

Upward Allen

The International Spy



Allen Upward

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«Public Domain»

Upward A.

The International Spy / A. Upward — «Public Domain»,

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The International Spy / Being the Secret History of the Russo-Japanese War

PROLOGUE¹

THE TWO EMPRESSES

“Look!”

A fair, delicately-molded hand, on which glittered gems worth a raja’s loyalty, was extended in the direction of the sea.

Half a mile out, where the light ripples melted away into a blue and white haze upon the water, a small black smudge, like the back of a porpoise, seemed to be sliding along the surface.

But it was not a porpoise, for out of it there rose a thin, black shaft, scarcely higher than a flag-staff, and from the top of this thin shaft there trickled a faint wreathing line of smoke, just visible against the background of sky and sea.

“It is a submarine! What is it doing there?”

The exclamation, followed by the question, came from the second, perhaps the fairer, of two women of gracious and beautiful presence, who were pacing, arm linked in arm, along a marble terrace overlooking a famous northern strait.

The terrace on which they stood formed part of a stately palace, built by a king of the North who loved to retire in the summer time from his bustling capital, and gather his family around him in this romantic home.

From here, as from a watch-tower, could be seen the fleets of empires, the crowded shipping of many a rich port and the humbler craft of the fisherman, passing and repassing all day long between the great inland sea of the North and the broad western ocean.

Along this narrow channel had once swept the long ships of the Vikings, setting forth on those terrible raids which devastated half Europe and planted colonies in England and France and far-off Italy. But to-day the scene was a scene of peace. The martial glory of the Dane had departed. The royal castle that stood there as if to guard the strait had become a rendezvous of emperors and queens and princes, who took advantage of its quiet precincts to lay aside the pomp of rule, and perhaps to bind closer those alliances of sovereigns which serve to temper the fierce rivalries of their peoples.

The pair who stood gazing, one with curiosity and wonder, the other with an interest of a more painful character, at the sinister object on the horizon, were imperial sisters. Born in the tiny sea kingdom, they had lived to wear the crowns of the greatest two realms the world has ever seen, two empires which between them covered half the surface of our planet, and included one-third of its inhabitants.

But though sundered in interests they were not divided in affection. As they stood side by side, still linked together, it was evident that no common sympathy united them.

The one who had been first to draw attention to the mysterious craft, and whose dress showed somber touches which spoke of widowhood, answered her sister’s question:

“I never see one of those vessels without a shudder. I have an instinct which warns me that they are destined to play a dangerous, perhaps a fatal, part in the future. What is that boat doing

¹ The author desires to state that this history should be read as a work of imagination simply, and not as authentic.

here, in Danish waters? – I do not know. But it can be here for no good. If a war ever broke out in which we were concerned, the Sound would be our first line of defense on the west. It would be mined, by us, perhaps; if not, by our enemy. Who can tell whether that submarine has not been sent out by some Power which is already plotting against peace, to explore the bed of the strait, with a view to laying down mines hereafter?”

The other Empress listened with a grave countenance.

“I hope your fears are not well founded. I can think of no Power that is ever likely to attack you. It is my nephew, or rather those who surround him, from whom the signal for war is likely to come, if it ever does come.”

The widowed Empress bowed her head.

“You know what my hopes and wishes are,” she answered. “If my son listened to me there would be no fear of his departing from the peaceful ways of my dear husband. But there are secret influences always at work, as stealthy in their nature as that very craft – ”

The speaker paused as she glanced 'round in search of the black streak and gray smoke-wreath which had attracted her notice a minute before. But she looked in vain.

Like a phantom the submarine had disappeared, leaving no trace of its presence.

The Empress uttered an ejaculation of dismay, which was echoed by her sister.

“Where is it now? Where did it go? Has it sunk, or has it gone back to where it came from?”

To these questions there could be no answer. The smooth waters glistened in the sunlight as merrily as if no threatening craft was gliding beneath the surface on some errand fraught with danger to the world.

“Perhaps they saw they were observed, and dived under for concealment,” suggested the second Empress.

Her sister sighed gently.

“I was telling you that that submarine was a type of the secret dangers which beset us. I know, beyond all doubt, that there are men in the innermost circle of the Court, men who have my son's ear, and can do almost what they like with him, who are at heart longing for a great war, and are always working underground to bring it about. And if they succeed, and we are taken unprepared by a stronger foe, there will be a revolution which may cost my son his throne, if not his life.”

There was a brief silence. Then the Empress who had listened to this declaration murmured in a low voice:

“Heaven grant that the war is not one between you and us!”

“Heaven grant it!” was the fervent reply. And then, after a moment's reflection, the widowed Empress added in an eager voice:

“But we – cannot we do something to avert such a fearful calamity?”

Her sister pressed her arm as though to assure her of sympathy.

“Yes, yes,” the other continued. “We can do much if we will. Though my son does not always take my advice, he has never yet refused to listen to me. And in moments of grave stress he sometimes consults me of his own accord. And I know that you, too, have influence. Your people worship you. Your husband – ”

The Western Empress interrupted gently:

“I cannot play the part that you play. I do not claim the right to be consulted, or to give direct advice. Do not ask me to step outside my sphere. I can give information; I can be a channel sometimes between your Court and ours, a channel which you can trust as I fear you cannot always trust your ministers and diplomatic agents. More than that I should not like to promise.”

“But that is very much,” was the grateful response. “That may be quite enough. Provided we can arrange a code by which I can always communicate with you safely and secretly, it may be possible to avert war at any time.”

“What do you propose?”

“It is very simple. If any crisis comes about through no fault of my son’s – if the party who are conspiring to make a war arrange some unexpected *coup* which we could not foresee or prevent – and if I am sure that my son sincerely desires peace, I can send you a message – one word will be enough – which you can take as an assurance that we mean to put ourselves right with you, and to thwart the plotters.”

The Western Empress bowed her head.

“I accept the mission. And the word – what shall it be?”

The other glanced ’round the horizon once more, and then, bending her lips to her imperial sister’s ear, whispered a single word.

The two great women who had just exchanged a pledge for the peace of the world were moving slowly along the terrace again, when the Western sister said, thoughtfully,

“I think I know another way to aid you.”

The Eastern Empress halted, and gazed at her with eagerness.

“I know the difficulties that surround you,” her sister pursued, “and that the greatest of them all is having no one in your service whom you can entirely and absolutely trust.”

“That is so,” was the mournful admission.

“Now I have heard of a man – I have never actually employed him myself, but I have heard of him from those who have, and they tell me he is incorruptible. In addition, he is a man who has never experienced the sensation of fear, and his abilities are so great that he has been called in to solve almost every problem of international politics that has arisen in recent years.”

“But this man – how can he be obtained?”

“At present he is retained in our secret service. I must not conceal from you that he is partly a Pole by descent, and as such he has no love for your Empire. But if it were made clear to him that in serving you he was serving us, and defeating the designs of the anti-popular and despotic clique at your Court, I feel sure he would consent to place himself at your disposal.”

The Eastern Empress listened intently to her sister’s words. At the close she said,

“Thank you. I will try this man, if you can prevail on him to come to me. What is his name?”

