Cullum Ridgwell

The Men Who Wrought

Ridgwell Cullum
The Men Who Wrought

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23169531
The Men Who Wrought:

Содержание

Cullum Ridgwell
The Men Who Wrought

CHAPTER I
THE DANGER

"Amongst the many uncertainties which this deplorable, patched-up peace has brought us, there is, at least, one significant certainty, my boy. It's the inventor. He's buzzing about our heads like a fly in summer-time, and he's just about as – sticky."

Sir Andrew Farlow sighed. His sigh was an expression of relief; relief at the thought that he and his son, dining together at Dorby Towers for the first time since the dissolution of Parliament had released the latter from his political duties, had at last reached the end of a long discussion of the position brought about by the hopelessly patched-up peace, which, for the moment, had suspended the three years of terrible hostilities which had hurled the whole of Europe headlong over the precipice of ruin.

The great ship-owner toyed with the delicate stem of his liquor glass. There was a smile in his keen blue eyes. But it was a smile without lightness of heart to support it.

"Yes, I know. They've been busy enough throughout the war

– and to some purpose. Now we have a breathing space they'll spread like a – plague."

Ruxton Farlow sipped his coffee. The weight of the recent discussion was still oppressing him. His mind was full of the appalling threat which the whole world knew to be overshadowing the future.

The dinner was drawing to its close. The butler, grown old in Sir Andrew's service, had finally withdrawn. The great Jacobean dining-hall of Dorby Towers, with its aged oak beams and beautifully carved panelling, was lost in the dim shadows cast by the carefully shaded table lights. Father and son were occupying only the extreme end of the dining-table, which had, at some far-distant age, served to bear the burden of the daily meals of half a hundred monks. There were no other lights in the room, and even the figures of the two diners were only illuminated by the reflected glow from the spotless damask on the table, a fashion to which the conservative habits of the household still ardently clung. It was a fitting setting for such a meeting as the present.

Sir Andrew Farlow, Baronet, was one of the greatest magnates of shipping and ship-building in the country, and was also one of the greatest sufferers by the German submarine warfare during the late war. His extreme wealth, and the fact of the enormous Government contracts in his ship-building yards, had left him practically immune from the consequences of his losses, but the losses to his fleet had been felt by the man, who was, before all things in the world, a shipmaster.

His son, and only partner, had spent those past three years in the service of his country. Not in the actual fighting line but in the work of organization, an important position which his wealth and capacity had entitled him to.

Sir Andrew pierced and lit a cigar.

"We mustn't ridicule them, though," he said, in his hearty Yorkshire way. "We've laughed at 'em too often in the past. It's a laugh which cost our country a couple of thousand millions, and a world-wide suffering which mankind will never forget." Then his manner lightened. "Henceforth the inventor must be to us a rare and precious orchid. We must spend hundreds of thousands of pounds on him, the same as I spend thousands on my orchid houses. I count myself well repaid if I succeed in raising one single perfect bloom on some rare plant. That is, if my rivals have failed with the same plant. The inventor is the orchid of modern civilization, and the perfect blooms he produces are very, very precious and – rare."

"You are thinking of those diabolical engines of destruction which were prepared for this war."

Ruxton helped himself to a cigar.

"On the contrary, I am thinking of the defence, not the offence, of this old country of ours."

The younger man nodded as he lit his cigar.

"That is it. We must prepare – prepare. We have only a breathing space for it."

"There must be no more slumbering."

"And no more sacrificing the country to self-seeking demagogues."

"Yes, and no more slavery to Party prejudices, as antique as the timbers of this house."

"Nor the knaveries of men who seek power through dividing the country into classes, and setting each at the other's throat."

"Nor must we ever again allow the nation's security, economic or military, to be hurled into the cockpit of Party politics."

"Gad! It makes me shiver when I think how near – how near – "

"We were to destruction," added Sir Andrew gravely.

It was again a moment of intense thought. Each man was regarding from his own view-point that intangible threat inspired by the unsatisfactory termination of the war, which left the Teutonic races in a position to brew further mischief with which to flood the world.

The pucker of thought, the drawn brows, completed the likeness of Sir Andrew Farlow to England's national symbolic figure. His broad shoulders and shortish figure; his round, strong, Yorkshire face, with its crowning of snow-white, curly hair, and the old-fashioned, crisp side whiskers made him a typical John Bull, even in his modern evening dress.

In the case of his son Ruxton it was almost in every respect an antithesis.

No foreigner would have taken Ruxton Farlow for anything but an Englishman, just as no Englishman but would have

charged him with possessing foreign blood in his veins. And the Englishman would have been right.

Sir Andrew Farlow had spent a brief married life of a few months over one year with one of the most beautiful women amongst the Russian nobility, and the birth of his son left him a widower.

From his mother young Ruxton had inherited all those characteristics which foreign Europe assigns to the British born; his great size, his fair, waving hair and his darkly serious eyes. These things all came from his Russian mother, who had possessed them herself in a marked degree. Furthermore he inherited other qualities which could never be claimed for his Yorkshire father. The boy from his earliest childhood was an idealist: an idealist of but a single purpose which developed into a brilliant specimen of the modern product of an old-fashioned patriotism.

But he brought more to bear upon his patriotism than the mere passionate devotion to his country. He was a fine product of public school and university with the backing of a keen, well-balanced brain, and a natural aptitude for statecraft in relation to the rest of the world. He saw with eyes wide open to those interests dearest to his heart, and clearly, without one single smudge of the fog of personal self-interest.

"It's never out of my thoughts, Dad," Ruxton said at last. "It is with me at all times. It is the purpose of my life to devote myself to, and associate myself with, only those who will place

their country before all else in life."

"An ideal difficult to realize in Great Britain," observed his father drily.

"Do you think that? Do you really think that?"

Sir Andrew stirred impatiently.

"It is not what I think. It is not what any of us think. It is what we see and hear – and *know*. This war has shown up so many weaknesses in the armor of our social economy as well as the psychology of our people that one hardly knows where to hurl one's condemnation the most forcefully. So many weaknesses and failures stand out crying aloud for the bitter castigations of national conscience that it is difficult to point out one worthy feature. Oh, you think that too sweeping," cried the baronet with flushed rugged cheeks and brow, as his son raised questioning eyes in his direction. "That is what every other man and woman in the country would say in their purblind vanity. But it is true. True of the country. True of us all. There is one thing which appeals to me as our greatest failure, however. One failure preëminent over all others that has sunk deep down in my heart, and the scar of which can never be obliterated. I was brought up in the early Victorian days when patriotism was no mere head-line in a sensation-loving press. It was something real. Something big. Something which gripped the sense of duty and made our men and women yearn for active participation when danger threatened our Empire, even to the sacrifice of all they held dear in life. That national spirit was sick to death when this war broke

out. Our press was divided, our politicians were divided, and, yes, our people were largely indifferent. But for the strength of a few of our leaders, men who have deserved far better of our country than our country has ever yielded them, thanks to indifference and Party politics, the end of this war would have come with even more terrible consequences to our Empire than all that is signified by the position, almost approaching *in status quo ante*, in which we now find ourselves. The ramifications of our lack of national spirit are so multifarious that it is impossible to go into them as a whole. One or two, however, are so prodigious, and have been so pronouncedly marked, that the veriest optimist has not failed to observe. One which stood out remarkably was the attitude of the reigning Government when war was declared. Every newspaper cried aloud that our ranks had closed up to meet the peril. They did close up, as far as the will of the country was concerned, but our machinery was geared to certain movement, a machine built through years of partizanship in politics. The result was pitiful. When the party in power was faced with Labor troubles which threatened our downfall in the war, they dared not face their task of drastic remedy because they saw in the dim future the loss of votes which would return their opponents to power at the next election. Hence the political crisis, at a time when we could ill afford such crises, and the formation of a coalition. Ten months were thus lost in drifting while Labor played, and our soldiers, inadequately armed, went to their deaths. The press, a divided press, mark you, sought a

scapegoat in the individual, when they, no less than our national machinery, were to blame for the disaster. Is such a condition conceivable in a fervent Latin race, or an iron-shod Teuton? No, no. Is it right to blame Labor, who, for the past decade and more, has been coddled and pampered into the belief that like any baby in its cradle it has only to cry loud enough to obtain the alleviating fluid? It at least has cunning enough to realize that its weight of vote in the country is sufficient to control the destiny of the demagogues who seek place and power through its ignorance. Man, but it makes me sweat to think of it. National spirit? Faugh! Look at the manufacturers. Patriotism? They were full of newspaper patriotism until those who were executing Government contracts discovered that their profits were to be limited. The Army? Our voluntary system? The Army was all right. Oh, yes, the Army was great. But the system? The system was probably the most painful among all our national systems. The most hopelessly inadequate. And, from a national spirit view, was hideously grotesque. But the men who joined and shed their blood upon those terrible battle-fields abroad were as the worker in the vineyard who engaged for one penny. They gave their all, and made up in the execution of their duty for those who sheltered behind the skirts of their womenkind, and the race of shopkeepers they left behind. The spirit of our country when the war broke out was a sordid commercial spirit. 'Business as usual' was the cry. Then our press, our wonderful divided press, said the country was not awake. It was slumbering! I tell you it

was a lie!" The old man banged his fist upon the table and set the glasses jumping. "Our country was not asleep. Every man, woman, and child capable of common understanding realized our peril from the start. It was the hateful commercial mind seeking to make gain out of the disaster which had overtaken the world, that mind that has acquired for us the detestable sobriquet of 'a race of shopkeepers,' that hindered and deterred us. We were not slumbering. We were awake. Wide awake! To think that I have lived to see the day when our women's fair hands should be called upon to distribute the white feather. Our present-day musicians and our national bards will tell you that the old songs of England are out of date. They are right. Our girls and boys look askance at your Marryats, your Dickenses, your Thackerays, your Stevensons, and all those great masters who found their strength in our country's greatest ages. When war broke out we were floundering in the mire of sensualism brought about by the years of peace and security, and so we bred the cult of the sensualist writers on sex problems, and all the accompaniment of the other arts to match."

The white-haired veteran, who had spent his early youth fighting his country's battles on the Empire's frontiers, and, in later days, had devoted all his energies to the furthering of Britain's supremacy on the seas, passed one strong hand over his lined brow. He swallowed like a man choking back an emotion threatening to overwhelm him. Then the flush died out of his rugged cheeks, and he smiled at the son he loved, and who was

his one remaining relative. "Forgive me, my boy, but – but all I've said is true. I don't think many will deny it. Anyway those who do are lying to their own consciences, or – or are purblind in their insane egoism."

Ruxton smiled responsively and thrust back his chair.

"There's no forgiveness needed, Dad," he said. "You have quoted but a few of the hundred signs, of which we all have proof, that when war broke out patriotism had only the smallest possible part in the life of this country. From the beginning to the end of this war England has had to pay out of her coffers, to those of her people whose services she needed, a price so extortionate that one wonders if it is not all some hideous nightmare and in truth unreal. But tell me, Dad," he went on after a pause, "you spoke just now of inventors, and your manner suggested that there was something – important."

Sir Andrew rose from the table and led the way towards the distant folding doors.

"Well, I don't know if it will prove to be anything – worth while."

He fumbled at an inner pocket of his dinner coat, and produced a letter written on thin paper. When they reached the great hall and stood under the brilliant electrolier he unfolded it and held it out for his son's perusal.

"I get lots of them," he said almost apologetically, "and few enough turn out worth while. This one reads a little different. That's all."

"Sir,

"You are a great shipmaster. You owned a fleet of merchant shipping when war broke out of forty-two coastwise and thirty-five ocean-going ships. At the end of the war you owned thirteen coastwise and twenty-one ocean-going traders. I have a means of saving you any such loss by submarine in the future. May I be permitted to show you my invention?

"Truly yours,

"Charles Smith.

"P.S. – Absolute secrecy is necessary. A simple 'yes' addressed by wire to Veevee, London, will be sufficient."

"The wording of it is so unusual that it – interested me," Sir Andrew went on, as Ruxton began to read the letter a second time.

Presently the younger man looked up from his reading.

"That's your imagination working, Dad," he said, smiling. Then he added: "Let it work. Let it run riot. That's what we want in England – now. I should see this man. I think he is a foreigner – in spite of his English name."

The John Bull face of the elder man wreathed into a warm smile as he looked up at his towering son.

"I had decided to," he said quietly.

Ruxton handed him back the letter. Then he moved across to the great mullioned window and looked out upon the perfect summer night. The moon was shining at its full and not a cloud was visible anywhere.

"I have some letters to write, my boy," Sir Andrew went on. "If you want me I shall be in the library. What are you going to do?"

"I think I shall take a stroll along the cliffs. It'll do me good, Dad. I want to feel our beloved Yorkshire cliffs under my feet again, and make sure they're – still there."

Ruxton laughed.

"The General Election is on August 21st, isn't it?" his father enquired presently. "You've got seven weeks in which to recuperate, and get the cobwebs blown off you."

"I always get rid of bad fancies up here in my native air," Ruxton said lightly. "I'm glad we haven't a strenuous campaign."

"No. We shall win all right."

"Win?" Ruxton laughed. "The National Party will sweep the polls. Labor will be opposed to us as Labor will oppose any party. They will always be with us. But even if the extreme Radicals were to link forces with them, they couldn't obtain a twenty-five per cent. representation. No, Dad, whatever the country failed to realize during the first two years of war, it's been all brought home to it now. The English housewife has been driven to a sweeping and garnishing of her home. We've driven her to that, and the National Party is —*going to see she does it thoroughly*."

The younger man's enthusiasm drew an approving smile from his father. Also a world of pride in this great, fair-haired idealist shone in his eyes.

"Sweep and garnish. That's it, boy," he said ardently. "And

what a sweeping, what a garnishing is needed. I wonder. Can it be done?"

"That is what we intend to test. It is to that great effort my colleagues have pledged their lives. I have pledged mine to another. I tell you, Dad, that the sweeping and garnishing isn't sufficient. That is only the moral side of the campaign that lies before us, and without it the other side can never be achieved. But all my future is to be given up to the material security side of the problem. It may be only my dreaming, but I seem to see a terrible threat sweeping up over the eastern horizon. A threat so appalling for us as to make the late war almost insignificant. Some day, if you have the patience to listen to a dreamer, I will tell you of the dread that persistently haunts me. Meanwhile we have that – breathing space."

Without troubling himself to get a hat Ruxton Farlow passed through the entrance hall, out into the brilliant, warm summer night, and strode on towards his destiny.

CHAPTER II
A STRANGE MEETING

The peace of the night knocked vainly at the heart of the man as he moved along over the grass-grown cart track, which skirted those fields abutting on the pathway marking the broken line of the lofty Yorkshire cliffs.

The warmth of the July air left him utterly forgetful of the light evening clothes in which he was clad, just as the grass-grown track failed to remind him that the shoes he wore had never been intended for country rambles. The soft sea breeze fanned his cheeks, and the bracing air added vigor of body if it left his mental feelings wholly uninspired.

