of my letters which he was making, all unconscious that he was being observed, until suddenly at a noise made by a servant approaching from the other end of the corridor, he started, flung back the letters into the drawer, and mounting to the open window, got out and disappeared. I shouted and rushed after him to the window, but he had gone. He must have dropped about twelve feet on to the roof of the ballroom and thus got away.

“Several servants rushed in, and the sentries were alarmed,” she went on. “But when I told my story, it was apparent that I was not believed. The drawer in the writing-table had been reclosed, and as far as we could see all was in perfect order. So I believe they all put it down to my imagination.”

“But you are quite certain that you saw the man there?” I said, much interested in her story.

“Quite. He was of middle height, dressed in dark clothes, and wore a cloth peaked cap, like men wear when golfing in England,” she replied. “He was evidently in search of something I had in my writing-table, but he did not find it. Nevertheless, he read a quantity of my letters mostly from school-friends.”

“And your love-letters?” I asked, with a smile.

“Well, if the fellow read any of them,” she laughed, “I hope he was very much edified. One point is quite plain. He knew English, for my letters were nearly all in English.”

“Some spy or other, I suppose.”

“Without a doubt,” she said, clasping her white hands before her and raising her wonderful eyes to mine. “And do you know, Uncle Colin, the affair has since troubled me very considerably. I wanted to see you and hear your opinion regarding it.”

“My opinion is that your window ought not to have been left open.”

“It had not been. The maid whose duty it is to close the windows on that floor one hour before sunset every day has been closely questioned, and declares that she closed and fastened it at seven o’clock.”

“Servants are not always truthful,” I remarked dubiously.

“But the intruder was there with some distinct purpose. Don’t you think so?”

“Without a doubt. He was endeavouring to learn some secret which Your Highness possesses. Cannot you form any theory what it can be? Try and reflect.”

“Secret!” she echoed, opening her eyes wide. “I have no secrets. Everybody tells me I am far too outspoken.”

“Here, in Russia, everyone seems to hold secrets of some character or other, social or political, and spies are everywhere,” I said. “Are you quite certain you have never before seen the intruder?”

“I could only catch the silhouette of his figure against the moonlight, yet, to tell the truth, it struck me at that moment that I had seen him somewhere before. But where, I could not recollect. He read each letter through, so he must have known English very well, or he could not have read so quickly.”

“But did you not tell me in the winter garden of the Palace, on the night of the last Court ball, that Marya de Rosen had given you certain letters – letters which reflected upon General Markoff?” I asked.

She sat erect, staring at me open-mouthed in sudden recollection. “Why, I never thought of that!” she gasped. “Of course! It was for those letters the fellow must have been searching.”

“I certainly think so – without the shadow of a doubt.”

“Madame de Rosen feared lest they should be stolen from her, and she gave them over to me – three of them sealed up in an envelope,” declared my dainty little companion. “She expressed apprehension lest a domiciliary visit be made to her house by the police, when the letters in question might be discovered and seized. So she asked me to hold them for her.”

“And what did you do with them?”

“I hid them in a place where they will never be found,” she said; “at a spot where nobody would even suspect. But somebody must be aware that she gave them to me for safe-keeping. How could they possibly know?”

“I think Your Highness was – well, just a little indiscreet on the night of the Court ball,” I said. “Don’t you recollect that you spoke aloud when other people were in the winter garden, and that I queried the judiciousness of it?”

“Ah! I remember now!” she exclaimed, her face suddenly pale and serious. “I recollect what I said. Somebody must have overheard me.”

“And that somebody told Serge Markoff himself – the man who was poor Madame de Rosen’s enemy, and who has sent both her and Luba to their graves far away in Eastern Siberia.”

“Then you think that he is anxious to regain possession of those letters?”

“I think that is most probable, in face of your statement that you intend placing them before the Emperor. Of course, I do not know their nature, but I feel that they must reflect very seriously upon His Majesty’s favourite official – the oppressor of Russia. You still have them in your possession?” I asked.

“Yes, Uncle Colin. I feared lest some spy might find them, so I went up to my old nursery on the top floor of the Palace – a room which has not been used for years. In it stands my old doll’s house – a big, dusty affair as tall as myself. I opened it and placed the packet in the little wardrobe in one of the doll’s bedrooms. It is still there. I saw it only yesterday.”

“Be very careful that no spy watches you going to that disused room. You cannot exercise too much caution in this affair,” I urged seriously.

“I am always cautious,” she assured me. “I distrust more than one of our servants, for I believe some of them to be in Markoff’s pay. All that we do at home is carried at once to the Emperor, while I am watched at every turn.”

“True; only we foreign diplomats are exempt from this pestilential surveillance and the clever plots of the horde of *agents-provocateurs* controlled by the all-powerful Markoff.”

“But what shall I do, Uncle Colin?” asked the girl, her white hands clasped in her lap.

“If you think it wise to place the letter before the Emperor, I should certainly lose no time in doing so,” I replied. “It may soon be too late. Spies will leave no hole or corner in your father’s palace unexamined.”

“You think there really is urgency?” she asked.

I looked my charming companion straight in the face and replied:

“I do. If you value your life, then I would urge you at once to get rid of the packet which poor Madame de Rosen entrusted to you.”

“But I cannot place it before the Emperor just at present,” the girl exclaimed. “I promised secrecy to Marya de Rosen.”

“Then you knew something of the subject to which those letters refer – eh?”

“I know something of it.”

“Why not pass them on to me? They will be quite secure here in the Embassy safe. Russian spies dare not enter here – upon this bit of British soil.”

“A good idea,” she said quickly. “I will. I’ll go home and bring them back to you.”

And in a few minutes she rose and with a merry laugh left me to descend to her carriage, which was waiting out upon the quay.

I stood looking out of the window as she drove away. I was thinking – thinking seriously over the Emperor’s strange apprehension.

Two visitors followed her, the French naval attaché, and afterwards old Madame Neilidoff, the Society leader of Moscow, who called to congratulate me upon my escape, and to invite me to spend my convalescence at her country estate at Sukova. With the stout, ugly old lady, who spoke French with a dreadfully nasal intonation and possessed a distinct moustache, I chatted for nearly an hour, as we sipped our tea with lemon, when almost as soon as she had taken her departure the door was flung open unceremoniously and the Grand Duchess Natalia burst in, her beautiful face blanched to the lips.

“Uncle Colin! Something horrible has happened; Those letters have gone!” she gasped in a hoarse whisper, staring at me.

“Gone!” I echoed, starting to my feet in dismay.

“Yes. *They’ve been stolen – stolen!*”

Chapter Nine.

The Little Grand Duchess

In the golden September sunset, the long, wide promenade stretching beside the blue sea from Brighton towards the fashionable suburb of Hove was agog with visitors.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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