“I expect you must have heard of him already, It is – ”

“*Monsieur V – ?*”

The second Empress nodded.

No more was said.

The two imperial figures passed away along the terrace, silhouetted against the red and stormy sunset sky, like two ministering spirits of peace brooding over a battleground of blood.

CHAPTER I

THE INSTRUCTIONS OF MONSIEUR V —

The great monarch by whose gracious command I write this narrative has given me his permission to preface it with the following remarkable document:

Minute: It is considered that it cannot but promote the cause of peace and good understanding between the British and Russian Governments if Monsieur V – be authorized to relate in the columns of some publication enjoying a wide circulation, the steps by which he was enabled to throw light on the occurrences in the North Sea.

By the Cabinet.

In addition, I desire to state for the benefit of those who profess to see some impropriety in the introduction of real names into a narrative of this kind, that objections precisely similar to theirs were long ago raised, and long ago disposed of, in the case of Parliamentary reports, newspaper articles, society papers, and comic publications of all kinds; and, further, that I have never received the slightest intimation that my literary methods were displeasing to the illustrious personages whom my narratives are intended to honor.

With this apology I may be permitted to proceed.

On a certain day in the winter which preceded the outbreak of war between Russia and Japan, I received a summons to Buckingham Palace, London, to interview the Marquis of Bedale.

I am unable to fix the precise date, as I have forsworn the dangerous practice of keeping a diary ever since the head of the French police convinced me that he had deciphered a code telegram of mine to the Emperor of Morocco.

The Marquis and I were old friends, and, anticipating that I should find myself required to start immediately on some mission which might involve a long absence from my headquarters in Paris, I took my confidential secretary with me as far as the British capital, utilizing the time taken by the journey in instructing him how to deal with the various affairs I had in hand.

I had just finished explaining to him the delicate character of the negotiation then pending between the new King of Servia and Prince Ferdinand of Bulgaria, when the train rolled into Charing Cross.

Not wishing any one, however high in my confidence, to know too much of my movements, I ordered him to remain seated in the railway carriage, while I slipped out of the station and into the closed brougham for which I had telegraphed from Dover.

I had said in the wire that I wished to be driven to a hotel in Piccadilly. It was not till I found myself in Cockspur Street that I pulled the check-string, and ordered the coachman to take me to Buckingham Palace.

I mention these details in order to show that my precautions to insure secrecy are always of the most thorough character, so that, in fact, it would be quite impossible for any one to unveil my proceedings unless I voluntarily opened my lips.

The instructions which I received from Lord Bedale were brief and to the point:

“You are aware, of course, Monsieur V – , that there is a possibility of war breaking out before long between Russia and Japan.”

“It is more than a possibility, I am afraid, my lord. Things have gone so far that I do not believe it is any longer possible to avert war.”

His lordship appeared gravely concerned.

“Do you tell me that it is too late for you to interfere with effect?” he demanded anxiously.

“Even for me,” I replied with firmness.

Lord Bedale threw at me a glance almost imploring in its entreaty.

"If you were to receive the most ample powers, the most liberal funds; if you were to be placed in direct communication with one of the most exalted personages in the Court of St Petersburg – would it still be impossible?"

I shook my head.

"Your lordship should have sent for me a fortnight ago. We have lost twelve days, that is to say, twelve battles."

The Marquis of Bedale looked more and more distressed.

"At least you can try?" he suggested.

"I can try. But I am not omnipotent, my lord," I reminded him.

He breathed a sigh of relief before going on to say:

"But that is only the preliminary. Great Britain is bound to come to the assistance of Japan in certain contingencies."

"In the event of her being attacked by a second Power," I observed.

"Precisely. I rely on you to prevent that contingency arising."

"That is a much easier matter, I confess."

"Then you undertake to keep the war from extending to us?"

"I undertake to keep a second Power from attacking Japan," I answered cautiously.

Lord Bedale was quick to perceive my reservation.

"But in that case we cannot be involved, surely?" he objected.

"I cannot undertake to keep you from attacking Russia," I explained grimly.

"But we should not dream of attacking her – without provocation," he returned, bewildered.

"I fancy you will have a good deal of provocation," I retorted.

"Why? What makes you think that?" he demanded.

I suspected that Lord Bedale was either sounding me, or else that he had not been taken into the full confidence of those for whom he was acting.

I responded evasively:

"There are two personages in Europe, neither of whom will leave one stone unturned in the effort to involve you in war with Russia."

"And they are?"

Even as he put the question, Lord Bedale, as though acting unconsciously, raised one hand to his mustache, and gave it a pronounced upward twirl.

"I see your lordship knows one of them," I remarked. "The other –"

He bent forward eagerly.

"Yes? The other?"

"The other is a woman."

"A woman?"

He fell back in his chair in sheer surprise.

"The other," I repeated in my most serious tone, "is a woman, perhaps the most formidable woman now living, not even excepting the Dowager Empress of China."

"And her name?"

"Her name would tell you nothing."

"Still –"

"If you really wish to hear it –"

"I more than wish. I urge you."

"Her name is the Princess Y –"

Scarcely had the name of this dangerous and desperate woman passed my lips than I regretted having uttered it.

Had I foreseen the perils to which I exposed myself by that single slip I might have hesitated in going on with my enterprise.

As it was I determined to tell the Marquis of Bedale nothing more.

“This business is too urgent to admit of a moment’s unnecessary delay,” I declared, rising to my feet. “If your lordship has no further instructions to give me, I will leave you.”

“One instant!” cried Lord Bedale. “On arriving in Petersburg you will go straight to report yourself to her majesty the Empress Dagmar.”

I bowed my head to conceal the expression which might have told his lordship that I intended to do nothing of the kind.

“Your credentials,” he added with a touch of theatricality, “will consist of a single word.”

“And that word?” I inquired.

He handed me a sealed envelope.

“I do not myself know it. It is written on a piece of paper inside that envelope, and I have to ask you to open the envelope, read the word, and then destroy the paper in my presence.”

I shrugged my shoulders as I proceeded to break the seal. But no sooner did my eyes fall on the word within, and above all on the handwriting in which that word was written, than I experienced a sensation of admiring pleasure.

“Tell the writer, if you please, my lord, that I am grateful for this mark of confidence, which I shall endeavor to deserve.”

I rolled up the paper into a tiny pellet, swallowed it, and left the room and the Palace without uttering another word.

CHAPTER II

THE PRINCESS Y – 'S HINT

I never use the same stratagem more than once. It is to this rule that I attribute my success.

On previous missions to Russia I assumed the disguises of a French banker, of the private secretary to Prince Napoleon, of an emissary from an Indian Maharaja, and of an Abyssinian Maduga.

I now decided to go thither as an Englishman, or rather – for there is a distinction between the two – as a Little Englander.

It appeared to me that no character could be more calculated to gain me the confidence of the Anglophobes of the Russian Court. I anticipated that they would smother me with attentions, and that from their hypocritical professions I should stand a good chance of learning what was actually in their minds.

No sooner had I taken this decision, which was while the brougham was being driven along the Mall, than I gave the order “ – House.”