For the time, at least, Ruxton Farlow was living within himself. His mental digestion was devouring hungrily of that force which had come to make his contemporaries realize that here was a man of that unusual calibre which must ultimately make him a leader of men in whatever walk of life he chose for that strenuous journey.

The full moon, shedding a ghostly glory on every hand, yielded him the necessary guidance for his footsteps. It served his purpose, but its beauty for once left him unimpressed. The diamond-studded sky suggested no jewel-bedecked cloak of mysterious night as at other times it was wont to appeal. All

romance was dead for the time, as though the shutter of his mental camera had been closed with a slam for the development of the plates within which held those living, grim pictures of the life he felt himself surrounded by on every hand.

He passed the last stile and faced the open sea. That smooth limitless expanse, sighing and restless, as it gently rocked its bosom like some aged crone nursing the infant she was too old to bear herself. He flung himself full length upon a rustling bed of heather. His head was towards the sea, and craning over the very edge of the dizzy cliff. There was no thought in his mind of the dangerous proximity. He had known these cliffs almost from his birth up. They were the friends of his whole life, and their possible latent treachery was unthinkable to him. He propped his face between his two hands and sank his elbows deep into the heather. Then, like some schoolboy, his feet were raised behind him, and crossed, while his eyes searched that mysterious horizon lost in the shadows of a perfect night.

It has been said that Ruxton Farlow was an idealist. But let there be no misapprehension about it. His idealism was practical and full of sanity. He was no visionary. His mind was ever groping for the material welfare of his country. The moral welfare, he felt, should be in hands far more capable in that direction than his life and learning had made his. It had been his habit of life to feed his mind upon hard and incontrovertible facts which bore upon the goal of his ideals. He accepted nothing which was merely backed by academic logic. He demanded the

logic of practice. Theory was impossible to him, unless that theory was demonstrated in practice. Thus it was he kept his mind alert for facts – and again facts.

The facts which concerned him at the moment were many, and he found in them all, when arranged in due order, one stream like some rushing river which raced on its tempestuous way to the wide sea of disaster beyond.

The starting-point of his facts was the truth that no modern combination of force, however superlative its effort, could crush out of international existence the power of two peoples with aggregate populations of virile strength of some hundred and odd million souls. The war had proved that. And the only possible peace resulting from it had added the conviction that, from a peace point of view, the war had proved utterly useless and damaging. Besides the enormous expenditure of treasure and the vast sacrifices of human life, it had given the world a nominal peace backed by an aggravation of international hatred and spleen a thousand times greater than had ever been known in history since the days of bare-limbed savagery.

What then was the outlook? The man stirred with that nervous suggestion of a disturbed mind. War – war! On every hand war – again. Once again all the moral development of the human race towards those higher planes of light, learning, and religious ideals was shadowed by the spectre which during the last three years had flung men back to the shadows of an ancient savagery and barbarism.

The savage mind of the Teuton had broken out into a fierce conflagration of barbarism. Again it would smoulder, like some slumbering volcano, only to break out again when the arrogance of the German heart told it that the time was ripe to avenge the indignity of its earlier failure.

Ruxton Farlow accepted this as his basis of fact, and followed the river down its turbulent course towards that sea of disaster which he already saw looming ahead. It required no imagination. The course was a straight one, straight as the crow flies. For that passion of hatred which inspired the flood brooked no obstruction to its course. It clamored for its goal and swept all side issues out of its path. Great Britain lay in that sea beyond. Great Britain, who, in German eyes, owned the earth, and incidentally had snatched even those inadequate colonies from her bosom, which, through long years of diplomatic trickery, she had contrived to acquire. The Prussian passion for conquest had been changed through the late war to the passionate national hatred of the German people against Great Britain. This was clear. So clear that the light which shone upon it was painful to his mental vision.

What then was the resulting position of the country he loved? The lessons of the war were many – so many. Yet preëminently outstanding was one fact which smothered all others in its significance, and reduced them all almost to nothingness. His father had dwelt upon the lack of national spirit when war broke out. That had been remedied. The country had changed during

those three years of suffering and sacrifice. No, his father had missed the great lesson. Yet it was so simple – so simple.

The man raised his head higher, and folded his arms under him as a support. He gazed down at the calm summer moonlit sea. So calm, so peaceful, so – seductive to the straining mind.

He began to realize the yearning of the suicide for the peace beyond life. How easy to solve all problems. How easy to rid oneself of the duties, the harassing, cruel duties imposed by the Creator of all life. The soft murmur of the breaking swell upon the beach below. One plunge beneath that shimmering surface and – nothing. In that instant there flashed through his mind a memory of just such another sea. The perfect summer sea. The great ship, one of the wonders of the age. A stealing trail of foam across the glass-like surface. An explosion. Then fifteen hundred souls solve the problem of that – nothing! Ah, that was it. That was the Danger. He knew. Every thinking human being knew that if Germany had begun war with a fleet of some three or four hundred submarines, three weeks would have terminated the war so far as Britain was concerned.

He moved over on to his side, and his movement was a further expression of nervous tension. He propped his head upon one hand with his eyes fixed on the vague horizon beyond which the Teutonic giant was peacefully slumbering, and his thought was spoken aloud.

"Is he slumbering?" he asked of the sea. "Is he? Will he ever sleep again? No, I think not. Not at least while there is a chance

that his intelligence behind the machine can render an island home untenable."

"Night claims from the overburdened soul the truth which daylight is denied."

Ruxton Farlow sat up with a jolt. His dark, searching eyes were turned from the sea. They were turned in the direction whence the voice, which had answered him, had proceeded. In the brilliant moonlight he saw the outline of a figure standing upon the footpath which ran parallel to the coast-line. The figure was not quite distinct, but it was clearly a woman's, which corroborated the conviction he had received at the sound of the voice.

"But for once she has betrayed her – trust," he said, and a feeling of irritation swept over him that he had permitted himself to respond to the challenge of this stranger, who was probably something in the nature of one of life's vagrants, wandering homeless over the deserted ways of the countryside.

Then he discovered to his further annoyance that his response had brought forth its logical result. The figure was moving towards him, and as it drew near he became aware of that delightful feminine rustle which no man ever yet found unseductive.

The woman made no verbal reply until she was standing before him. Ruxton was still sitting on the heather, but his eyes were wide with astonished admiration, and his clean-shaven lips were parted, which added to his whole expression of incredulous

amazement.

The woman standing before him was no vagrant, unless a vagrant could possess a queenly presence, and an attire which suggested the best efforts of London or Paris. He stared, stared as might some schoolboy budding into manhood at the sight of a perfect womanhood. Then, in a moment, questions raced through his head. Who was she, and where – where did she come from? What freak of fortune had set her wandering those cliffs alone – and at night?

She was beautifully tall and crowned with a royal wealth of hair which remained hatless. Its color was not certain in the moonlight, but Ruxton felt that it must be red-gold. He could think of no other color which could match such a presence. Her figure, sharply outlined in the moonlight, was superb. It suggested all he had ever seen in those ardent dreams of youth. Her face possessed something of the reflected glory of the moon lit by eyes whose color was hidden from him, but which shone like great dull jewels full of a living fire.

All these things he realized in one swift comprehensive glance. But in another moment his whole attention was absorbed by the rich voice, the tones of which were like the softest music of some foreign southern land.

"It is scarcely fair to blame the night," she said, in smiling protest.

All unprepared for the encounter Ruxton had nothing but a stupid monosyllable to offer.

"No," he said, and a sigh somehow escaped him.

Then, in a moment, the blood was set swiftly pulsating through his veins.

"May I sit down?" the woman enquired. "I have had a long walk, and am a little tired," she added in explanation.

But she waited for no permission. And somehow Ruxton felt that her expression of weariness was far below the mark. She appeared quite exhausted.

"You are more than a *little* tired," he said, with urgent solicitude.

Now that her face was nearer to his level he could see that she was indeed very, very beautiful. Her eyes were large and almost oriental in their shape. Her cheeks were as delicate as the petals of a lily. The contour of her whole face was a perfect oval with just sufficient lengthening to give it character.

She did not deny him. But a smile lit her eyes.

"This is delicious," she said, with a sigh of content, turning her face towards the sea, and drinking in deep draughts of fresh, salt air.

Ruxton endeavored to gather his faculties, which had been completely scattered by the thrilling shock of the encounter. He felt himself to be like a callow youth of seventeen rather than a man of over thirty-five, a man whose public life had made intercourse with women of society a matter of every day.

"You have had a long walk?" he enquired wonderingly. "But at night? On these cliffs? You are ten miles from Dorby, and

there is no habitation between – except Dorby Towers. Beyond this there is a village or two, but no railway for miles." He had made up his mind that she did not belong to this district. Her costume was still in his thoughts.

"I did not come from Dorby. Nor from any of those villages. Still, I have had a long walk. I have been on my feet nearly three hours."

As she offered no further explanation Ruxton urged her.

"Will you not explain – more?"

"Is it needed?"

The woman faced round, and her Eastern eyes were smiling frankly into his.

Ruxton had no alternative. He desired none. The situation had suddenly gripped him. He was caught in its toils, and delighted that it was so. This woman's beauty, her frank unconventionality, were wholly charming. He asked nothing better than that she should satisfy her whim, and sit there, beside him, talking – talking of what she pleased so long as he listened to the rich music in her voice, and could watch the play of her beautiful, mobile features.

"No," he said deliberately. "There is no need." Then he made a comprehensive gesture with one hand. "The night is beautiful, it is a night of romance and adventure. Let us forget there are such things as conventionality, and just – talk. Let us talk as this silver night prompts. Let us try and forget that painful thought which daylight brings us all. As you say, the night is the time of

truth, while daylight demands the subterfuge which conceals it."

But the woman did not respond to his invitation. A little pucker of sudden distress marred her brows.

"Conventionality. I had forgotten," she said. Then her manner became suddenly earnest. She leant slightly forward, and her shining eyes warned Ruxton of the genuineness of their appeal. "Yes, I had truly forgotten," she went on. "Will you – will you forget for the moment there is the difference of sex between us? Will you forget that I am a woman who has wilfully thrust her presence upon a man, a stranger, and laid herself open to a dreadful interpretation of her actions? Will you simply regard me as some one who is striving to unravel those tangled skeins, which, just now, seem to be enveloping a helpless humanity, and, in her effort, has sought out the only man whom she feels can help her – Mr. Ruxton Farlow, the man who will one day rise to be a great ruler in his country?"

"You sought me out?" enquired Ruxton, ignoring the tribute so frankly spoken.

"That is why I have been on my feet for three hours. Will you do as I have asked?"

The charm of this beautiful creature was greater than the man knew. The situation, as she put it, was wholly impossible. Yet her fascination was such that he was impelled to hold out his hand.

"For the time, at least, we are comrades in a common cause," he said, smiling. "My hand on it."

The woman laid a white-gloved hand in his, and the thought

in the man's mind was regret at the necessity for gloves.

Ruxton stretched himself out on the heather again. This time he was on his side, supporting his head upon his hand and facing her. The moon was shining full down upon her uncovered hair, and illuminating the perfect features which held the man's gaze.

"And now for the tangled skein," he said with attempted lightness, while his eyes lit whimsically.

"Ruxton Farlow doesn't need a woman to point the dreadful tangle in which humanity is involved – just now. He knows more of the threads than perhaps any man of his country. He was thinking of them when he was run to earth here upon this scented waste of Nature's riot. He was probably pulling apart the wretched threads himself, seeking hope in his endeavor, hope for the future, hope for the future of this land we both love, and for its people. Doubtless he, as others, has found the task something more than arduous, and no doubt he has searched the scene that lies below him, yearning for that peace of mind which oblivion has yielded in recent days to so many souls which have passed beneath the shining surface which encircles this iron-bound coast."

Ruxton's eyes devoured the entrancing animation which accompanied the words. An added amazement had leapt within him. She had fathomed his secret feelings as his eyes had searched the surface of the shimmering summer sea. Her understanding was even more uncanny than had been her sudden apparition. Who was she? he kept reiterating to himself. Who?

And where did she come from?

"I felt all that," he found himself saying.

"I know. I have felt it all, too. But your feeling had no inspiration in cowardice. It is the mind of the imaginative that sees an exaggeration in all that offends the sensibilities. It is the mind that distorts with painful fancy the threat which has not yet fallen. It is the mind which is inspired by a heart strong with hope, which in its turn owes its inspiration to a spirit possessed of a great power to do. Of such spirit are the leaders of men. Their mental agony is theirs alone, they suffer and do for those others who do not possess power to do for themselves."

The woman's eyes were turned upon the distant horizon again. Their gaze was introspective, and she talked as she thought, regardless for the time of the man beside her.

But he was more mindful. No word of hers was lost upon him. He was marvelling at her depth of understanding, he was marvelling at her simplicity of expression. And, through it all, he was noting and endeavoring to place that suggestion of foreign intonation in her perfect English accent. More and more was this splendid creature becoming an enigma. More and more was he becoming absorbed in her, and more surely was his promise of simple comradeship becoming an impossibility.

"And the threat – which inspires these phantasms?" he said, as the musical tones ceased, and the murmur of the sea came up to them in their eyrie.

"It is a reality."

Ruxton stirred. He sat up once more, and his gaze, for the moment, left the beautiful profile, and wandered towards the eastern horizon.

"I know," he said simply.

"I have seen," came the impressive rejoinder.

Ruxton's eyes came back to the woman's face.

"Will you tell me?"

His request was made without a shadow of excitement. That was his way when confronted with a crisis. Now he understood why she had worn herself to weariness for three hours on her feet. But for all the interest of the moment his mind was still questioning – Who?

"The telling would be worthless. It would convey simply – words. There is better than telling."

"But the world is at peace now," Ruxton suggested.

"It was at peace before, when – the telling came from all ends of the world."

"And no one listened."

"Those who could have helped refused to hear. And those who heard were powerless."

"So now you come – ?"

"To one who, eschewing all that his wealth and position could give him of life's leisure and delight, has dedicated his whole future to the land I – have learned to love."

"And what would you have me do?" Ruxton was smiling, but behind his smile was a brain searching and hungry.