I was driven to the office of a well known review conducted by a journalist of boundless philanthropy and credulity. Mr. Place – as I will call him – was within, and I at once came to business.

“I am a Peace Crusader,” I announced. “I have devoted myself to the sacred cause of which you are the foremost champion. At present war is threatened in the Far East. I am going to Russia to persuade the war party to abandon their designs. I have come here to ask you for your aid and countenance in this pious enterprise.”

The editor gave me a doubtful glance.

“If it is a question of financial aid,” he said not very encouragingly, “I must refer you to the treasurer of the World’s Peace League. I am afraid our friends – ”

“No, no,” I interrupted him. “It is not a question of funds. I am a wealthy man, and if you need a subscription at any time you have only to apply to me. What I desire is your moral support, your valuable advice, and perhaps a few introductions to the friends of peace in the Russian capital.”

The editor’s face brightened.

“Of course!” he exclaimed in cordial tones. “I will support you with all my heart. I will write up your mission in the *Review*, and I will give you as many introductions as you need. What is your name, again?”

“Sterling. Mr. Melchisadek Sterling.”

The philanthropist nodded and touched a bell on his table.

“I will give you a letter,” he said, as his secretary came in and seated herself at the typewriter, “to the noblest creature I have ever met, a woman of high birth and immense fortune who has devoted herself to the cause.”

And turning ’round in his chair he dictated to the attentive secretary:

“*My dear Princess Y–* ”

It needed all that command over my features which it has taken me twenty years to acquire to conceal the emotion with which I heard this name. Less than half an hour had passed since I had warned Lord Bedale that the Princess would be the most formidable enemy in my path, and now, on the very threshold of my enterprise, her name confronted me like an omen.

I need not repeat the highly colored phrases in which the unsuspecting philanthropist commended me to this artful and formidable woman as a fellow-worker in the holy cause of human brotherhood.

Not content with this service, the editor wanted to arrange a meeting of his league or brotherhood, or whatever it was, to give me a public send-off. As I understood that the meeting would partake of a religious character I could not bring myself to accept the offer.

In addition to the letter to the Princess Y – , he gave me another to a member of the staff of the Russian Embassy in London, a M. Gudonov. He also urged me to call upon a member of Parliament, a rising politician who is not unlikely to have a ministerial post in the next government, and who has made himself known as an apologist of the Czar's. But as I had good reason to know that this gentleman was by no means a disinterested dupe, like Mr. Place, I prudently left him alone.

On going to the Russian Embassy to have my passport viséd I inquired for M. Gudonov.

The moment he entered the room I recognized him as one of the most unscrupulous agents of the notorious Third Section, one of the gang who drugged and kidnapped poor Alexander of Bulgaria. My own disguise, it is hardly necessary to say, was impenetrable.

This precious apostle of peace greeted me with unction, on the editor's introduction.

"You are going to our country on a truly noble errand," he declared, with tears in his eyes. "We Russians have reason to feel grateful to worthy Englishmen like you, who can rise above national prejudices and do justice to the benevolent designs of the Czar and his advisers."

"I hope that I may be instrumental in averting a great catastrophe," I said piously.

"Even if you fail in preventing war," the Russian replied, "you will be able to tell your countrymen when you return, that it was due to the insane ambition of the heathen Japanese. It is the 'Yellow Peril,' my friend, to which that good Emperor William has drawn attention, from which we are trying to save Europe."

I nodded my head as if well satisfied.

"Whatever you and your friends in Petersburg tell me, I shall believe," I assured him. "I am convinced of the good intention of your Government."

The Russian fairly grinned at this simplicity.

"You cannot find a more trustworthy informant than the Princess Y – ," he said gravely. "And just now she is in a position to know a very great deal."

"How so?" I asked naturally – not that I doubted the statement.

"The Princess has just been appointed a lady-in-waiting to her imperial majesty the Dowager Empress Dagmar."

This was a serious blow. Knowing what I did of the past of Princess Y – , I felt that no ordinary pressure must have been brought to bear to secure her admission into the household of the Czaritza. And with what motive? It was a question to which there could be only one answer. The War Party had guessed or suspected that the Czar's mother was opposed to them, and they had resolved to place a spy on her actions.

Inwardly thankful to Mr. Place for having been the means of procuring me this important information in advance, I received my passport and quitted the Embassy with the heartfelt congratulations of the ex-kidnapper.

Forty-eight hours later I had crossed the Russian frontier, and my life was in the hands of the Princess.

My first step on arriving in the capital of the North was to put up at the favorite hotel of English visitors. The coupons of a celebrated tourist agency were credentials in themselves, and I had not forgotten to provide myself with the three articles indispensable to the outfit of every traveling Briton – a guide book, a prayer book, and a bath sponge.

At the risk of incurring the suspicions of the police agent stationed in the hotel, I mingled some hot water in the bath which I took on the first morning after my arrival. Then, having made my toilet and eaten the heavy breakfast provided for English visitors, I set out, suffering sadly from indigestion, to present my letter of introduction to the Princess.

As this woman, the most brilliant recruit ever received into the Russian secret service, and a foe of whom I am not ashamed to confess that I felt some fear, has never been heard of by the public of Great Britain, I shall say a word concerning her.

The Princess, whose Christian name was Sophia, was the daughter of a boyar of Little Russia. Her extraordinary beauty, while she was still a very young girl, attracted the attention of the governor of the province, Prince Y – , who was one of the wealthiest nobles in the Empire, and a widower. He made proposals for her hand which were accepted by her father, without the girl herself being asked to express an opinion in the matter, and at the age when an English girl would be leaving home for a convent or “high-school,” Sophia became the Governor’s wife.

Almost immediately the Prince resigned his government and went to live in his splendid palace on the Nevsky Prospect, in Petersburg. Before very long, society in the Russian capital was startled to hear of the sudden deaths in rapid succession of both the Prince’s children by his former wife, a son and a daughter. Then, after a brief interval, followed the tragic death of the Prince himself, who was found in bed one morning by his valet, with his throat cut.

The almost satanic beauty and fascination of the youthful Princess had made her from the very first one of the most conspicuous personages at the Imperial Court. These three deaths, following on the heels of one another, roused the most dreadful suspicions, and the Czar Alexander III. personally charged his minister of justice to see that the law was carried out.

Accordingly the police took possession of the palace while the corpse of its late owner still lay where it had been found. The most searching investigations were made, the servants were questioned and threatened, and it was rumored that the widow herself was for a short time under arrest.

Suddenly a great change took place. The police withdrew, professing themselves satisfied that no crime had been committed. The deaths of the son and daughter were put down to natural causes, and that of the Prince was pronounced a suicide, due to grief at the loss of his children. Some of the servants disappeared – it was said into Siberia – and in due course the Princess resumed her place in society and at Court, as though nothing were amiss.

Nevertheless, from that hour, as I have every reason to know, her life was really that of a slave to the head of the secret police. She appeared to go about unfettered, and to revel in the enjoyment of every luxury; but her time, her actions, and the vast wealth bequeathed to her by her husband, were all at the disposal of her tyrant.

Time after time, in half the capitals of Europe, but more especially, of course, in that of Russia, I had come on traces of this terrible woman, not less terrible if it were true that she was herself the most miserable victim of the system of which she formed part.

But singularly enough, though I had heard so much of the Princess I had never actually found myself pitted against her. And, more singularly still, I had never met her.

From this it will be gathered that I experienced a sensation of more than ordinary curiosity and even apprehension as I presented myself at the house in the Nevsky Prospect, and asked to be admitted to the presence of its mistress.

“Her highness is on duty at the Palace to-day,” I was told by the chamberlain who received me in the inner hall. “Her carriage is just ordered to take her there. However, I will take up your letter, and inquire when her highness can see you.”

I sat down in the hall, outwardly a calm, stolid Briton, but inwardly a wrestler, wound up to the highest pitch of excitement and impatient for the sight of his antagonist.

To pass the time suitably, I took my guide-book out of my pocket and began to read. The book opened at Herr Baedaker’s description of the gloomy fortress of the Schlüsselburg, the dreaded prison of the foes of the Czar.

The description did not tend to soothe my nerves, conscious as I was that the woman I was about to meet could consign me to the most noisome dungeon in the fortress by merely lifting her little finger.

I was just closing the book with an involuntary shudder when I heard a light, almost girlish, laugh from above. I looked hastily, and saw the woman I had come to measure myself against standing poised like a bird on the top of the grand staircase.

As I rose hurriedly to my feet, taking in every detail of her superb yet delicate figure, her complexion like a blush-rose, her lustrous eyes – they were dark violet on a closer view – and the cloud of rippling gold that framed her brow, I was moved, yes, positively carried away for a moment, by a sentiment such as few women have been able to inspire in me.

Perceiving, no doubt, that she had produced the desired impression, the Princess ran lightly down the stairs and came toward me holding out two tiny hands, the fingers of which were literally gloved in diamonds.

“My friend! My noble Englishman!” she exclaimed in the purest French. “And since when have you known that dear Monsieur Place?”

I checked myself on the point of replying, pretended to falter, and then muttered in the worst French I could devise on the spur of the moment:

“Parlez-vous Anglais, s’il vous plaît, Madame?”

The Princess shook her head reproachfully.

“You speak French too well not to understand it, I suspect,” she retorted in the same language. Then dropping it for English, marred only by a slight Slavonic accent, she repeated:

“But tell me, – dear Mr. Place, he is a great friend of yours, I suppose?”

“I can hardly claim the honor of his personal friendship,” I replied, rather lamely. “But I have always known and admired him as a public man.”

“Ah! He is so good, is he not? So generous, so confiding, so great a friend of our dear Russia. You know Mr. – ?”

The name she uttered was that of the politician referred to above. She slipped it out swiftly, with the action of a cat pouncing.

I shook my head with an air of distress.

“I am afraid I am not important enough to know such a great man as that,” I said with affected humility.

The Princess hastened to relieve my embarrassment.

“What is that to us!” she exclaimed. “You are an Englishman, you are benevolent, upright, truthful, and you esteem our country. Such men are always welcome in Russia. The Czaritza is waiting for me; but you will come back and dine with me, if not to-night, then to-morrow, or the next day. I will send an invitation to your hotel. My friends shall call on you. You are staying at the – ?”

I mentioned the name of the hotel, murmuring my thanks.

“That is nothing,” the beautiful woman went on in the same eager strain. “I shall have good news for you when we meet again, believe me. Yes – ” she lowered her voice almost to a whisper – “our dear Czar is going to take the negotiations into his own hands. So it is said. His majesty is determined to preserve peace. The odious intrigues of the War group will be defeated, I can assure you. You will not be disappointed, my dear Mr. – ” she snatched the editor’s letter from her muff and glanced at it – “Mr. Sterling, if I tell you that you are going to have your journey for nothing. You will have a good time in Petersburg, all the same. But believe me when I tell you so, your journey will fortunately be for nothing!”

And with the repetition of these words, and another bright bow and look which dazzled my senses, the wonderful creature swept past me to where the chamberlain stood ready to hand her into her carriage.

For nothing?

CHAPTER III

THE HEAD OF THE MANCHURIAN SYNDICATE

No reader can have failed to notice one remarkable point in the interview between the Princess Y – and myself. I refer of course to her invitation to me to dine with her in the course of a day or two.

Unless the etiquette of the Russian Court differed greatly from that of most others in Europe, it would be most indecorous for a lady-in-waiting, during her turn of service, to give entertainments at her private house.

I felt certain that this invitation concealed some trap, but I puzzled myself uselessly in trying to guess what it could be.

In the meantime I did not neglect certain other friends of mine in the city on the Neva, from whom I had some hope of receiving assistance.

Although I have never gone so far as to enroll myself as an active Nihilist, I am what is known as an Auxiliary. In other words, without being under the orders of the great secret committee which wages underground war with the Russian Government, I have sometimes rendered it voluntary services, and I have at all times the privilege of communicating with it, and exchanging information.

While waiting for the next move on the part of the Princess, therefore, I decided to get in touch with the revolutionists.

I made my way on foot to a certain tavern situated near the port, and chiefly patronized by German and Scandinavian sailors.

The host of the Angel Gabriel, as the house was called, was a Nihilist of old standing, and one of their most useful agents for introducing forbidden literature into the empire.

Printed mostly in London, in a suburb called Walworth, the revolutionary tracts are shipped to Bergen or Lubeck, and brought thence by these sailors concealed in their bedding. At night, after the customs officers have departed, a boat with a false keel puts off from a quay higher up the Neva, and passes down the river to where the newly arrived ship is lying; the packages are dropped overboard as it drifts past the side and hidden under the bottom boards; and then the boat returns up the river, where its cargo is transferred to the cellars of the tavern.

The host, a namesake of the Viceroy of Manchuria, was serving in the bar when I came in. I called for a glass of vodka, and in doing so made the sign announcing myself as an Auxiliary.

Alexieff said nothing in reply, but the sailors lounging in the bar began to finish off their drinks and saunter out one by one, till in a short time the place was empty.

“Well?” said the tavern-keeper, as soon as we were alone.

It was not my first visit to the Angel Gabriel, and I lost no time in convincing Alexieff of my identity. As soon as he recognized me, I said: —

“You know the Princess Y – ?”

The expression of rage and fear which convulsed his features was a sufficient answer.

“You know, moreover, that she is at present working her hardest to bring about a war between Russia and Japan, with the hope of ultimately involving Great Britain?”

He nodded sullenly.

“How does that affect your friends?” I asked cautiously. Something in the man’s face warned me not to show my own hand just then.

“We hate her, of course,” he said grudgingly, “but just now we have received orders that she is not to be interfered with.”

I drew a deep breath.

“Then you regard this war – ?”

"We regard it as the beginning of the revolution," he answered. "We know that the Empire is utterly unprepared. The Viceroy Alexieff is a vain boaster. Port Arthur is not provisioned. The Navy is rotten. The Army cannot be recruited except by force. The taxes are already excessive and cannot be increased. In short, we look forward to see the autocracy humiliated. The moment its prestige is gone, and the moujik feels the pinch of famine, our chance will come."