"Do? Ah, that is it." The woman turned swiftly. All her calm had been caught up in a hot emotion. Her eyes were wide and shining as she leant towards him and searched his fair face and dark eyes. "There is peace as you said. But it is only words written upon paper with ink that is manufactured, and by a pen also manufactured. The whole peace is only manufactured. There is no peace in the hearts of the leaders of nations, only hate, which has inspired a passionate yearning for revenge, a passion which has intensified a thousandfold all effort towards the destruction of the hated. Need I tell you of the Teuton feelings? Ruined, blasted as has been that great machine, both military and industrial, there is still the Teuton mind ready and yearning for such a revenge as will stagger all conscious life. Well may the sensitive imagination distort and magnify the threat that cannot yet be grasped. Well may the straining mind contemplate with ecstasy the oblivion gained by those poor creatures on the *Lusitania*. But for those who would learn, and know, and see, there is a better, braver death to die than the bosom of the ocean can offer. I tell you there is work for every true Briton, man and woman. Work that can offer little else than the reward of a conscience that, maybe, is rendered easy in death. The men who would lead Britain must be men with eyes, and ears, and mind wide open. The time has gone by when England's politicians may sit down in luxurious offices and enjoy the liberal salaries this country so generously dispenses. They must learn first hand of the dangers which threaten these impregnable

shores. Impregnable? That has been the fetish which has been the ruin of Britain's national spirit. But I tell you, as surely as the sun will rise to-morrow I can prove to you that impregnability can never again be applied to these splendid shores. Remember, these are the days when victories and destruction are wrought by thought in peace time. The days of simple brute strength have died for all time. And that is why I have travelled far to seek Ruxton Farlow."

"You have sought me to tell me all this that I have thought for months. That I have felt. That in my heart I have known as surely as that night follows day. You have sought *me*," he added reflectively.

The stranger leant still further towards him, and the man thrilled at the contiguity. So close was she that her breath fanned his cheek, and he found himself gazing into the eager, beautiful eyes.

"And have I not done right? Have I not done right to come to you, who have felt, and thought, and known these things for months – if I can show you even more than in your worst moments you have ever dreamed of?"

It was an intense moment. Its intensity for the man was well-nigh overpowering. Was this wonderful creature some brilliant siren luring him to destruction for very wantonness, or in the interest of others? Was she just as she represented, just an ardent patriot, to whom chance had revealed some damaging secret of his country's enemies, or was she merely a woman endowed with

superlative beauty exercising her attraction in those enemies' interests? These things flashed through his brain, even as those feelings of sex stirred his blood and made for denial. For a moment the mental side of him rose dominant.

"You are a foreigner," he challenged, in a voice he hardly recognized as his own.

"I am a Pole."

The admission came promptly.

"You speak English – perfectly," he persisted in the same voice.

"I am – glad."

"Where were you – during the war?"

"In England."

The questions and answers flew back and forth without a semblance of hesitation.

"Yes, yes." Then the man mused. "There were thousands of foreigners at large in England – then."

"But not all were – spies."

The man lowered his eyes. A flush stole up to his brow. It was a flush of shame.

"I – I beg your pardon," he said. The mind had yielded to the man.

"Why should you? Your country should be first in your thoughts. You have not hurt me."

Ruxton passed one hand across his broad, fair forehead.

"But you – a Pole. It seems – "

"It seems that I must have some motive other than I have stated. I have." A bitter laugh accompanied the admission. Quite suddenly she threw her arms wide in a dramatic gesture. "Look at me," she cried. "You see a Pole, but before all things you see a woman. Give riot to your heart, and leave your head for other things. Then you will understand my motives. I have lived through centuries of horror during that terrible war. A horror that even you, who know the horrors committed, will never be able to understand. The innocent women and children in Belgium and France, and my own country, on your own shores, on the high seas. O God," she buried her face in her hands. Then, in a moment, she looked up. "Think – think, if at some future time the Teuton demons overrun this beautiful land I love. The past, those horrors of which I have spoken are nothing to that which will be committed here in England. Now do you understand? Now – will you let me show you what – I can show you?"

"I think I understand – now."

"And you will grant my request?" The urgency was intense. But in a moment the woman went on in a changed tone. A soft smile accompanied her next words. "But no. Don't answer now. It would not be fair to yourself. It would not be fair to your country. It would even deny all that I believe of you. Keep your answer. You will give it to me – later. I will not let you forget. Now I must go."

She rose to her feet, and Ruxton watched her with stirring feelings as she occupied herself with that truly feminine process

of smoothing out the creases of the costume which had suffered by contact with the heather.

At last she held out her white-gloved hand, and Ruxton sprang to his feet. He realized that she was about to vanish out of his life as swiftly and mysteriously as she had entered it.

"You are going?" he said quickly.

"Yes. But you will be reminded."

The man held the gloved hand a shade longer than was necessary.

"But on these cliffs? Alone?" Somehow her going had become impossible to him.

But the woman laughed easily.

"It will be only a few moments on these cliffs. It is nothing. Remember I have been wandering about for three hours – alone."

"But – Good-bye!"

The man made his farewell regretfully. He had been about to ask her how, with ten miles to Dorby, and a considerable distance to other villages, she would only be on the cliffs a few moments. But he felt that her coming and her going were her secret, and he had no right to pry into it – yet.

"Good-bye."

The woman turned away, but was promptly arrested by a swift question.

"May I not know your name?"

The stranger faced him once more, and her smile lit up her radiant features till Ruxton felt that never in his life had he seen

anything to equal her beauty.

"My name? Yes – why not? It is Vladimir. Vita Vladimir."

Then, in a moment, the man stood gazing after her, as the brilliant moonlight outlined the perfect symmetry of her receding figure.

CHAPTER III
THE MYSTERY

Ruxton Farlow's return home was even more preoccupied than had been his going. An entirely new sensation was stirring within him. Before, his thoughts had been flowing along the troubled channel of affairs, all of which bore solely upon the purpose of his life. Now their flow had been further confused by the addition of an emotion, which, under ordinary circumstances, might well have leavened the most gloomy forebodings. Instead, however, it was rather like an artist engaged on painting a picture of tragic significance who suddenly discovers that another hand has added some detail, which, while it is still a part of the subject portrayed, yet renders the whole a masterpiece of incongruity.

The coming of a woman into the affairs of his life seemed to him as incongruous as it was pleasant, and, in the circumstances, justified. It was an element all unconsidered before. His association with women until now had been the simple parrying of the feminine shafts levelled at him in the process of ordinary social intercourse in the position he occupied in life. He was by no means a man who took no delight in women's society. On the contrary. But his purpose in life had always been too big as yet to permit his dwelling upon those pleasures which no real manhood can ever ignore.

Women were to him part of the most exalted side of a man's life. His ideals in that direction were as wholly unworldly as his ideals were practical in every other direction. From his earliest youth, due to the death of his mother at his birth, he had never experienced a woman's influence upon his life, and thus he had been left to the riot of imagination, which, in very truth, had been his safeguarding against the operation of the matrimonial market of social London in the midst of which he had found himself plunged.

Now, under conditions wholly robbed of every convention, he had suddenly been confronted by a wonderful creature, who, to his vivid imagination, appealed as the most beautiful of all her beautiful sex. Furthermore the contact had been brought about through those very ideals and purposes to which he had devoted his life. And, moreover, the wonder of it all was that his purpose was apparently her purpose, and she had sought him because this was so. Herein lay the extraordinary incongruity of a sex attraction brought about by the threatened tragedy overshadowing them all.

Vita Vladimir!

It was a name such as he might have discovered anywhere amongst the foreign colony in Soho. His attraction towards the woman afforded no glamor to the name. None at all. He told himself frankly it did not fit her. Furthermore it left him unconvinced that it truly belonged to her. Yet she said she was a Pole. And somewhere in the back cells of memory there was

a sort of hazy recollection that "Vladimir" had some connection with Polish history.

However, the question of her name left him cold. Only the vivid picture of her personality remained in his mind. Her charm, her ardor, her beauty, and that extraordinary suggestion of mystery, conveyed in her costume, and the evasion of the details of her coming and going – these things had caught the imagination and the youth in him, and acted upon them like champagne.

He strove to thrust aside these things and consider her only through the purpose on which she had sought him out. She knew, and had seen, the realities of the threat which he believed to be hanging over his country. She could, and would, show him these things.

Suddenly on the impulse of a reasonable incredulity he asked himself if he were dreaming. The whole thing must be a mere phantasm, the outcome of all the troubled thought which had occupied him for so long. But she had told him he would hear from her again, and then that tiny white-gloved hand. He felt its clasp now, as it had lain in his strong palm. No, it was no dream. She was real – and she was very, very beautiful.

By the time he reached the great colonnade which formed the entrance porch of his home the woman's personality had dominated all his endeavor to regard the incident from any other point of view. The woman had absorbed all that was in him, and a curious, deep, thrilling sensation of delight at the encounter

had completely thrust into the background the purpose which had brought it about. All that which we in our consideration of the affairs of life are apt to despise, and even leave out of our reckoning altogether, had asserted itself. It was the sex instinct, which no power of human mentality can resist.

Ruxton had no wish to meet his father again that night. He wanted solitude. He wanted to think and dream, as all youth desires to think and dream, when the floodgates of sex are opened, and it finds itself caught in the first rush of its tide.

Glancing at his watch he discovered it to be close upon midnight. But the hour had no significance in his present mood. His father would have retired, and the library would be empty, so he passed up the oak stairway with the determination to smoke a final cigar, and let his thoughts riot over the delectable banquet the evening had provided for them.

But that particular pleasure was definitely denied him. When he entered the library the lights were still on, and he beheld his father's curly white head still bent over the table at which he was wont to attend to his private correspondence.

The old man looked up as the other walked down the long book-lined room towards him. His deep-set eyes were smiling as they were ever ready to smile upon the companion of his wifeless life.

"Finished your ramble?" he enquired pleasantly.

Ruxton returned the smile and flung himself upon a long old settle before he replied.

"The ramble is finished," he said, preparing to light a cigar.

Their eyes met. The father knew there remained something as yet unspoken behind the reply. He waited. But Ruxton's decision was not yet taken.

"Finished your letters yet?" he enquired from behind a cloud of smoke.

The bright blue eyes surveying him twinkled.

"One more," his father said.

"Go ahead then."

Sir Andrew knew by the tone that ultimately the unspoken word was to come. He glanced down at his papers with a sigh.

"I believe, after all, I shall have to break with some of my old-fashioned habits. It is an awful thing to contemplate at my time of life. I think I must be getting old. The burden of private correspondence begins to weigh. I have always held that a private secretary for such a purpose is waste of money, and the undesirable admission of another into one's private life."

Ruxton stretched out his long legs. His bulk almost completely filled the settle.

"It's hard work for Yorkshire to change its habit. A feature applying pretty generally to the Briton. I only wonder a man of your vast fortune has clung to such habits so long. I, who possess but a twentieth of the fortune you possess, find I cannot do without one."

"But then you are a political man," his father smiled drily.

Ruxton nodded. "And in consequence I am saved much

heartburning."

"Yes." Sir Andrew gathered up a sheaf of sealed envelopes and flung them into his post basket. "Twenty-five letters. Answers to cranks. Answers to those philanthropists who love to do good with other folks' money. Answers to beggars, to would-be blackmailers, to public institutions whose chief asset is a carefully compiled list of likely subscribers, and then – those whom we have decided to encourage – the inventors. Here is our friend Charles Smith." He picked up the last letter remaining to be dealt with. "What am I going to say to him?"

The old man scratched one shaggy eyebrow with the point of his penholder – one of his signs of doubt and perplexity.

"This secrecy business adds importance to the reply," he added.

Ruxton held out his hand.

"Let's read it again," he said.

His father passed the letter across, and sat watching the concentrated brows of his son, while the latter re-perused the contents.

The watching man was about to turn back to his desk when his eyes abruptly widened questioningly. Ruxton had suddenly sat bolt upright, and a quick flush of suppressed excitement spread over his strong expressive features.

"Veevee, London!" he exclaimed. "A code address which is obviously a word made out of initial letters. V. V." Then he looked across at his startled parent. "I say, Dad, there's mystery

here all right – mystery everywhere to-night. V. V. Those initials fit Vita Vladimir exactly."

"Precisely. Also Vivian Vansittart," smiled his father. "Or any other high-sounding names beginning with V."

Ruxton passed the letter back with a laugh. Then he flung himself back on the settle.

"Wait until I have told you what happened to me to-night. Then write to that man and give him a definite appointment at some time when you can devote several hours to him – if necessary."

Sir Andrew pushed his high-backed chair well away from the desk and helped himself to a cigar.

"This is one more than I have any right to to-night, Rux," he said, as he crossed his stout legs, "but go ahead."

Ruxton seemed in no hurry to begin his story. The truth was he felt reluctant to let any one share his secret. Furthermore he was doubtful, in the light of cold words, if that which he had to tell would carry the conviction which possessed him. It seemed impossible; and then the personality of Vita. No. But he felt that the story must be told, if only in justification of his demand for Mr. Charles Smith.

"Look here, Dad," he began at last. "I know you regard me as a bit of a dreamer, but on more than one occasion you have been pleased to say you consider my judgment pretty sound. Perhaps it is. I don't know. Maybe to-night I have been unduly affected by feelings which don't usually carry me away; but, even so, I think

I have retained sufficient of our Yorkshire phlegm to get a right estimate of things, and the things which have happened to-night I am convinced are connected with the V. V. in that letter. I was on the cliffs, lying on the heather, looking out to sea, when a woman came along who had been endeavoring to hunt me out for three hours. She was the most beautiful creature I have ever seen. She does not belong to Dorby, or the neighborhood. She was dressed to perfection, and was hatless, and her name was Vita Vladimir. I tell you these details because they are all significant, and I want you to understand that first."

"Go on," his father nodded.

"Go on?" Ruxton gave a short laugh. "It's easier to say than to do – adequately. Anyway this is the whole story."

Both men's cigars had been entirely consumed by the time Ruxton Farlow had finished his long recital. He told his story of his meeting with Vita Vladimir with all the simple force which was part of the Russian nature in him. And, in spite of his fears to the contrary, none of its dramatic significance was lost in the telling.

His father read in the story all his son wanted him to read. But he read deeper even than that, and the depth of his reading was a trespass upon the ground which Ruxton fondly believed he had kept to himself. The shrewd Yorkshire mind probed deep to the vivid impression this Vita Vladimir had made upon his only son, and as yet he was not sure that he shared the boy's enthusiasm. However, long years of understanding had

convinced him of Ruxton's clarity of judgment in vital matters, and his earnest recital of the woman's warning and promises carried the conviction that, in spite of the boy's attraction, his judgment in this matter had remained unimpaired. He accepted the facts, but, to himself, deplored the means by which they had been conveyed.

"It is quite remarkable, boy, quite remarkable," was his only comment at the conclusion of the story. Then he held the man Smith's letter in his hand and glanced at the postscript.

But Ruxton was not satisfied with such comment. He was anxious that his hard-headed father should see eye to eye with him.

"But what do you think of it?" he demanded, with suppressed feeling.

The great ship-owner took some moments formulating his reply.

"One's impression from your telling is the honesty of the woman," he said deliberately at last. "There are three possibilities in the matter. First that she is honest Second that she – belongs to our enemies. Third that she is a – crank. But the second and third I think can be dismissed. Why should our enemies make such an extraordinary proposal to you, or to anybody, short of a man important enough to be done away with? The suggestion of 'crank' is quite dispensable, in view of the significance of the story as it bears on all the possibilities of the future we have discussed. Accepting her honesty, I should say that the answer to

this letter will be received by her for – transmission. Well?"

"Then answer that letter in the affirmative, and see this Charles Smith, Dad," cried Ruxton, rising and pacing the floor. "I am going to probe this matter to the bottom." Then he came to a halt before the desk, and gazed down into his father's serious eyes. "There is mystery abroad, Dad. There is more than mystery. There is something tangible. A great and threatening danger which must be nullified. We don't know what it is yet. We can only surmise, but surmise is futile. We must go and find out, as she said. We must learn these things first hand. I shall go."

"That is what I felt you had – decided." The old man sighed. "I can't disguise my regret, my boy, but it is – in the light of your life's purpose – your duty to go. I will do my part. I will see this – Charles Smith."

The General Election had come and gone like a hurricane of emotion sweeping the country from one end to the other. Passionate opinion had been stirred, it had been brought to a feverish surface and had been hurled from lip to lip in that spirit of contention, than which no more bitter feeling can be roused in the affairs of modern life. For once, however, Britain was far less divided than usual. Even prejudice, that blind, unreasoning, unthinking prejudice which usually characterizes the voter, who claims for himself "good citizenship," had somehow been shaken to its foundations. It was an almost awakened Britain which marched on the polls and registered its adhesion and support to the men who, out of the muckhole of demagoguery, had risen

superior even to themselves and yielded to the real needs of the country.

And the voice of the new Britain had been heard like a clarion across the Empire, so that, at the close of the polls, the world knew that, as Ruxton Farlow had said, the British housewife had determined upon that sweeping and garnishing so sadly needed, and that once and for all she had decided to bolt and bar the back door through which for so long she had been assailed by her enemies.

Ruxton Farlow was on his way to his little old Georgian house in Smith Square, Westminster. He was returning from Downing Street, where he had been summoned hastily and urgently by the new Prime Minister. He had found that electrical individual busily engaged in superintending the removal of his effects, aided by his equally energetic secretary, from one house in Downing Street to that Mecca of all political aspirations, "No. 10."

Ruxton had avoided the vehicles and packing-cases at the door and was conducted to the great little man's library. And on his entry the secretary had been promptly dismissed. The interview was brief. It was so brief that Ruxton, who understood and preferred such methods, was not a little disconcerted. There had been a hearty hand-shake, a few swiftly spoken compliments and a quick assurance, and once more the big man found himself picking his way amongst the debris on the doorsteps.

But this time he had scarcely seen the obstructions he had to avoid. He dodged them almost mechanically. His heart was

beating high with a quiet exultation, for he had left the presence of the wonderful little man, who seemed to live his whole life on the edge of his nervous system, with the assurance of a junior Cabinet rank in the new Ministry.

But the first rush of his tumultuous feelings quickly subsided, as was his way, and he remembered that which was at once his duty and desire. So he turned into a post-office and despatched a code wire to his father in Yorkshire that he might be the first person in the world to learn of his early triumph. Yes, he wanted his to be the first congratulations. He smiled to himself as he left the post-office. The entire press had been devoting itself to forecasting the personnel of the new Cabinet, but not in one single instance had his name been included in the lists.

It was with a sense bordering on perfect delight that he turned into the calm backwater of Smith Square. And for once the dingy atmosphere took on a reflected glory from his feelings. The square church, with its four squat towers, handsome enough in its architecture but drab of hue, might have been some structure of Gothic splendor. Even the impoverished trees which surrounded it had something of the verdant splendor of spring in them on this late summer afternoon. The sparrows and the pigeons failed even to bring home to him the greyness of life in a London square. For the moment those mental anxieties which had haunted him ever since the Great War were powerless to depress his outlook. Life was very good – very good indeed.

He crossed the square and let himself into his house with a

latch-key. He crossed the panelled hall and flung his hat and cane upon a table and hurried up the stairway to his study. He had been interrupted in his correspondence by the Prime Minister's summons, and now he was anxious to be done with it, and be free to contemplate the new situation in the light of those many purposes he had in view.

As he sat down at his desk the door in the oak panelling at the far end of the room was thrust open and his secretary appeared. In a few moments these two were absorbed in their work with a thoroughness which was characteristic of Ruxton. Thus for two hours and more the memory of his promotion was completely thrust into the background.

The butler had just brought him in a tray of afternoon tea, and the two men took the opportunity to abandon their work for a few minutes' leisure.

Ruxton leant back in his chair and lit a cigar, while the secretary lit a cigarette and poured out the tea.

"Our labors have borne fruit, Heathcote," said Ruxton, seizing the moment to impart his good news. "We are raised from the rank and file. Our future lies on the front benches."

"The Cabinet?"

"Yes, the Cabinet."

Nor could Ruxton quite control the delight surging through him.

"Now we begin to see the development of all those long-laid plans we have so ceaselessly worked upon, Heathcote," he went

on. "Now we are getting nearer to the position which will enable us to bring about something of that security for this old country for which we both so ardently long. Now – Heathcote – now!"

There was a passionate triumph underlying the idealist's words which found ample reflection in the dark eyes of the keen-faced secretary.

The Honorable Harold Heathcote, a younger son in an old English family, had been Ruxton's secretary from the beginning of his political career; he was a brilliant youngster who had determined upon a political career for himself, and had, with considerable shrewdness, pinned his faith to the banner which, from the beginning of his career, Ruxton Farlow had unfurled for himself. These two men were working for a common purpose.

"I knew it would come, Mr. Farlow," said Heathcote with cordial enthusiasm. "And there'll be more to follow, or I have no understanding of the times. I am glad. Very glad."

At that moment there was a knock at the door, and Heathcote rose to answer it. When he returned he handed two telegrams to his chief.

"Telegrams," he said laconically, and returned to his seat and to his tea.

Ruxton ran a paper knife through the envelopes. The first message was from his father. It was brief, cordial, but urgent.

"Heartiest congratulations. Immensely delighted. Must see you at once. Inventor turned out most important as well as mysterious. – Farlow."

Ruxton read the message over two or three times. Then he deliberately tore it up into small pieces and dropped it in the waste-paper basket.

He opened the second message with a preoccupied air. He was thinking – thinking deeply. But in a moment all his preoccupation vanished as he glanced over its contents. He hungrily devoured the words written on the tinted paper.

"Am delighted at your promotion. I anticipated it. My most heartfelt good wishes. Do not let this success make you forget our meeting. Dare I hope that you may find your way to 17, Streamside Mansions, Kensington? – Vita Vladimir."

It was some moments before Ruxton's eyes left that message. A world of unsuspected emotion was stirring within him. He had not forgotten. He was never likely to forget. But in the midst of his emotion some freak of mind had caught and held the significance of this mysterious creature's congratulations. How – how had she learned of – his promotion, when no one but himself and the Prime Minister knew of it?

Suddenly he bestirred himself. He carefully refolded Vita's message, and placed it in his pocket. Then he turned to Heathcote.

"I shall have to go to Dorby to-night. My father wants me. It is rather important. Fortunately things here will not require me just now. But you must notify me of anything important happening. Meanwhile give orders to have my things got ready, and look me out a train. I must run out to send a wire."

"Can't I send it for you?"
"No-o. I think not, thanks."

CHAPTER IV
MR. CHARLES SMITH

A profound silence reigned in the library at Dorby Towers.

The pungent aroma of cigars weighed upon the atmosphere in spite of the wide proportions of the apartment. Considerable light was shed from the antique sconces upon the walls, as also by the silver candelabra upon the long refectory table which ran down the centre of the room. But withal it was powerless to dispel the dark suggestion of the old bookcases which lined the walls of the room.

Two men were occupying one side of the table, and Ruxton Farlow sat alone at the other. The eyes of all three were focussed intently upon the object lying upon the table, which was a ten-foot model of a strange-looking water craft.

The first to break the spell of the burden of silence was Sir Andrew Farlow, who, with a bearded stranger, occupied the side of the table opposite his son. But his was no attempt at speech. He merely leant forward with an elbow on the polished oak, and his fingers softly stroking his square chin and tightly compressed lips. He was humming softly, an expression of an intently occupied mind. The fixity of his gaze suggested a desire to bore a way to the heart of the secrets the strange model contained.

The bearded stranger was watching him closely while his eyes appeared to be focussed upon the object of interest, and presently, as though the psychological moment had arrived, he, too, leant forward, and, with an arm stretched out, terminating in a long, lean, tenacious-looking hand, he pressed a button on the side of the model. Instantly the whole interior of it was lit electrically, and the light shone through a series of exquisitely finished glass-covered port-holes extending down the vessel's entire sides.

He spoke no word, but sat back in his chair and went on smoking, while he closely watched for any sign of impression which the two interested spectators displayed.

The moments slipped by. The patient stranger sat on with his long lean legs crossed, and a benevolent smile in his large eyes. After a while Ruxton sat back in his chair. Then Sir Andrew abandoned his inspection, and turned to the man beside him.

It seemed to be the cue awaited, for the stranger promptly leant forward again and released a spring by the movement of a switch. Instantly the model split in half, and, opening much in the fashion of a pea-pod, displayed the longitudinal sections of its interior.

Simultaneously the two men whose lives had been hitherto given up to ship construction rose to their feet, and pored over the wonderful and delicate mechanism and design the interior revealed.

Then it was that Sir Andrew verbally broke the silence.

"Will you explain, Mr. Smith?"

The inventor removed his cigar.

"You know – marine mechanism?" he enquired.

Sir Andrew nodded.

"Yes, unless there is a new principle here."

"It is the perfected submarine principle which was used towards the end of the war. There is no fresh detail in that direction."

"We have a complete knowledge of that principle," said Ruxton. "We have been constructing for the Admiralty throughout the war."

"Good."

There was a distinct "T" at the end of the word as Mr. Smith spoke it.

Ruxton shot a quick glance in his direction. The man's whole personality was an unusual one. He was very tall, and very thin. His intellectual head, quite nobly formed, was crowned by a shock of snow-white hair closely hogged, as might be a horse's mane. His features were almost as lean as his body. But the conformation of a magnificent forehead and the gently luminous eyes, beneath eyebrows almost as bushy as a well-grown moustache, made one forget the fact. Then, too, the carefully groomed, closely cut snow-white beard and moustache helped to disguise it still more. It was the face of a man of great mentality and lofty emotions, a face of simplicity and kindliness. It was, in fact, a face which demanded a second scrutiny, and one

which inspired trust and liking.

To the rest must be added certain details which seemed a trifle extraordinary in view of his profession. If his tailor did not trade in Bond Street then he certainly must have served his apprenticeship in those select purlieus. Perfect cut and excellence of material marked every detail of his costume, which was of the "morning" order.

"Then there is little enough to explain, except for the architectural side of the matter," Mr. Smith went on, with a peculiarly back-of-the-throat tone in his speech, which also possessed a shadow of foreign accent. "I am not offering you a submarine principle. That is established now all over the world. I please to call my invention a submersible merchantman. You will observe the holds for merchandise. You will see the engine-rooms," he went on, rising and pointing out each detail as he enumerated it. "There are the stateroom decks, with the accompaniment of saloon and kitchens, and baths, and – and all the necessities of passenger traffic. Everything is there on a lesser scale such as you will find on a surface liner. Its speed and engine power will compare favorably with any liner afloat up to ten thousand tons. Thus it has the speed of a surface craft on the surface, with the added advantages of a submarine. In addition to these I have a light, in the course of production, which will serve to render the submarine immune from the dangers of submersion. I call it the 'U-rays.'"

"The U-rays?" Ruxton's enquiry came like a shot.

"Just so."

Mr. Smith replied quite unhesitatingly, and Ruxton's obvious suspicion was disarmed.

"This vessel," the inventor went on, quite undisturbed, "solves the last problem of sea traffic under – all conditions."

The light of enthusiasm was shining in the man's luminous eyes as he made his final pronouncement. It was as though the thought had filled him with a profound hope of the fulfillment of some ardent desire. It suggested to the more imaginative Ruxton that he cared more for the purpose of his invention than for its commercial aspect to himself.

"You speak, of course, of – war," Ruxton said.

The large eyes of the stranger widened with horror and passion.

"I speak of – international murder!" he cried fiercely.

Sir Andrew turned from the model at the tone of the reply. Ruxton would have pursued the subject, but Mr. Smith gave him no opportunity.

"Your pardon, gentlemen," he said with a sudden, exquisite smile of childlike simplicity. "Memories are painful. I have much that I remember, and – but let us keep to the business in hand."

"Memories are painful to us all – here in England," said Ruxton gently. "But – this is a beautiful model. Perfect in every detail."

"It was made in my own shops," returned the inventor simply.

"And you say this," indicating the model, "has been tested on

a constructed vessel?"

"I have travelled more than ten thousand miles in just such a vessel. I have travelled on the surface at twenty-four knots, and under the surface at fifteen. I have carried mixed cargoes, and I have carried certain passengers. All these things I have done for experiment, so that the principle should be perfected. You can judge for yourselves. A vessel of this type awaits your pleasure at any hour. A vessel of two thousand tons."

"Two thousand?" The incredulous ejaculation escaped Sir Andrew before he was aware of it.

"It is nothing," exclaimed Mr. Smith, turning quickly. "A vessel of ten thousand tons can just as easily be constructed."

The sweeping assertion spoken with so simple a confidence had the effect of silence upon his audience. It was overwhelming even to these men who had witnessed the extraordinary development of invention during the war.

After awhile Ruxton broke the silence.

"In your original communication to us you assured us of a means of avoiding the losses we endured during the war from submarine attack. This I understand is the – means. Will you point its uses? I see it in my own way, but I should like to hear another mind on the subject."

Mr. Smith folded his arms and settled himself in his chair. Ruxton was not seeking information on the subject of the boat. His imagination told him all he wanted to know in that direction. It was the man he wanted to study. It was the man he was not

certain of. He was convinced that this man was a foreigner, for all his British name. He desired to fathom the purpose lying behind this stranger's actions.

"A great Admiral just before the war," said the inventor, "declared that the future of naval warfare lay under the water, and not on the surface, as we have always believed. He was right. But he did not go as far as he might have gone. The *whole future of shipping* lies as much under water as on the surface. I tell you, gentlemen, that this boat, here, will afford untold blessings to humanity. To an island country it affords – existence. Think. This country, Britain, is not self-supporting. Is it not so? It could not keep its people alive for more than months. It depends upon supplies from all ends of the earth. All roads upon the high seas lead to Britain. And every helpless surface vessel, carrying life to the island people at home, is a target for the long-distance submarine. If an enemy possesses a great fleet of submarines he does not need to declare a war area about these shores. Every high sea is a war area where he can ply his wanton trade. With the submarine as perfect as it is to-day, Britain, great as she is in naval armaments, can never face another war successfully. *That thought is in the mind of all men already*." The man paused deliberately. Then with a curious foreign gesture of the hands he went on. "But there is already established an axiom. Submarine cannot fight submarine – under the surface." He shrugged. "It is so simple. How can an enemy attack my submersible? The moment a submarine appears, the submersible submerges and

the enemy is helpless. An aerial warship will become a spectacle for the amused curiosity to the ocean traveller. In peace time storms will have small enough terror, and on the calm summer seas we shall speed along at ever-increasing mileage. I tell you, gentlemen, the days of wholly surface boats are gone. The days of clumsy blockades are over, just as are the starvation purposes of contraband of war. With the submersible how is it possible to prevent imports to a country which possesses a seaboard? That is the proposition I put to the world in support of my submersible."