I saw that I had come to the wrong quarter for assistance.

"Then you will do nothing against this woman at present?" I remarked, anxious to leave the impression that she was the only object of my concern.

"No. At least not until war is definitely declared. After that I cannot say."

"And you think the war sure to come?"

"We are certain of it. One of our most trusted members is on the board of the Manchurian Syndicate."

"The Syndicate which has obtained the concessions in Korea?"

"Against which Japan has protested, yes."

I felt the full force of this announcement, having watched the proceedings of the Syndicate for some months for reasons of my own.

Every student of modern history has remarked the fact that all recent wars have been promoted by great combinations of capitalists. The causes which formerly led to war between nation and nation have ceased to operate. Causes, or at least pretexts, for war continue to occur, but whether they are followed up depends mainly on commercial considerations. A distant Government is oppressing its subjects, it may be in Turkey, it may be in Cuba, it may be in Africa. No matter, some great Power suddenly discovers it is interested; the drums are beaten, the flag is unfurled, and armies are launched on their path. The next year, perhaps, the same Power sees its own subjects massacred wantonly off its own coasts by a foreign fleet. Nothing happens; a few speeches are made, and the whole incident is referred to arbitration, and forgotten.

It is the consideration of money which decides between peace and war.

Perceiving it was useless to ask any assistance of the Nihilists in my forlorn enterprise, I returned sadly to my hotel.

Hardly had I finished the immense lunch on which I was compelled to gorge myself, when a waiter brought me a card, the name on which gave me an electric shock.

"*M. Petrovitch.*"

Every one has heard of this man, the promoter of the Manchurian Syndicate, and, if report spoke truly, the possessor of an influence over the young Czar which could be attributed only to some occult art.

I could not doubt that this powerful personage had been instigated to call on me by the Princess Y – .

What then? Was it likely that she would have sent the most influential man in the imperial circle to wait upon a traveling fanatic, a visionary humanitarian from Exeter Hall?

Impossible! Somehow something must have leaked out to rouse the suspicions of this astute plotter, and make her guess that I was not what I seemed.

It was with the sensations of a man struggling in the meshes of an invisible net that I saw M. Petrovitch enter the room.

The celebrated wire-puller, whose name was familiar to every statesman and stock-broker in Europe, had an appearance very unlike his reputation.

He was the court dandy personified. Every detail of his dress was elaborated to the point of effeminacy. His hands were like a girl's, his long hair was curled and scented, he walked with a limp and spoke with a lisp, removing a gold-tipped cigarette from his well-displayed teeth.

As the smoke of the cigarette drifted toward me, I was conscious of an acute, but imperfect, twinge of memory. The sense of smell, though the most neglected, is the most reliable sense with which we are furnished. I could not be mistaken in thinking I had smelt tobacco like that before.

"I have come to see you without losing a moment, Mr. Sterling," he said in very good English. "My good friend Madame Y – sent me a note from the Palace to beg me to show you every attention. It is too bad that an ambassador of peace – a friend of that great and good man, Place, should be staying in a hotel, while hundreds of Russians would be delighted to welcome him as their guest. My house is a poor one, it is true, and I am hardly of high enough rank, still – "

The intriguer was asking me to transfer myself to his roof, to become his prisoner, in effect.

"I cannot thank you enough," I responded, "but I am not going to stay. The Princess has convinced me that the war-cloud will blow over, and I think of going on to Constantinople to intercede with the Sultan on behalf of the Armenians."

"A noble idea," M. Petrovitch responded warmly. "What would the world do without such men as you? But at all events you will dine with me before you go?"

It was the second invitation to dinner I had received that day. But, after all, I could hardly suspect a trap in everything.

"Do you share the hopes of the Princess?" I asked M. Petrovitch, after thanking him for his hospitality.

The syndicate-monger nodded.

"I have been working night and day for peace," he declared impudently, "and I think I may claim that I have done some good. The Japanese are seeking for an excuse to attack us, but they will not get it."

"The Manchurian Syndicate?" I ventured to hint, rising to go to the bell.

"The Syndicate is wholly in favor of peace," he assured me, watching my movement with evident curiosity. "We require it, in fact, to develop our mines, our timber concessions, our – "

A waiter entered in response to my ring.

"Bring me some cigarettes – your best," I ordered him.

As the man retreated it was borne in on my guest that he had been guilty of smoking in my room without offering me his case.

"A thousand pardons!" he exclaimed. "Won't you try one of mine?"

I took a cigarette from the case he held out, turned it between my fingers, and lit it from the end farthest from the maker's imprint.

"If I am satisfied that all danger is removed I should be inclined to apply for some shares in your undertaking," I said, giving the promoter a meaning look.

From the expression in his eyes it was evident that this precious scoundrel was ready to sell Czar, Russia and fellow-promoters all together.

While he was struggling between his natural greed and his suspicion the waiter reentered with some boxes of cigarettes.

I smelt the tobacco of each and made my choice, at the same time pitching the half-smoked cigarette given to me by M. Petrovitch into the fireplace, among the ashes.

"Your tobacco is a little too strong for me," I remarked by way of excuse.

But the Russian was wrapped up in the thought of the bribe at which I had just hinted.

"I shall bear in mind what you say," he declared, as he rose.

"Depend upon it, if it is possible for me to meet your wishes, I shall be happy to do so."

I saw him go off, like a fish with the bait in its mouth. Directly the door closed behind him I sprang to the fireplace, rescued the still burning cigarette and quenched it, and then, carefully brushing away the dust, read the maker's brand once more.

An hour later simultaneous messages were speeding over the wires to my correspondents in London, Amsterdam and Hamburg:

Ascertain what becomes of all cigarettes made by Gregorides; brand, Crown Aa.

CHAPTER IV

THE CZAR'S AUTOGRAPH

The next morning at breakfast I found the two invitations already promised. That of the head of the Manchurian Syndicate was for the same night.

Resolved not to remain in the dark any longer as to the reason for this apparent breach of etiquette, I decided to do what the Marquis of Bedale had suggested, namely, approach the Dowager Empress in person.

Well accustomed to the obstacles which beset access to royalty, I drove to the Palace in a richly appointed carriage from the best livery stable in Petersburg, and sent in my card to the chamberlain by an equerry.

"I have a message to the Czaritza which I am instructed to give to her majesty in person," I told him. "Be good enough to let her know that the messenger from the Queen of England has arrived."

He went out of the room, and at the end of ten minutes the door opened again and admitted – the Princess Y – !

Overpowered by this unlucky accident, as I at first supposed it to be, I rose to my feet, muttering some vague phrase of courtesy.

But the Princess soon showed me that the meeting did not take her by surprise.

"So you have a message for my dear mistress?" she cried in an accent of gay reproach. "And you never breathed a word of it to me. Mr. Sterling, I shall begin to think you are a conspirator. *How* long did you say you had known that good Mr. Place? But I am talking while her majesty is waiting. Have you any password by which the Czaritza will know whom you come from?"

"I can tell that only to her majesty, I am afraid," I answered guardedly.

"I am in her majesty's confidence."