Father and son sat silently listening to the easy, brief manner of the man's explanation. Nor was it till he spoke of the futility of a war submarine's efforts against his submersible did any note of passion and triumph find its way into the man's manner. At that point, however, a definite uplifting made itself apparent. His triumph was in the new depth vibrating in his musical voice. There was a light in his eyes such as is to be found in the triumphant gaze of the victor.

Ruxton beheld these things with greater understanding than his father. Moreover, he interpreted them with that sympathetic understanding of one who possesses great ideals of his own. Whoever this man might be, wherever he came from, one thing was beyond all question in his mind. Here was no mere huckster seeking to trade his wares for the sole purpose of gain. Gain might be his object, but somehow he felt that it was not wholly so, not even paramount in his consideration. It seemed to him that the man had spoken the truth when he had said that his efforts

were directed in the service of humanity.

But for all his understanding he had no intention of accepting his own reading without proof from the only direction in which proof could come.

"And what is the commercial aspect of the matter – between us?" he enquired in his most businesslike tone.

Mr. Smith looked up in a startled way from the deep reverie into which his own words had plunged him.

"Commercial?" he echoed a little helplessly.

"Yes." Ruxton smiled. "The – price."

Mr. Smith nodded readily and smiled back. But his reply carried no conviction.

"Yes, yes," he said hurriedly. "I was thinking. Of course – yes. The price."

His infantile manner brought a smile to the shrewd face of Sir Andrew. Ruxton only waited.

"I – had forgotten," Mr. Smith went on. Then, with his curious tenacious hands clasped about one knee, a hopeless sort of distress slowly filled his eyes. "It – it is difficult," he stumbled. Then quite suddenly a world of relief seemed to come to him. "Would it not be better to leave terms until you have seen, and proved for yourselves, of what my constructed vessel is capable? You see, any price I could name now would sound – er – excessive."

The manner of this strange creature was so delightfully naive that even the keen Yorkshire features of Sir Andrew were

reduced to a smile of enjoyment.

"That's the way I like to hear an inventor talk, Mr. Smith," he cried heartily. "Most of 'em want large sums in options on the bare model and registered patents. If your invention – the constructed vessel is capable of what you claim for it, it is worth – millions."

But the millionaire's encouragement seemed to have an adverse effect upon the inventor. Trouble crept again into his eyes, and he passed one thin hand across his splendid forehead.

"If it serves to save innocent lives in the future, sir, it has done all that I ask of it," he said at last. "Its value to me then could never be reckoned in millions. There would not be enough cyphers in the mind of man to express that value."

To Ruxton the riddle of this man was growing in obscurity. For all his understanding Mr. Smith's attitude demanded explanation which as yet he was unable to give it.

But something in the nature of solution to the riddle was nearer than he had supposed. It came in the man's words which were added in further reply to his father.

"I have no fear but my invention will do these things," he said with strong conviction. "But," he added almost sombrely, "I have other fears."

"Others?"

The commercial mind of Sir Andrew was sharply suspicious.

"Yes."

Again came that troubled movement of the hand across the

forehead. The man hesitated in a painful, embarrassed way. Then, with a perfectly helpless gesture, he blurted out something of that which Ruxton had been waiting for.

"Yes, yes," he cried, his eyes full of a passionate light. "I have fears, other fears. Nor are they idle. Nor are they to be belittled. I came here in secret. No one but my two confidential men, who brought this model, know of my coming. No one knows my whereabouts at all, but you, and those two men whom I can trust – even with my life. Fears. My God, if you only knew. I tell you there are people in the world, if they knew of my visit to you, if they saw that model lying on your table, who would not rest until my life was forfeited, and the utility of my invention to this country was destroyed forever."

The man stood up. His great height was drawn up to its uttermost. He was breathing hard, but the light in his eyes was not of the fear of which he spoke. They were burning with a strained defiance of that threat he knew to be hanging over him.

The others rose from their chairs simultaneously. Both were startled. But Sir Andrew far more than his son. Startlingly as the revelation had come, to Ruxton it *was* revelation. And now it was he who took the initiative. He leant across the table.

"I think I understand something that has been puzzling me all the evening, Mr. – Smith," he said. "And now that I understand it I am satisfied. You have come to us to-day at great danger to yourself. You are risking everything in the world that we shall have the benefit of your invention. The last thought in your mind

is the commercial aspect of this affair. Your real object in coming is your secret for the present. I might even hazard a guess at it. But it is your secret, and one we have no desire to probe. You desire a pledge from us. That is obvious. And for myself I give it freely. Your secret is safe with me – safe as the grave. I shall avail myself of your offer of a trip in your submersible, and, if you will permit me, I shall make my own time for it in the near future. Will you allow me that privilege?"

The inventor impulsively held out his hand, and his relief was obvious and intense. It was almost as if he had feared the result of his revelation.

"Your wishes are entirely mine," he said, as Ruxton wrung his hand. "It was this necessity for secrecy which has troubled me. I did not think you would accept it. And – I feared the shattering of all my hopes." He turned to Sir Andrew, who stood watching the scene wonderingly.

"And you, sir?" he asked, with extended hand. "Have I your word?"

"Absolutely, sir."

The bluff tone, and the grip of the Yorkshire hand, had its prompt effect.

"I need no more."

The man proceeded to close up his model.

"And for communicating with you?" demanded Ruxton.

Mr. Smith looked up.

"The same address. Veevee, London. It will always find me."

"Thank you."

Two hours later Ruxton and his father were alone in the library. The inventor had gone, and his precious model had been carefully removed by the two men who had conveyed it to Dorby Towers. For those two hours Sir Andrew and his son had thrashed threadbare the situation created by the stranger's coming. And, incredible as it seemed, in the minds of both men was a steady conviction that the work of that evening was to mark an epoch in the history of their country.

The possibilities were of a staggering nature. Neither could probe the future under this new aspect. If this new principle of ocean traffic were to – But it was "if." If the man were honest. If the invention were right. If – if, and again – if. That was it. And so they had talked it out.

Now it was time to seek that rest which Ruxton sorely needed. His had been a strenuous day, and he knew he must return to town to-morrow. He rose and stretched himself.

"Well, Dad, it's bed for me," he said, in the midst of a yawn.

His father looked up from his final cigar, which was poised in his hand.

"Yes. You must be tired, boy. There's one thing, though, about that man, that's occurred to me," he added, his mind still dwelling on the subject of their long discussion. "Did you notice his speech? He didn't sound to me English, and yet there – was no real accent."

Ruxton laughed.

"I wondered if that had escaped you." Then his eyes grew serious. "No, he isn't an Englishman. He isn't even Dutch. That I am sure of. But his nationality – no, I cannot say."

"No. It's a difficult matter with these foreigners."

"Yes. But if I can't locate his nationality I am certain of a very important fact."

"And that is?"

"He belongs to – Germany."

CHAPTER V
THE LURE

That Ruxton Farlow was a creature of destiny rather than a man who wrought only through the force of his own self-guidance was extraordinarily apparent. The purpose of his life filled his whole being. It was all of him, a dim light in the mist and fog of the future, ever encouraging onwards, yet yielding to him no vision of the path by which it might be the more easily reached. It was his lot to flounder on, frequently stumbling and yawning as the conformation and obscurities of the road compelled, but every step, every stumble, every bruise and buffet, added to the sum of progress achieved and pointed the unyielding nature which inspired his set purpose of reaching that ray of light beyond.

The coming into his life of the woman who called herself Vita Vladimir was an incident in his progress of far greater significance that even he had dreamed. Whither it inclined his footsteps he knew not. All he knew was that, almost in a moment, she had become definitely linked up with his future through a bond, the meaning of which even he had no full understanding of. All he knew was that she had some great bearing upon the ultimate, and that it was his desire to follow blindly the track she had opened up before him.

Nor had he any delusion as to his desire. There was not the smallest doubt but that her attraction had influenced his decision. He had listened to her words with a brain inspired by the warmth of the manhood within him, which her extraordinary beauty had stirred as it had never been stirred before.

It was in answer to this feeling that he left Yorkshire at the earliest opportunity, and hastened back to town. He merely gave himself time to change and hold a brief consultation with his secretary. Then he set out in search of the rather obscure little flat in Kensington.

His mind was perfectly clear as to the object of this visit. Just as he perfectly understood that even without that object it would have been his desire to make it. He wished to give this woman an answer to her request. He wished to fathom the manner by which she had learned of his promotion. And, apart from these things, he desired ardently to see her again. The recollection of that moonlit figure was a sharp negative on the photographic plates of memory, and he was anxious to study the original in the full light of day. Her undoubted beauty, and the romance of their first meeting, had left behind them an irresistible attraction; nor had he any desire to resist it.

His position in the world as the only son and partner of the greatest among the ship-owners of Britain, his political career, and his position as under-secretary in the Foreign Office of the late Ministry, had brought him into contact with the social world of London. But, hitherto, women had had small enough

place in his life. The hunting-field and the coverts, with golf and rowing, had entirely claimed his leisure, which would have been considered something very like wasted had it been spent in Society's drawing-rooms. He was a big, strong, outdoor man, and possessed a great deal of that curious diffidence which is more apt to attack men of his bulk than those of lesser stature.

All these things had served to make him difficult as a prize worth striving for in the matrimonial market, and, doubtless, he had been thus saved to the work which he believed lay before him. He had never been a man of marked celibate tendencies. It was simply the fact that the sex question had always been dominated by the simple, hard-working, outdoor life he lived. Those who knew him had always taken a delight in prophesying that one day some woman would get hold of him, he would get it badly, and it would be a thousand to one chance she would be the wrong woman, and he would make a complete mess of things.

Now as he sat, filling to overflowing a small drawing-room chair, in Vita Vladimir's flat in Kensington, listening to the musical tones of the wonderful Polish beauty facing him on a wholly inefficient window seat, with his dark eyes, shining and intent, fixed upon her mobile features, it looked as though at least one part of his friends' prophecy was within measurable distance of being fulfilled.

The woman was talking rapidly, and the light and shade of emotion passing over her expressive face were quite irresistible.

"Your coming was more than I dared to hope," she said. "And

yet – I knew you would. I mean underneath my fears. You know I feel I ought to tell you so many things that I have purposely hidden, and yet I know it would be a mistake to do so until – I have shown you all that which I promised. It makes me feel mean. It makes me feel almost as if I were not acting honestly. And yet I know I am. But I think I can tell you one thing which may astonish you. Our meeting on the cliffs was the result of nearly two months' preparation and consideration. It was even in the nature of a plot, in which I was to be the instrument of communication. Furthermore it took me nearly two weeks of waiting and watching before I could decide that the right moment had arrived. You see, so secretly had we to move that I dared not chance a thing. The risk for all concerned was so great. Mr. Farlow, will you believe me when I say that yours is not the only life at stake in this adventure? Even now I dare not give you the details. You must still take me on trust, as you were kind enough to do – that night."

Ruxton nodded soberly, though his eyes were feasting upon the woman's superlative beauty as she reclined against the window casing in an all unconscious pose of considerable grace.

"I think I understand better than you imagine since I have seen – Mr. Charles Smith and his invention."

The woman's deeply-fringed grey eyes were widely alert.

"You have – associated us?"

"Veevee, London."

The woman nodded. There was no attempt at denial.

"I see," she said, and the grey eyes became interestedly speculative.

Ruxton glanced about him. He was swiftly taking in the details of the plainly furnished, extremely modern little drawing-room. It was the preliminary to the next step in this strange adventure. He saw about him no single suggestion of the personality of the woman who claimed it as her home. It might have belonged to anybody, from a superior business woman, who used it as a nightly refuge from the cares and worries of a commercial life, to a foreign visitor to London, desiring a convenient headquarters. It was to his mind a typical "furnished flat" as designated in the house agent's catalogue.

His eyes came back to the woman herself, and a deep, restrained admiration grew in their depths.

All that he had believed of her in the deceptive moonlight was more than confirmed in the warm light of day. He had no thought for her costume. In his man's way he realized a perfect harmony between that and the wonderful face and head that adorned it. He was aware only of the deep sleepy grey eyes so exquisitely fringed. The smooth, delicately tinted cheeks, and the mouth so ripe and full of the suggestion of youth. Above all was that wonderful glory of red-gold hair massed on the head with all the art of the hair-dresser, which transformed it into a crown which any queen might well have envied.

"I want to say something that may sound rough, even brutal," Ruxton said abruptly after the prolonged pause. "But then there

are times in life when the suaveness of diplomatic methods becomes wholly misplaced – even an insult to the person towards whom they are directed. You will permit me to assure you that what I have to say is the outcome of the interest you have roused in me by all you have confided." He paused again thoughtfully. He was endeavoring to shut out of his mind the picture of the woman's personality which made what he was about to say seem so harsh and unnecessary. He nerved himself for the effort and proceeded.

"Let me say at once, that against all my – what shall I say – better sense? That will do. Against all my better sense I accepted and believed your story to me on the cliffs. Had I acted as my sense prompted I should have thrust it aside and ignored it, regarding you merely as one of my country's enemies, seeking, for some inexplicable reason, to leave me at the mercy of your confederates.

"However, for once instinct served me well. I committed no such injustice. Then on my return home I discovered a link, as I thought, between you and another matter which has since proved to be of considerable importance. I refer to Veevee, London. That link you do not deny. The combination suggests more fully the importance and *truth* of what you told me."

"The combination of the two things was part of the – preparation."

Vita Vladimir smiled. Her smile was like a sunbeam of early morning, and Ruxton was compelled to respond.

"That is how I now supposed. You must forgive me for what else I have to say. The natural result of a mind left groping is the dominance of imagination. 'Fact' is the only thing which can pin imagination down. At the present moment I am lacking in facts. I have only been told, and so my imagination has been turned loose. The result has been one or two things which I am going to put to you, and you can answer them or not. But my future action will be undoubtedly governed by your attitude. First, then, this is not your actual home. Second, your name is not Vita Vladimir. Third, you were kind enough to send me congratulation on my promotion to Cabinet rank when only the Prime Minister, and his most intimate colleagues, were aware of it. Even the ubiquitous press had failed to steal the information."

Ruxton's challenge came as it was intended to come, shortly, sharply, even with a suggestion of brutality in it. He had outraged his own feelings in doing so. He knew in his heart he had no doubt of this wonderful creature, but his mind, that simple, keen, straightforward organ, trained in the hypocritical world of diplomacy, dictated its will upon him. He had been asked to believe something very like a fairy-tale, and the lips which had formulated the request were the most perfect it had ever been his lot to behold. However, the dictates of his heart, the warm young manhood in him were still subservient to the trained mind. The day might come when rebellion would overthrow such sway, but, for the moment, it held.

The woman took no umbrage. There was a quickening of the

rise and fall of her beautifully rounded bosom, but that was the only sign of emotion permitted to escape her.

"Your observation is – quick," she said, with a slightly heightened color. "And what if these things are – true? Are they so very significant?"

Ruxton shrugged. Something of the warmth had passed out of his eyes. But he displayed not the smallest impatience.

Then the woman smiled. Her smile grew into a deep musical laugh.

"I am foolish. I am not clever enough for the work entrusted to me," she cried, spreading out her hands in a deprecating manner. "Here am I striving to win your perfect confidence by methods which might well characterize the most absurdly cumbersome and blundering child. I am deputed to urge you to an enterprise that entails risks – untold; maybe I am striving to send you to your – death. And this work is vital to the world, and, more than all, to your country. We are both striving in the cause of humanity, partners bound by no other tie, and yet in my endeavor I am raising doubt in your mind. Doubt of me, doubt of my purpose, even doubt of my honor. That is so like a woman – isn't it?"

The smile which the self-denunciation raised upon the man's face no longer lacked warmth.

"The clever knave is rarely at a loss for explanation," he said drily. "The lack of explanation often carries conviction."

The woman's slumberous eyes only smiled the more deeply.

"I have explanations for all these things, and I would give

them," she said promptly. "And those explanations might astonish you – a little. But at present I have only admission to make, which may have a disastrous effect upon my hopes. This is not my home. It is only a sort of – office. My name is not Vita Vladimir, except in part. And as for my wire to you, the moment the personnel of the new Cabinet was decided upon by Sir Meeston Harborough and his colleagues, the news was conveyed by the usual underground methods – abroad. That is all."

"And you are in touch with – abroad?"

"It is quite simple," the woman went on, with a shrug. "No political movement, no movement of any significance goes on here but it is known in foreign official circles even before the press get it here. Remember the war. My father, who is interested in this matter I am engaged upon, is in touch with those official circles, and so I received the news within a few hours of the time Sir Meeston knew it himself."

The interest of this woman was very great. Its influence was growing on the man even more quickly than he knew. Her ready admission, her obviously true explanation of how she received the news which inspired her message of congratulation, these things had immediate effect. To a lesser mind than that of this youthful statesman, these things might well have inspired added doubt, but to Ruxton they told him all he wanted to know with definite assurance. He was convinced of her absolute sincerity, as he was convinced of – other things.

The woman was waiting anxiously for the attitude which was to follow her explanations. Her anxiety did not display itself in her eyes, which were as calm as though matters of vital importance were beyond even her appreciation. Nevertheless, her blood was tingling with an apprehension which left the silence which had fallen almost insupportable.

But Ruxton was thinking swiftly. For the moment all thought of the woman herself had been brushed aside. He was gazing at that dim misty light ahead, which was his goal, and he seemed to see the shadowy obstacles looming up which perhaps meant a life and death struggle in their surmounting. There was no pathway to the right or left. He must go on. It was the only road, a dangerous, deadly road, and it was the road this woman had offered him. He had probed deeply, far deeper than had seemed possible at first, and his probing had helped him to his decision.

He rose from his seat and stood towering and large in that small room. The sleepy eyes of the woman were raised expectantly to his face, and, deep down in their depths, a light of admiration, which had only his manhood for its object, was growing with each passing moment. She too rose from her seat at the window, and they stood facing each other perfect in their splendid youth.

"Well?"

The woman could no longer restrain her impatience. Her interrogation broke from her almost unconsciously.

"I came here to – accept your invitation to visit that – to see

those things first hand, which is the duty of our country's political leaders," he said, with a smile which thrilled the expectant woman.

"And you will – accept?"

Ruxton nodded. His fine head, with its fair hair, was inclined in acquiescence.

"Thank God!"

The woman's exclamation was one of unrestrained thankfulness and relief. Had Ruxton needed any added proof of her honesty and sincerity, it was in that wonderful expression of fervid thankfulness which accompanied her words. But he had needed none, and it was the result of a coalition of heart and brain.

"I shall communicate with your father and appoint a time when I can start with him – on his submersible."

The woman's eyes were wide.

"My father!" she exclaimed.

"Surely – Mr. Charles Smith."

The laugh which followed Ruxton's announcement was full of delighted admiration.

"And we took so much trouble. We planned so carefully. We came to you because we believed you to be the only man approachable on such a subject. We did not realize we were approaching an intellect capable of fathoming and turning inside out our closely kept secrets."

"Intellect?" Ruxton laughed as he held out his hand in "good-

bye." "It is not necessarily intellect which recognizes strong family likenesses. But I regret to say that your father, brilliant as he may be as an inventor, does not do you justice in the matter of his personal appearance. However, I shall send him a message addressed Veevee, London, which you will doubtless see, and I pray that Providence may bless our feeble efforts. From all I can imagine the immediate future will contain many uncertainties for me, so I do not know if we shall ever meet again. But I want to tell you that I thank you from the bottom of my heart for coming to me. If things are as bad as you think, then you have done our country an inestimable service – you and your father."

But his words had a different effect from that which might have been expected. A shudder of pain seemed suddenly to affect the woman and a great distress shadowed her beautiful eyes.

"Please don't," she cried. "If you knew all that is in here," she went on, pressing her hands upon her bosom, "you would understand all this thing means. Mr. Farlow, you have never felt terror as a woman can feel it. How could you? You, a man, so big, and strong, and fearless. Even your imagination, riot as it may, could never know the haunt which the sinking of the *Lusitania* has created in my woman's mind. Those poor helpless souls. Think of them, and think of some future, distant day when – Oh, God! No, no! The service you speak of is no service. It is – Duty."

Ruxton was deeply affected by the evident sincerity of her distress. He had nothing to add. But Vita Vladimir brushed her

moment of weakness aside, and gazed up at him with luminous, searching eyes.

"I had almost forgotten," she cried. "I am afraid I am but a poor plotter. The delight that you have accepted has put so much out of my poor brain." Then her eyes grew wide with awe and dread. "I told you that other lives than yours hang upon this matter. So – it is necessary for inviolable secrecy. Need you tell even your – father of your going? Need any one know? Your servants? Any one at all? It is a big thing to ask, but – life is very dear to us all, and – No, no, what am I talking about? I must not beg. I must demand. For as sure as the sun rises to-morrow you will be silenced forever if word of this leaks out. We shall all be."

The woman's manner was far more impressive than her words. But Ruxton treated the matter almost lightly.

"Don't worry. I have given my promise to go. I am wilfully thrusting my neck into the noose waiting for it. I shall not take unnecessary chances. No one, not even my father, shall hear of this thing from me. So – good-bye until I return from – Germany."

Vita's relief found expression in a grave sort of smile.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "But – but you are not going to – Germany."

CHAPTER VI
THE OLD MILL COVE

He had known the mill all his life; at least he believed he had. He had gazed upon that awesome black ruin, keeping watch and ward over the wicked little cove below it, like some sentinel on guard over a dangerous criminal, with wide, childish eyes, and a mind full of terrified speculation. He had known it later, when, with boyish bravado, he had flouted the horrific stories of a superstitious countryside, and explored its barren, ruined recesses. He had known it still later, when, with manhood's eyes opening to a dim appreciation of all those things which have gone before in the great effort of life, he had seen in it a picturesque example of the endless struggle which has gone on since the dawn of life.

So he thought he knew it all.

Now the limitations of his knowledge were forcing themselves upon him. Now he was realizing that there were secrets by the score in those every-day things which a lifetime of contact may never reveal. The strangeness of it all set him marvelling. The limitations of human understanding seemed extraordinarily narrow.

He gazed down into the gaping cavity beneath his feet, and, by the dim rays of a lighted lantern, counted the worn stone steps

until the darkness below swallowed up their outline.

Ruxton Farlow straightened himself up and glanced about him at the bare stone walls, from the joints of which the cement had long since fallen. He looked up at the worm-eaten, oaken rafters which had stood the wear of centuries. The flooring which they supported had long since fallen into decay, and he only wondered how much longer those sturdy oaken beams would continue to support the colossal weight of the millstones now resting from their grinding labors.

Through the rents which time and weather had wrought he saw the warm glow of daylight above, for all was ruin in the great old mill, ruin within and without. As it was with the walls of stone, and the great tower of woodwork above them, so it was with the outbuildings beyond the doorway, within which he stood. The walls remained, heavily buttressed by the hardy hands of a race of men who had understood so well the necessity for fortifying their homes against all eventualities, but the timbers of the roofs had long since fallen victims to the inclemencies of the seasons and the ruthless "North-easters" which, probably, since the time when the iron shores of Britain first emerged from beneath the waters, had beaten their relentless wings against the barrier which held up their freedom.

Ruxton set his lantern on the ground and moved away to the wide doorway, which no longer possessed the remotest sign of the old wooden doors which had probably been at one time heavy enough to resist a siege. Here he drew a letter from his pocket

and read it carefully over by the light of the sunset.

"Dear Mr. Farlow:

"I never knew your wonderful coast could be so interesting, even absorbing. I feel I owe you personal thanks for a delightful time, simply because you live – where you live. I have discovered a most wonderful spot. I say discovered, but probably you have known it from the days when you were first able to toddle about by yourself. However, I must tell you of it. It is an old, old, ruined mill, regarded by the folks on your coast as an evil place which is haunted by the spirits of the smugglers who once upon a time used it as the headquarters for their nefarious trade. But the incredible part of it is we unearthed a secret in it which has remained hidden for generations, possibly centuries. Now listen carefully and I will tell you of this secret. In the middle of the stone chamber under the mill there is the entrance to a passage which communicates with that villainous cove over which the evil eye of the old mill forever gazes. Six inches beneath the surface of the debris on the floor there is a slate slab, and, on raising this, you will discover a stone staircase which goes down, down, – follow it, and you shall see what you shall see. I have since discovered that this is the *only means of reaching the beach of the cove – unless you possess wings.* But I began this note with the intention of only telling you how much I am looking forward to seeing you again on Thursday evening at eight o'clock. I do hope you are taking full advantage of your vacation from parliamentary work, and are storing up plenty of good health

upon your wonderful, wonderful moors.

"Yours very sincerely,

"Vita Vladimir."

Ruxton refolded the letter and put it away. He understood it was the final summons to that great adventure which was to tell him of the threat overshadowing his beloved country.

He had obeyed it readily, eagerly, and now that the reality of the whole thing was developing he paused to consider the motives urging him.

He was going to witness things first hand. He was glad. His understanding of duty assured him that it was the only means by which he could hope to convince others, when the time came. But was this his sole motive? Was this the motive which had inspired that feeling of exaltation when he first read the perfumed note, so carefully written lest it should fall into wrong hands? He knew it was not.

His eyes were raised to the glistening sea away beyond the cove. He was gazing straight out through the narrow opening of the cove where the precipitous cliffs rose sheer out of the blue waters and marked the entrance which the country-folk sensationally loved to call "Hell's Gate." His mind was searching and probing the feelings which inspired him, and he knew that the beckoning hand of the woman was exercising a greater power than any sense of duty. He did not blind himself. He had no desire to. Those dark Slavonic eyes of his were wide and bright, and the half smile of them was full of an eager warmth. The idealist

mind behind them was widely open to its own imagery. He saw through those Hell's Gates the perfect, palpitating figure which had poured out its burden of soul to him on the edge of those very cliffs; and she was – beckoning.

The youth of him had been engulfed in the soul of the woman. Nor, as yet, did he realize the extent of the power she was exercising. All he knew was that he had neither the power nor desire to resist the summons, and herein lay the distinguishing mark of those whom Destiny claims.

After a few moments he glanced at his watch. And at once the alertness of the man was displayed. It was twenty minutes to eight, and shortly after eight it would be low tide. The appointment had been made with regard to that, and that while he approached from the land, she would come by water. Therefore he must not delay.

Dismissing every other consideration he turned back to the mysterious stairway he had unearthed and began its descent, aided by the light of the lantern he had discovered secreted upon the top step, ready for his use.

His progress was rapid and easy. The vaulted, declining passage beneath the mill was high and wide, and constructed of masonry calculated to withstand the erosion of ages. It was moist and slimy, and the steps were at times slippery, but these things were no deterrents.

The stairway, however, seemed endless in the dim lantern light, and by the time he had completed the journey he had

counted upwards of one hundred steps. At the bottom he paused and looked back up the way he had come, but, in the blackness of the tunnel, his light revealed little more than the first few steps.

Without further pause he turned to ascertain the nature of the place upon which the stairway had debouched. It was a wide and lofty cavern of Nature's fashioning, except that the walls and the natural obstructions of the flooring had been rendered smooth and clear by the hand of man. It was easy to estimate the purposes of this subterranean abode. There was less imagination in the legends of the old mill than he had supposed. If the books of his childish reading had any foundation in their local color this was certainly the den of some old-time smugglers.

He passed rapidly along the declining passage, and the end of it came as he expected to find it. It was a cave which opened in the face of the cliff overlooking the cove, but so ingeniously hidden by Nature that its presence could never have been even guessed at by any chance visit from the sea.

He stood at the opening and gazed out upon the already twilit cove. But he could not see the sea from where he stood; only along the face of the cliff to his right, down which, zigzagging and winding, a sort of rough-hewn stairway communicated with the beach below. In front of him a great projection of rock, as though riven from the main cliff at some far-off time by the colossal forces of Nature, hid the entire entrance of the cavern. And so narrow was the space intervening that he could touch it with an outstretching of his arm. It was a remarkable hiding-place. Nor

did he marvel that he had never heard of it before. But the rapidly deepening twilight of the cove warned him of the approach of the hour of his appointment. So he blew out his lantern and began the descent to the beach nearly fifty feet below.

Within five minutes he was standing in the centre of a patch of golden sand with the still ebbing water of the cove lapping gently at his feet.

A curious change had come over him. All interest inspired by the journey through the cavern was entirely gone. Even, for the time, he had no longer any thought of the purpose for which he was there. His mind was absorbed in the curious weird of the place, and the dreadful feeling of overwhelming might bearing in and down upon him.

The appalling grey barrenness, the height of the frowning ramparts which surrounded him on all sides, except the narrow opening to the sea. The absolute inaccessibility of those frowning walls, and the melancholy scream of the thousands of gulls which haunted the place. It was tremendous. It was terrible. But added to all these things was a discovery which he made almost upon the instant. With the instinct of personal security his eyes sought the high-water mark upon the beach. There was none. It was high up on the cliff sides at no point less that ten feet above the highest point of the beach. Herein lay the terror of the cove which lived in the minds of the dwellers upon the moors. Here was its real terror. A rising tide, and the secret of the smuggler's cavern undiscovered, and – death! He smiled as he thought of the name

given to the entrance to the cove. Hell's Gate! It was surely —

"Ahoy!"