And bringing her exquisite face so near to mine that I was oppressed by the scent of the tuberoses in her bosom, she whispered three syllables in my ear.

Dismayed by this proof of the fatal progress the dangerous police agent had already made, I could only admit by a silent bow that the password was correct.

"Then come with me, Mr. Sterling," the Princess said with what sounded like a malicious accent on the name.

The reception which I met from the Dowager Empress was gracious in the extreme. I need not recount all that passed. Her imperial majesty repeated with evident sincerity the assurances which had already been given me in a different spirit by the two arch-intriguers.

"There will be no war. The Czar has personally intervened. He has taken the negotiations out of the hands of Count Lamsdorff, and written an autograph letter to the Mikado which will put an end to the crisis."

I listened with a distrust which I could not wholly conceal.

"I trust his majesty has not intervened too late," I said respectfully, my mind bent on framing some excuse to get rid of the listener. "According to the newspapers the patience of the Japanese is nearly exhausted."

"No more time will be lost," the Czaritza responded. "The messenger leaves Petersburg to-night with the Czar's letter."

I stole a cautious glance in the direction of the Princess Y – . She was breathing deeply, her eyes fixed on the Czaritza's lips, and her hands tightly clenched.

I put on an air of great relief.

"In that case, your majesty, I have no more to do in Petersburg. I will wire the good news to Lord Bedale, and return to England to-morrow or the next day. I beg your pardon, Princess!" I pretended to exclaim by a sudden afterthought, "*after* the next day." And turning once more to the mother of the Czar, I explained:

"The Princess has honored me with an invitation to dinner."

The Dowager Empress glanced at her attendant in evident surprise.

"I must implore your pardon, Madam," the Princess stammered, in real confusion. "I am aware I ought to have solicited your leave in the first place, but knowing that this gentleman came from –"

She broke off, fairly unable to meet the questioning gaze of her imperial mistress.

I pretended to come to her relief.

"I have a private message," I said to the Empress.

"You may leave us, Princess," the Empress said coldly.

As soon as the door had closed on her, I gave a warning look at the Czaritza.

"That woman, Madam, is the most dangerous agent in the secret service of your Empire."

I trusted to the little scene I had just contrived to prepare the mind of the Czaritza for this intimation. But she received it as a matter of course.

"Sophia Y – has been all that you say, Monsieur V – . I am well acquainted with her history. The poor thing has been a victim of the most fiendish cruelty on the part of the Minister of Police, for years. At last, unable to bear her position any longer, she appealed to me. She told me her harrowing story, and implored me to receive her, and secure her admission to a convent. I investigated the case thoroughly."

"Your majesty will pardon me, I am sure, if I say that as a man with some experience of intrigue, I thoroughly distrust that woman's sincerity. She is intimate with M. Petrovitch, to my knowledge."

"But M. Petrovitch is also on the side of peace, so I am assured."

I began to despair.

"You will believe me, or disbelieve me as your majesty pleases. But I am accustomed to work for those who honor me with their entire confidence. If the Princess Y – is to be taken into the secret of my work on your majesty's behalf, I must respectfully ask to be released."

As I offered her majesty this alternative in a firm voice, I was inwardly trembling. On the reply hung, perhaps, the fate of two continents.

But the Dowager Empress did not hesitate.

"What you stipulate for shall be done, Monsieur V – . I am too well aware of the value of your services, and the claims you have on the confidence of your employers, to dispute your conditions."

"The messenger who is starting to-night – does the Princess know who he is?"

"I believe so. It is no secret. The messenger is Colonel Menken."

"In that case he will never reach Tokio."

Her majesty could not suppress a look of horror.

"What do you advise?" she demanded tremulously.

"His majesty the Czar must at once write a duplicate of the despatch, unknown to any living soul but your majesty, and that despatch must be placed by you in my hands."

The Dowager Empress gazed at me for a moment in consternation.

But the soundness of the plan I had proposed quickly made itself manifest to her.

"You are right, Monsieur V – ,” her majesty said approvingly. "I will communicate with the Czar without delay. By what time do you want the despatch?"

"In time to catch the Siberian express to-night, if your majesty pleases. I purpose to travel by the same train as Colonel Menken – it is possible I may be able to avert a tragedy."

“And since your majesty has told me that the Princess Y – is aware of the Colonel’s errand, let me venture to urge you most strongly not to let her out of your sight on any pretense until he is safely on his way.”

I need not go into the details of the further arrangements made with a view to my receiving the duplicate despatch in secrecy.

I came away from the Palace fully realizing the serious nature of my undertaking. I understood now all that had worried me in the proceedings of the Princess. It was clear to me that Lord Bedale, or the personage on whose behalf he instructed me, had wired to the Dowager Empress, notifying her majesty of my coming, and that she had shown the message to her lady-in-waiting.

Blaming myself bitterly for not having impressed the necessity for caution on the Marquis, I at once set about providing myself with a more effectual disguise.

It is a proverb on the lips of every moujik in Petersburg that all Russia obeys the Czar, and the Czar obeys the Tchín. Ever since the bureaucracy deliberately allowed Alexander II. to be assassinated by the Nihilists out of anger at his reforming tendencies, the Russian monarchs have felt more real dread of their own police than of the revolutionists. The *Tchin*, the universally-pervading body of officials, who run the autocracy to fill their pockets, and indulge their vile propensities at the expense of the governed, is as omnipotent as it is corrupt. Everywhere in that vast Empire the word of the Tchínovink is law – and there is no other law except his word.

Taking the bull by the horns, I went straight to the Central Police Bureau of the capital, and asked to see a certain superintendent named Rostoy.

To this man, with whom I had had some dealings on a previous occasion, and whose character was well understood by me, I explained that I had accepted a mission from a friendly Power to travel along the Siberian Railway and report on its capacity to keep the Army of Manchuria supplied with food and ammunition in the event of war.

He expressed no surprise when I told him it was essential that I should leave Petersburg that night, and accordingly it did not take us long to come to terms.

The service which I required of him was, of course, a fresh passport, with a complete disguise which would enable me to pass anywhere along the railway or in Manchuria without being detected or interfered with by the agents of the Government.

After some discussion we decided that the safest plan would be for me to travel in the character of a Russian police officer charged with the detection of the train thieves and card-sharpers who abound on every great route of travel. I could think of no part which would serve better to enable me to watch over the safety of the Czar’s envoy without exciting suspicion.

I placed in Rostoy’s hands the first instalment of a heavy bribe, and arranged to return an hour before the departure of the Moscow express to carry out my transformation.

It was only as I left his office that I remembered my unlucky engagement to dine that very night with the head of the Manchurian Syndicate.

I perceived that these hospitalities were well devised checks on my movements, and it was with something of a shock that I realized that when I went to dinner that evening with the most active promoter of the war I should be carrying the Czar’s peace despatch in my pocket!

If the enemies of peace had foreseen every step that I was to take in the discharge of my mission, their measures could not have been more skilfully arranged.

And as this reflection occurred to me I turned my head nervously, and remarked a man dressed like a hotel porter lounging carelessly in my track.