The cry echoed about the grey walls in haunting fashion. Ruxton was startled out of his reverie. In a moment his repulsion at what he beheld was forgotten. He remembered only his purpose, and his searching eyes gazed out over the water.

"Ahoy!" he replied, when the last echo of the summons had died out.

He could see no boat. He could discover no human being. And – it was a man's voice that had hailed him.

For some moments a profound silence prevailed. Even the gulls ceased their mournful cries at the intrusion of a human voice upon their solitude.

Ruxton searched in every direction. Was this another surprise of this extraordinarily mysterious place? Was this – ? Quite suddenly his gaze became riveted upon a spit of low, weed-covered rock, stretching out into the calm water like a breakwater. There was a sound of clambering feet, and as his acute hearing caught it, a sort of instinct thrust his hand into his coat pocket where an automatic pistol lay. Then he laughed at himself and withdrew his hand sharply. The figure of a man scrambled up on to the breakwater.

They stood eyeing each other for several thoughtful moments. Then without attempting to draw nearer the stranger called to him.

"Mr. Farlow, sir. This way, if you please."

Without hesitation Ruxton crossed over to him and scrambled on to the rocks.

"You are from – ?" he demanded.

The question was put sharply, but without suspicion.

"The lady's waiting for you out there," replied the man simply. "We haven't much time, sir. You can't come in here on a rising tide, and you can't get out of it either. It's hell's own place for small craft, or any craft for that matter on a rising tide." He threw an anxious glance at the water.

Ruxton was gazing down at the little boat lying the other side of the natural breakwater. It was a petrol launch of some kind, but small and light as a cockle-shell. There was another man in the stern, and he observed that both he and the man beside him were in some sort of uniform.

"I didn't see you come in," he went on curiously.

"We've been lying here half an hour, sir. Our orders were to wait till just before the tide turned. We've got about half an hour, sir," the man added significantly.

"Where's the vessel?" enquired Ruxton.

"Just outside, sir."

"I didn't see her."

"She's lying submerged."

"And Miss Vladimir is – aboard?"

"The lady is, sir," replied the man, with a shadow of a smile in his deep-set blue eyes.

The stranger stood aside, a direct invitation to Ruxton to climb

down into the boat. But the latter made no move to do so.

Then the man pushed his peaked cap back from his forehead and displayed a shock of sandy grey hair which matched his closely trimmed whiskers.

"You'll excuse me, sir," he said, a trifle urgently, "but we've got to get out smart. Once the tide turns it races in here like an avalanche. We'll never make Hell's Gates if we aren't smart, and we don't want to get caught up in Hell itself."

The man's urgency had the desired effect. Ruxton stooped down and lowered himself into the bow of the boat.

"That's right, sir, it'll trim the boat," the man approved, as he dropped lightly in amidships. In a moment the clutch was let in and the little craft backed out of its narrow harbor.

It was a moment of crisis. Ruxton Farlow had practically committed himself to the power of these strangers. Not quite though. For he had taken the bow seat, and his loaded automatic was in his pocket still. However, the position was not without considerable risk. He had expected to meet Vita. Instead he had been met by two men in uniform. They were both in middle life, and burly specimens of the seafaring profession.

He had calculated the chances carefully before taking his final decision. Moreover he had closely appraised the men in charge of the boat. They were British. Of that he was certain. Nor were they men without education. On the whole he did not see that the balance lay very much in their favor if any treachery were contemplated.

"You are British," he said to the man in front of him, as the boat swung round head on to the gates of the cove and began to gather speed.

"Yes, sir. Served my time in the Navy – and had a billet elsewhere ever since."

"Since the war?"

"No, sir. Before the war."

"Where?"

The man faced round with a smile, while his comrade drove the little boat at a headlong pace through the racing waters.

"Where a good many of our Navy's cast-offs go, sir. In Germany."

CHAPTER VII
ON THE GREY NORTH SEA

Brief as was the interval between leaving the treacherous cove and the moment when Ruxton Farlow found himself surrounded by the tasteful luxury of the saloon of the long, low, strange-looking craft waiting just outside to receive him, it was not without many thrilling experiences.

To a man of less imagination the very few minutes in the petrol launch would have meant little more than a rather exciting experience. But for Ruxton they possessed a far deeper significance. Nor was the least the feeling that he had slammed-to the doors of the life behind him, bolted and barred and locked them, and – flung away the key.

That was the man. Sensitive to every mood that assailed him, yet urged on by an indomitable purpose, he had no more power to raise a hand to stay the tide of life upon which he was floating than he had to check the racing current which bore him beyond the threatening shoals of the Old Mill Cove.

What a mill-race the latter was! The man in charge of the launch had by no means exaggerated it. The little craft, urged by its powerful motor, surged through the water till the sea washed over its prow, and Ruxton was forced to shelter beneath the decked-in peak, whence he could observe the man amidships,

who never once desisted from his efforts on the well pump.

Then, just beyond the jaws of the cove, they entered a stretch of tumultuous popple where the ebb met the opposing currents along the coast. Here the boat was tossed about like the proverbial feather, and to navigate it into the smooth water beyond demanded all the consummate seamanship of those responsible for its safety.

Then, out of the heart of the grey waters, came the abrupt rising of the submersible. There was a tremendous swirling and upheaval less than fifty yards away, and the grey-green monster of the deep reared its forlorn-looking deck, with its conning-tower, its sealed hatchways, and its desolate deck rails, above the surface, and lay there, long and low and as evil-looking as only a mind filled with memories of the late war could have pictured it.

Two minutes later Ruxton had left the little launch, had stepped aboard the submersible and passed down the "companion" to the saloon beneath the flush deck, once more to be greeted by the woman who seemed to have become so much a part of the new life opening out before him.

Her greeting was cordial.

"I knew you would come," she said, as she left her hand for a moment in his. Then her grey eyes, so full of warmth, shadowed for a moment. "And now that you have come I – could almost wish that I had had nothing to do with it. You see, I haven't the courage of my convictions. I know they are right, but – I am afraid."

When he answered her the influence of the woman was greater than Ruxton knew.

"You need not be," he said simply. "We are not fighting for ourselves, so – why fear?"

The woman had no verbal reply. She regarded for one moment the strong face of the man, and the meaning of that regard was known only to herself. Had Ruxton possessed more vanity it is possible he might have read it aright, but vanity with him was so small a quantity as to be almost negligible.

Again the woman held out her hand.

"The tide will not wait. I must hurry ashore." Then she smiled. "I must go, too, while the courage your words have momentarily inspired remains. My father will join you immediately. Good-bye and good – "

"You do not travel with us?"

Ruxton's enquiry was frankly disappointed. The other shook her beautiful head.

"No woman may venture where you are going. No woman has ever set foot there. I know it all, as you will understand later, but – no, I return with the launch. The tide will just serve us. Good-bye and good luck."

Ruxton was left listening to the sound of her footsteps mounting the companionway. Then, as he heard the door of the conning-tower above close with a slam, he turned about and sought one of the luxurious sofas with which the saloon was furnished.

As he sat he swayed gently to the motion of the vessel, and for the first time became aware of the automatic change to artificial light in the room. He knew at once that the vessel was returning once more to those depths whence he had witnessed it emerge. He gazed about him speculatively. The lights were carefully placed and diffused to prevent the trying nature of a constant artificial glare.

He became aware of the splendid appointments of the saloon, which was a fine example of the marine architect's handicraft. The apartment itself was some twenty feet wide, and he judged it to occupy most of the vessel's beam. It was probably a similar length. The carpet on which his feet rested was a rich Turkey. Nor were the rest of the furnishings essentially of the character of a ship's cabin. True, there was a centre dining-table bolted to the deck, and the accompanying swinging chairs, but there was a full grand piano of German make. There were several comfortably upholstered lounges. There was exquisite plastic panelling of warm, harmonious tints on the upper parts of the walls and the ceilings, while the lower walls were clad in polished carved mahogany. He sought for the source of the daylight which had filled the room when he first entered, and discovered a great skylight overhead which was now covered by a metal shield on the outside, which, he concluded, must close over it automatically with the process of submerging.

But his further observations were cut short by the abrupt opening of a door in the mahogany panelling and the entrance of

– Mr. Charles Smith. He came swiftly across the room, his steps giving out no sound upon the soft carpet.

"Mr. Farlow," he cried, holding out one tenacious hand in greeting, "you have done me a great honor, sir. You have done me an inestimable service in coming. I can – only thank you."

But Ruxton was less attentive to his words than to the man. There was a change in him. A subtle change. He was no longer the enthusiastic inventor, almost slavishly striving to enlist sympathy for his invention. There was something about him which suggested command – even an atmosphere of the autocrat. Perhaps it was that here he was in his own natural element – the element which he had himself created. Perhaps —

But he left it at that. It was useless to speculate further. He still experienced the sense of trust and liking which had been inspired at their first meeting by the noble forehead and the gentle, luminous eyes, so like, yet so unlike, those other eyes which so largely filled his thoughts.

He willingly responded to the extended hand. And the man seemed to expect no reply, for he went on at once —

"I was in my laboratory when you came aboard. Now I am entirely at your service."

"Good." Ruxton nodded. "I feel there must be a lot of talk between us – without delay."

The inventor looked at his watch. Then he pointed at the lounge from which Ruxton had risen, and seated himself in one of the swivel chairs at the dining-table.

"We have nearly two hours before supper is served. May I send for some refreshment for you?"

Ruxton dropped into the seat behind him.

"Thanks, no," he declined, "I dined early – purposely. All I am anxious for now is – explanation."

The manner in which his eyelids cut flatly across the upper part of the pupils of his dark eyes gave his gaze a keenly penetrating quality. He wanted explanation, full and exhaustive explanation. Warnings, and mere intangible suggestions, no longer carried weight. He must know the whole thing which the future had to reveal to him.

The white-haired man seemed lost in thought. Again Ruxton noted a change. The lean face and gentle eyes yielded to something very like an expression of dejection. It was almost as if the man shrank from the explanations demanded of him, while yet he knew they must be made.

At length he raised his eyes and regarded his guest with an almost pathetic smile.

"Explain? Ah, yes. I must explain everything now." He sighed. "Where – where shall I begin?" He crossed his long legs and strove to settle himself more comfortably in his chair, while Ruxton waited without a sign.

"It is hard to explain – all," he said, after a brief pause. "But I know it must be. Mr. Farlow, can you imagine what it means when a man who has always regarded his honor and his country's honor before all things in the world suddenly finds himself called

upon to confess that his country's honor has been outraged by his country, and his own honor has been outraged by himself? If you can, then perhaps you will understand my position when explanation is demanded of me."

Ruxton averted the steady regard of his eyes. He did not desire to witness this man's pain.

"I think I know," he said. Then quite abruptly he changed from the English language to German, which he spoke with the perfect accent of a man educated in Frankfurt. "But it may save you much if you begin by telling me your real name. The name you are known by in – Germany."

A pair of simple, startled eyes gazed back into his.

"Has – Vita – told you?" he demanded.

Ruxton shook his head.

"Then how did you know?"

"Does it matter? I desire to make it easier for you."

For a few moments neither spoke. The artificial light in the room had merged once more into daylight. There was again the sound of the opening and shutting of iron doors on deck above them. There were also the harsh tones of orders being given.

Ruxton knew that it was the return of the launch which had conveyed this man's daughter ashore, and that it was being taken on board and stowed within the parent craft. Presently the sounds died away. Once more the light in the saloon became artificial, and the silent throb of engines made themselves felt. The journey had begun.

"Well?"

Ruxton had now given himself entirely to the use of the German language.

The inventor cleared his throat

"My name is Stanislaus. Stanislaus, Prince von Hertzwohl."

Ruxton Farlow did not move a muscle. There was not the quiver of an eyelid, nor one detail of change of expression. Yet he was not unmoved at the mention of the man's real name. Although he had half expected it, it came with something very like a shock.

Stanislaus von Hertzwohl! Did he not know it? Did not the whole wide world know it? Was it not the one name, out of all the great German names associated with the war, which was anathematized more surely even than that of the Kaiser himself?

Stanislaus von Hertzwohl! The man who had perfected the German submarine. The man who had made possible the hideous slaughter of innocent victims upon the high seas. The man at whose door was laid the responsibility for that inhuman massacre – the sinking of the *Lusitania*. The man whom the world believed was the father of every diabolical engine of slaughter devised to combat his country's enemies.

"Of course, I know the name," he said simply. "Everybody knows it."

His reply seemed to fire the powder train of the Prince's passionate emotion.

"Ach!" he cried, with a desperately helpless gesture of

expressive hands. "That is it. Everybody! Everybody knows it! They know the name, but they do not know the truth."

Then, in a moment, the fire of his emotion seemed to die out.

"Mr. Farlow, I want you to know that truth," he went on calmly. "Will you listen to it now? Will you listen to it with an open mind, or – or have you already sat in judgment, and, with the rest of an unthinking, unreasoning world, condemned me?"

Ruxton's thoughts were pacing rapidly with his feelings. They had travelled swiftly back to that moonlit night upon the Yorkshire cliffs. To him had come the woman again, so fair, so radiant in her perfect womanhood, so passionate in her horror of the tragedy of the world war. These things had been beyond all doubt in their sincerity and truth. She was this man's daughter. She was loyally supporting her father now. Then his mind passed on to the scene in the library at Dorby Towers. It had been his work for years to deal with people whose superficial presentment was only calculated to cloak real purpose. He had read these two people out of his experience.

"Judgment is only for those who possess all the facts," he observed quietly. "Will you continue?"

The decision of his attitude seemed to inspire the white-haired man so patiently awaiting his reply. He crossed his legs, and, drawing up one well-shod foot, nursed its ankle in his clasped hands. He was leaning forward full of an anxious, nervous expression of attitude. It almost seemed as if his guest's judgment were to him a last straw of hope. The noble forehead was a-dew

with moisture. His bushy eyebrows were sharply drawn in a great effort of concentration. His eyes, so widely simple, usually so expressive of childhood's innocence, were now full of a suffering that was almost overwhelming.

"If I had been guilty of a fraction of that of which the world accuses me could I have dared, or cared, to approach you with my latest invention, and – the other proposals? Keep that question in your mind while I talk. It is so easy to condemn, and, having condemned, reversal of judgment is well-nigh impossible. If I am guilty it is only of a patriot's devotion to the country to which *I believed* I owed allegiance. That, and an even greater devotion to the problems of making possible those things which seemed impossible. In not one of the problems of invention have I ever possessed a motive other than that which has inspired every engineer engaged upon naval armaments in every other country. Never in my life have I devised any weapon for the army other than the monster siege mortar. The liquid fire, the gases, the dozen and one contrivances for slaughter have found their inception in other brains than mine. I state these facts simply. You must trust them, or dismiss them, as you will. I am a marine inventor solely, except for that one weapon which was legitimate enough – the siege mortar. You, who understand the nature of marine invention, must assuredly realize that one man's brain, one man's lifetime are all too brief and limited to permit a division of his powers with any hope of success."

He paused as though offering opportunity for comment, but

none was forthcoming. So he went on, his body slightly swaying to and fro, his eyes assuming a passionate fire that gave to his whole aspect an atmosphere of vigorous protest.

"I am a Pole," he went on presently. "I am a Pole, born in German Poland. My parents were poor, but we claim direct descent from the ancient royal house. Now let me make my own thoughts and feelings clear to you. I was brought up under German methods, German education. I was taught, as every child within the German Empire is taught, to believe that Germany is above and before all the nations of the world, and that, in the brief life of this earth, nothing else but German national interests matter to its people. Now mark the obvious result of such a training. I make no apology. I, beginning life in my father's little engineering shop, finding myself with an abnormal capacity for invention, seeking to make for myself and family a competence – what do I do? I place whatever ability I may possess at the service of Germany. I devote myself to discovery in the one direction in which official Germany has looked since the war of 1870.

"The next step comes quickly. It came so quickly that it well-nigh overbalanced my whole sense of proportion. The problem that appealed to me was the enormous strength of fortresses being built by our neighbors against our borders. We were doing the same against theirs. It was almost a simple problem. I said that if our fortresses were stronger than theirs, and we possessed a secret weapon which could destroy theirs, then our empire was safe from invasion for all time. So it came about that I took

plans of my great siege mortars to the authorities. They were considered, and the guns were ultimately made. On experiment they proved an instantaneous success, and I was at once given rank and wealth, and ordered to work on the development of the gun-power of the Navy. It was this that converted me to marine engineering. From then onwards my career became one series of triumphs – from Germany's point of view. Till now, as you know, I have been rewarded with the revival of an old Polish title, to which by birth I am entitled, and am placed – as perhaps you do not know – in supreme command of Germany's naval construction."

There was no atmosphere of triumph in the man's manner. There was no victorious inspiration in the tones of his voice. With each word which announced the progress of his triumph an almost painful dejection seemed to settle more and more heavily upon him.

Still Ruxton refrained from comment. He knew that the vital things had yet to be told. Nor had he any desire to break up the man's train of thought. There still remained the tragedy of triumph which this man's life concealed.

The man's voice came again in level tones which had lost all light and shade. He spoke like one utterly weary in mind, heart, and body.

"If I had only known," he said, with a dreary shake of his snow-white head. "But," he added with a shrug, "I did not know. I was blinded by success, and a passionate devotion to my work."

He drew a deep breath. "But I knew later. Oh, yes. I knew. The greatest triumph and the greatest disaster of my life was when I converted the paltry little coast defence submarines into the ocean-going pirates they afterwards became. But it was not until Germany declared a submarine blockade of these shores that I knew what I had done. Up to that time I had been a – German patriot. From that moment I became a simple, heart-broken human being. My legitimate engines of war had been turned against the innocent lives of a defenceless people, and when the massacre of fifteen hundred souls took place with the sinking of the *Lusitania* I think for the time I became demented."

He was breathing hard. His face had become almost stony in its expression. It was the face of a man who for the time is beyond all further feeling. Quite abruptly, however, he released his hold upon his foot, and ran his long fingers through his shock of white hair.

"Ach! How willingly would I have undone all I had done. I tried to resign on various pleas. Health!" He laughed, a hollow, mocking laugh. "As well try to struggle free from the strangling rope of the hangman with hands tied. To my horror I found that I belonged body and soul to Germany, and my rank and wealth was the price the country had paid for my brains. Oh, yes, I was no honored patriot serving my country. I was its bond slave, the slave of Prussian militarism. And to the end of my days that slave I must remain.

"Need I tell you of all the suffering I have since endured? No,

I think not. No repentant murderer could have suffered more for his crimes than I have done. I have striven, by every possible argument, to assure myself that mine was not the blame, but no conviction has resulted. The world cannot blame more cruelly than I do myself, and yet – I am innocent of all intent.

"Throughout all the struggle I have had with my own soul no glimmer of light reached me until my daughter came to my rescue. And I think it was her woman's wit, supported by her own brave heart, which has saved me. She, in her great pity and love of humanity, started a fresh thought in the poor brain with which Providence endowed me. It surely was only a woman's mind could have conceived so simple a solution to my trouble. It was all done in one brief sentence. She said, 'The brain that can invent to destroy can invent to save.' And from that moment hope came to me."

He leant forward urgently. The veins at his temples stood out with the mental effort of the moment.

"Need I detail the result. I came to you as the only possible person to help on the work. You were selected after careful thought. I have warned you of the threat hanging over your country. Now I will show you the engines of destruction which I have been forced to perfect to complete the execution of that threat. But I have already shown you my submersible. You are now on board the constructed vessel, the development and adoption of which is the only antidote to the devilish plans of the country to which I belong, plans which are staggering in their

possibilities. They are so simple, yet so vast and terrible when made against England. Listen: Germany has abandoned all other naval construction in favor of my new boat – the Submersible Dreadnought. Do you realize the type? It is a heavily armored vessel with the gun-power of the surface dreadnought, and its speed, but with all the attributes of the submarine. A fleet of nominally three hundred is being constructed. It will be larger by far. In a few years it will be possible to ring your country round with these lurking machines, each of which will be capable of engaging successfully any surface war vessel ever built, while its submarine attributes will render it practically immune from any combination of force opposed to it. Do you see? Never again will England, when at war with Germany, be able to transport her armies abroad. Never again will she be able to feed her millions of people through overseas channels. Henceforth she will be driven to peace under any conditions and her mastery of the seas will pass from her forever."

Ruxton stirred in his seat. He shifted his position. The man's words had sunk deeply.

"The submersible mercantile marine is certainly the obvious retort," he said reflectively. Then he added as an afterthought, "Temporarily."

"Yes. Temporarily."

Neither spoke again for some moments. Both were thinking ahead, much further on than the immediate future.

"And after the submersible dreadnought?" Ruxton's question

was not addressed to the inventor, but it was answered by him.

"Who can tell? One of these two countries must go under."

"Yes."

Again came a prolonged silence. Again Ruxton shifted his position. Then at last he spoke.

"And you will show me these things. The risk will be stupendous – for you."

Prince Stanislaus laughed without a shadow of mirth.

"For me it is just a matter of life and death. Life has few attractions for me now. For you? My power is sufficient to safeguard you. Shall I show you how?"

Ruxton nodded. His penetrating gaze was again fixed upon the almost cadaverous features with their snow-white crown and noble forehead.

"Yes," he said.

Prince Stanislaus began at once. And talk went on between them for many minutes. For the most part Ruxton listened, as was his way, and only occasionally interpolated a shrewd, incisive question. His dark, penetrating eyes were watchful and studying. And no change of expression in the other was lost upon him.

Slowly within him there grew a wide admiration for the mentality and courage in this strangely simple creature. He read him down to the remotest depths of his honest soul. Wherever Prince Stanislaus's devotion to his life's work had led him, there was no shadow of doubt left in the Englishman's mind as to his present sincerity and honesty of purpose.

When the last detail of the plan had been explained Ruxton stood up.

"The judgment of the world is rarely inspired by justice," he said. "I thank you, and will gladly place myself under your guidance. Since the opportunity of discovering the secrets of Kiel and Cuxhaven has been vouchsafed to me I should be far less than the patriot I desire to be did I shirk the risks. My duty is quite plain."

The relief and satisfaction his words inspired in the other were obvious.

"I thank you," he said earnestly. "You have helped me to that peace which I have long sought and I had come to believe could never again be mine in this life. But – "

"But?"

The man was smiling.

"But we do not go to either Kiel or Cuxhaven."

Ruxton was startled.

"Where then?" he demanded shortly.

"To the Baltic. Mr. Farlow, you have no idea of the subtlety of the people with whom we are dealing. All eyes of the world are on Cuxhaven and Kiel. Every vulture of the foreign secret services is hovering over those places, and the forges and foundries are working to deceive them. But the real work and preparations I speak of are not being made in Germany at all. We go to the Baltic, to the island of Borga, which is off the coast of Sweden. And there we shall find under German administration a naval

'Krupps,' and the greatest arsenal in the whole world."

CHAPTER VIII
BORGA

A grey, northern day devoid of all sunshine; a forbidding, rock-bound coast lost in a depressing mist; a flat, oily sea, as threatening to the mariner as the mounting hillocks of storm-swept water; a dull sense of hopelessness prevailing upon the still air. All these things marked the approach to Borga; for Nature was in a repellent mood, a thing of repugnance, of distrust and fear.

A long, low craft was approaching the gaping jaws which marked the entrance to the heart of the island, somewhere away in the distance, lost in the grey mists which seemed to envelop the whole land.

The deck was narrow, and guarded by a simple surrounding of low rails. Amidships was a curious construction which was at once the support of the periscope, the conning-tower, and the entrance to the interior of the vessel. Dotted about the deck were several sealed hatchways, and the sheen of glassed skylights. The whole thing was colored to match the surrounding grey-green waters.

Two uniformed figures were standing for'ard in the bows. One of them was beating the air with twin flags, one in each hand. The other stood by contemplating the book in his hand,

and at intervals scanning the repellent shore through a pair of binoculars.

Presently the signaller spoke.

"One, six, four, seven, nine, three, two," he said, reciting the combination of numerals in German with the certainty of familiarity.

"One, six, four, seven, nine, three, two, it is," replied the observer, in a similar, ill-spoken tongue. "That's 'proceed,'" he added, referring to his book.

Forthwith the signaller produced a pocket telephone connected with the conning-tower by a long insulated "flex," and spoke over it. A moment later the throb of engines made itself felt, and, in response, the spume broke on the vessel's cut-water, and left a frothing wake astern.

The vessel passed the mist-hooded granite headlands. It left them behind, and itself became engulfed in the grey threat lying between the overshadowing heights towering upwards nearly five hundred feet towards the leaden sky.

The two men on deck gave no heed to their immediate surroundings. They were men of the sea, hard and unimaginative. They were concerned only with the safety of the vessel under them. They would drive her into the very gates of Hell, if such were their orders. But they would avoid, with all their skill, the pitfalls by the way. They knew that the secrets of this gloomy abode were many, as many perhaps as those of the very Hades they would have been willing enough to face. They knew, too,

that those secrets, just as the secrets of the other place, were calculated to destroy them if they diverged one iota from the laws which governed the place. So they worked exactly, and took no chances.

The channel quickly began to narrow. The vast cliffs drew in upon them in their overpowering might. The barren shores were visible to the naked eye, and the white line of heavy surf boomed and boomed again in its incessant attack upon the grim walls. Higher up small patches of pine trees clung desperately to insecure root-holds, like the intrepid Alpini seeking to scale impossible heights.

A few minutes passed and a boat, a small petrol-driven vessel, like some cockle-shell amidst its tremendous surroundings, shot out from the shore and raced towards them. It had a high, protected prow, and its great speed threw up a pair of huge white wings of water till it had something of the appearance of an enraged swan charging to the attack of an enemy. Again the signaller spoke over his telephone, and the vessel slowed down, and finally hove-to.

The patrol boat drew alongside. Two men, amidships, in oilskins, held a brief conversation with those on board the intruder. Then their vessel passed ahead, and the bigger craft was left to amble leisurely along in its wake.

The cliffs had closed down till less than half a mile of water divided them. The narrow strip of leaden sky above looked pinched between them. For a mile and more ahead there was

no change. The narrow passage, with its racing tide, was full of hidden dangers, not the least amongst which being a crowded mine-field which lined either side of the channel.

As the journey proceeded the gloom increased. Added to the natural mists the atmosphere took on a yellow tint, which suggested an overhanging pall of smoke. There was no joy in the aspect anywhere.

The end of the passage came at last, and the pilot boat dropped astern. Its work was finished, and it raced back to its watching-post.

Now a complete change came over the scene. But it was scarcely a change for the better. It was only that Nature, having done her worst, left the rest in the safe hands of human ingenuity.

The frowning cliffs abandoned their threat. They ended as abruptly as they had arisen out of the sea. They fell back on either hand, carrying the shore with them, and merged into a mist-crowned hinterland of dark woods and wide ravines, with a wide-stretching foreshore, upon which was built a great city, entirely surrounding what had developed into a miniature, landlocked sea.

Nature had certainly left her incomplete effort in capable hands. Whatever beauty a brilliant sunshine, accompanied by a smart breeze, might have discovered upon the inhospitable shores of Borga in their pristine state, man's hand had contrived to destroy it. The whole prospect was sordid, uncouth, and suggested something of a nether world of lugubrious fancy. All

that could be said for it was the suggestion of feverish industry on every hand. The buildings looked all unfinished, yet they were in full work under a great strain of pressure. Borga had been built in a hurry, and all connected with it suggested only haste and industry.

There were no public buildings of classic model. There were no roads and avenues beautified by Nature's decorations. Just alleys and thoroughfares there were, and only sufficiently paved for the needs of the work in hand. The quays and docks were solid – only. The great machine shops, staring-eyed and baldly angular, suggested only the barest necessity. And though their hundreds of floors sheltered thousands of human workers, and acres of elaborate machinery, not even a cornice, or coping, or variation of brickwork had been permitted to make sightly a structure purely for utilitarian purposes. The slipways at the water's edge, and the gaunt steel skeletons they contained, were merely slipways, without other pretensions. A thousand smokestacks belched out of their fetid bowels an endless flow of yellow, sulphurous smoke upon an already overladen atmosphere. They stood up like the teeth of a broken comb, and added to the sordidness of the picture.

A faint relief might have been found for the primitive mind in the numberless blast furnaces to be detected on almost every hand by their shooting tongues of flame. Like all else in Borga they never ceased from their efforts. Theirs it was to give birth to an everlasting stream of molten metal with which to fill the

crudely-wrought sand moulds for the containing of pig-iron. The rolling mills, too, might have been not without effect. Those cavernous worlds of incessant clamor rolled the hours and days away, and took no count but of the output from their soulless wombs. The homes of the deep-noted steam hammers, and the fierce puddling furnaces, where men, bare to the skin except for a loin-cloth, with greased bodies, endure under showers of flying sparks and a heat which no other living creature would face. These sights were perhaps not without inspiration. But the sordidness of it all, its crudity, its suggestion of hideous life were on every hand; in the shrieking locomotives, with their tails of laden, protesting trucks; in the beer-drinking booths; in the vast heaps of rubbish and waste lying about in every direction; even to the almost bestial type of man whose brain and muscle made such a waste of industry possible.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.