CHAPTER V

A DINNER WITH THE ENEMY

Readers of that prince of romancers, Poe, will recollect a celebrated story in which he describes the device employed by a man of uncommon shrewdness to conceal a stolen letter from the perquisitions of the police, and the elaborate argument by which the writer proves that the highest art of concealment is to thrust the object to be hidden under the very nose of the searcher.

But that argument is one of the many mystifications in which the weird genius of Poe delighted. It is easy to see, in short, that the theory was invented to suit the story, and not the story to suit the theory. I now had before me the practical problem of concealing a document of surpassing importance, from enemies who were already on my scent, and keeping it concealed during a journey of some thousands of miles.

The ordinary hiding-places of valuable papers, such as the lining of clothes, or a false bottom to a trunk, I dismissed without serious consideration. My luggage would probably be stolen, and I might be drugged long before I reached Dalny.

The problem was all the more difficult for me because I have generally made it a rule to avoid charging myself with written instructions. I am sufficiently well known by reputation to most European sovereigns to be able to dispense with ordinary credentials. But in approaching the Mikado of Japan, a ruler to whom I was personally unknown, it was clearly necessary for me to have something in writing from the Russian Emperor.

All at once an idea flashed on my mind, so simple, and yet so incapable of detection (as it seemed to me), that I almost smiled in the face of the man who was dogging my steps along the street, no doubt under instructions from the War Syndicate.

That afternoon I was closeted with the Emperor of All the Russias in his private cabinet for nearly an hour.

It is not my habit to repeat details of private conversations, when they are not required to illustrate the progress of public events, and therefore I will say merely that the Czar was evidently in earnest in his desire to avoid war, but greatly hampered and bewildered by the difficult representations made to him by, or on behalf of, those to whose interests war was essential.

It was melancholy to see the destinies of half Europe and Asia, and the lives of scores of thousands of brave men, hanging on the will of an irresolute young man, depressed by the consciousness of his own infirmity, and desperately seeking for some stronger mind on which to lean. Had I not been placed by my Polish sentiment in a position of antagonism to the Czardom, perhaps – but it is useless to indulge in these reflections.

One thing in the course of the interview struck me as having great significance for the future. I found that his majesty, who had entertained at one time a strong dislike of the German Emperor, a dislike not untinged with jealousy, had now completely altered his opinion. He spoke to me of Wilhelm II. in terms of highest praise, declared that he was under the greatest obligations to him for useful warnings and advice, said that he believed he had no truer or more zealous friend.

When I drove to the house of M. Petrovitch that evening I carried, carefully sewn between the inner and outer folds of my well-starched shirt-front, where no sound of crackling would excite remark, a sheet of thin note-paper covered in a very small handwriting with the text of the Czar's letter to the ruler of Japan.

M. Petrovitch was not alone. Around his hospitable board he had gathered some of the highest and proudest personages of the Russian Court, including the Grand Duke Staniolanus, generally believed to be the heart and soul of the War Party. His imperial highness was well-known to be

a desperate gambler, up to the neck in debts contracted at the card-table, and bent on recouping himself out of the wealth of Korea and Manchuria.

I was duly presented to this royal personage (whom I had met once before under widely different circumstances) in the character of a Peace Crusader, an emissary of the philanthropists of Great Britain.

At the dinner-table, where I found myself placed on my host's left hand, while the Grand Duke was on his right, the conversation continued to be in the same strain. That Petrovitch believed me to be an English peace fanatic I did not believe any longer, but I could not tell if any, or how many, of the others were in his confidence.

As soon as the solid part of the feast was disposed of, Petrovitch rose to his feet, and after a bow to the Grand Duke, launched out into a formal speech proposing my health.

He commenced with the usual professions in favor of peace, spoke of the desire felt by all Russians to preserve the friendship of England, eulogized the work done by my friend the editor, and by other less disinterested friends of Russia in London, and wound up by asking all the company to give me a cordial welcome, and to send a message of congratulation and good-will to the British public.

Knowing as I did, that the man was a consummate rogue, who had probably invited me to his house in order to keep me under observation, and possibly to prevent my getting scent of the intrigues pursued by his friend and ally, Princess Y – , I was still at a loss to understand the reason for this performance.

I have learned since that an account of the proceedings, with abstracts from this hypocritical speech, was telegraphed to England, and actually found its way into some of the newspapers under the heading, "Peace Demonstration in St. Petersburg: No Russian Wants War."

There was one of the guests, however, who made no pretense of listening with pleasure to the smooth speech of M. Petrovitch. This was a dark young man of about thirty, in a naval uniform. He sat scowling while his host spoke, and barely lifted his glass from the table at the conclusion.

A minute or two later I took an opportunity to ask the promoter the name of this ungracious officer.

"That?" my host exclaimed, looking 'round the table, "Oh, that is Captain Vassileffsky, one of our most distinguished sailors. He is a naval aide-de-camp to the Czar."

I made a note of his name and face, being warned by a presentiment which I could not resist that I should come across him again.

The champagne now began to flow freely, and as it flowed the tongues of many of the company were unloosed by degrees. From the subject of peace the conversation passed rapidly to the possibilities of war, and the Japanese were spoken of in a way that plainly showed me how little those present understood the resolution and resources of the Island Empire.

"The Japanese dare not fire the first shot and, since we will not, there will be no war," declared my left-hand neighbor.

"The war will be fought in Japan, not in Manchuria," affirmed the Grand Duke with a condescending air. "It will be a case of the Boers over again. They may give us some trouble, but we shall annex their country."

M. Petrovitch gave me a glance of alarm.

"Russia does not wish to add to her territory," he put in; "but we may find it necessary to leave a few troops in Tokio to maintain order, while we pursue our civilizing mission."

I need not recount the other remarks, equally arrogant.

Abstemious by habit, I had a particular reason for refraining from taking much wine on this night. It was already past nine o'clock, the train for Moscow, which connected there with the Siberian express, started at midnight, and I had to be at the police bureau by eleven at the latest to make the changes necessary for my disguise.

I therefore allowed my glass to remain full, merely touching it with my lips occasionally when my host pressed me to drink. M. Petrovitch did not openly notice my abstinence, but presently I heard him give an order to the butler who waited behind his chair.

The butler turned to the sideboard for a moment, and then came forward bearing a silver tray on which stood a flagon of cut-glass and silver with a number of exquisite little silver cups like egg-shells.

“You will not refuse to taste our Russian national beverage, Mr. Sterling,” the head of the War Syndicate said persuasively, as the butler began filling the tiny cups.

It was a challenge which I could not refuse without rudeness, though it struck me as rather out of place that the vodka should be offered to me before to the imperial guest on my host’s right.

The butler filled two cups, M. Petrovitch taking the second from the tray as I lifted the first to my lips.

“You know our custom,” the financier exclaimed smilingly. “No heeltaps!”

He lifted his own cup with a brave air, and I tossed off the contents of my own without stopping.

As the fiery liquor ran down my throat I was conscious of something in its taste which was unlike the flavor of any vodka I had ever drunk before. But this circumstance aroused no suspicion in my mind. I confess that it never occurred to me that any one could be daring enough to employ so crude and dangerous a device as a drugged draft at a quasi-public banquet, given to an English peace emissary, with a member of the imperial family sitting at the board.

I was undeceived the next moment. Petrovitch, as soon as he saw that my cup had been emptied, sat down his own untasted, and, with a well-acted movement of surprise and regret, turned to the Grand Duke.

“I implore your pardon, sir. I did not ask if you would not honor me by taking the first cup!”

The Grand Duke, whom I readily acquitted of any share in the other’s design, shrugged his shoulders with an indifferent air.

“If you wish your friends to drink vodka, you should not put champagne like this before us,” he said laughing.

Petrovitch said something in reply; he turned and scolded the butler as well, I fancy. But my brain was becoming confused. I had just sufficient command of my faculties left to feign ignorance of the true situation.

“I am feeling a little faint. That *pâté*” – I contrived to murmur.

And then I heard Captain Vassileffsky cry out in an alarm that was unmistakably genuine – “Look out for the Englishman! He is swooning” – and I knew no more.

CHAPTER VI

DRUGGED AND KIDNAPPED

My first thought, as my senses began to come back to me, was of the train which was due to leave Petersburg for Moscow at midnight.

I clutched at my watch, and drew it forth. The hands marked the time as 9.25. Apparently I had not been unconscious for more than a few seconds.

My second glance assured me that my clothes were not disarranged. My shirt-front, concealing the Czar's autograph letter, was exactly as when I sat down to the table.

Only after satisfying myself on these two points did I begin to take in the rest of my surroundings.

I was resting on a couch against the wall in the room where we had dined. My host, the head of the Manchuria Syndicate, was standing beside me, watching my recovery with a friendly and relieved expression, as though honestly glad to see me myself again. A servant, holding in his hand a bottle which appeared to contain sal volatile, was looking on from the foot of the bed, in an attitude of sympathetic attention. The other guests had left the room, and the state of the table, covered with half-filled glasses and hastily thrown down napkins, made it evident that they had cleared out of the way to give me a chance to come to.

The cold air blowing over my forehead told me that a window had been opened. A Russian January is not favorable to much ventilation. As a rule the houses of the well-to-do are provided with double windows, which are kept hermetically sealed while the rooms are in use. The fact that the dining-room was still warm was sufficient proof that the window could not have been opened for more than the briefest time.

It was a singular thing that, in spite of these assurances that my swoon had been an affair of moments only, I was seized by an overmastering desire to get away from the house immediately.

I heard M. Petrovitch exclaim —

"Thank Heaven — you are better! I began to be afraid that your seizure was going to last. I must go and reassure my guests. The Grand Duke will be delighted to hear you are recovering. He was most distressed at the attack."

I sat upright with an effort, and staggered to my feet.

"I am ashamed to have given you so much trouble," I said. "I can't remember ever fainting like this before. Please make my excuses to his imperial highness and the rest of the company."

"But what are you doing?" cried M. Petrovitch in dismay. "You must not attempt to move yet."

"I shall be better in bed," I answered in a voice which I purposely strove to render as faint as possible. "If you will excuse me, I will go straight to my hotel."

The promoter's brow wrinkled. I saw that he was trying to devise some pretext to detain me, and my anxiety to find myself clear of his house redoubled.

"If you will do me a favor, I should be glad if you would let one of your servants come with me as far as the hotel," I said. "I am feeling rather giddy and weak."

The secret chief of the War Party caught eagerly at the suggestion. It was no doubt exactly what he desired.

"Mishka," he said, turning to the servant, and speaking in Russian, "this gentleman asks you to accompany him to his hotel, as he has not yet recovered. Take great care of him, and do not leave him until he is safe in his own bed."

The man nodded, giving his master a look which said — I understand what you want me to do.

Thanks to this request on my part, M. Petrovitch raised no further objection to my departure. I stumbled out of the room, pretending to cling to the servant's arm for support, and let him help me on with my furs, while the porter was summoning a sleigh.

There was a hurried consultation in low tones between my host and the porter. Rather to my surprise the carriage, when it appeared, was a closed one, being a species of brougham on runners instead of wheels. I allowed myself to be carried down the steps like a child, and placed inside; the door was closed, with the windows carefully drawn up, and the jailer – for such he was to all intents and purposes – got on the box.

The sleigh swept out of the courtyard and across the city. Directly it was in the street, I very softly lowered one of the windows and peered out. The streets seemed to me more deserted than usual at such an hour. I was idly wondering whether the imminence of war could account for this when I heard a church clock beginning to strike.

Once – twice – the chimes rang out. And then, as I was preparing to close the window, they went on a third time – a fourth!

I held my breath, and listened with straining ears, as the great notes boomed forth from the distant town across the silent streets and houses.

One – two – three – four – five – six – seven – eight – nine – ten – ELEVEN!

I understood at last. That drugged sleep had lasted an hour and a half, and before I came to myself my watch had been deliberately set back to the minute at which I lost consciousness, in order to prevent me from suspecting that I had been searched, or that there was anything wrong about the affair.

Had I taken time for reflection I should probably have made up my mind to lose the Moscow express. In order to lull the suspicions of the conspirators, by making them believe I was their dupe, I should have let myself be taken to the hotel and put to bed in accordance with the kind instructions of my late host. In that case, no doubt, my watch would have been secretly put right again while I was asleep.

But I could not bear the idea of all my carefully planned arrangements being upset. Above all things, I desired to keep up my prestige with the superintendent of police, Rostoy, who regarded me as an invincible being possessed of almost magical powers. At the moment when the clock was striking I ought to have been walking into his room in the bureau of the Third Section.

Grinding my teeth with vexation, I very gently opened the door of the carriage, which was traveling noiselessly over the snow, and slipped out.

I had taken care to ascertain that no onlooker was near. As soon as the sleigh was 'round the corner of the street I hailed a public conveyance and directed the driver to take me to the police office.

I was only five minutes late in keeping my appointment. Detecting a look of slight surprise on the face of the superintendent, I apologized for keeping him waiting.

"It is my habit to be punctual, even in trifling matters like this," I remarked carelessly. "But the fact is I have been drugged and kidnapped since I saw you, and it took me five minutes to dispose of the rascals."

Rostoy stared at me with stupid incredulity.

"You are joking, Monsieur V – , I suppose," he muttered. "But, however, since you have arrived, there is your disguise. You will find everything in the pockets complete, including a handkerchief marked with the initials of the name you have chosen."

"Monsieur Rostoy, you are an able man, with whom it is pleasure to do business," I responded heartily.

The Russian swelled with pride at this compliment. I hastily changed clothes, shifting nothing from my discarded costume except a cigarette case which I had filled with the hotel cigarettes. My inquiry as to the Gregorides brand smoked by M. Petrovitch had not yet been answered.

“Surely you are not going to wear that linen shirt of yours right across Siberia!” exclaimed Rostoy, who never took his eyes off me.

I shrugged my shoulders.

“It is a whim of mine always to wear linen,” I responded. “I am not a rheumatic subject. And, besides, I have no time to lose.”

The superintendent threw a regretful look at the flannel shirt he had provided for me.

As soon as I had finished my preparations I handed a thick bundle of ruble notes to the superintendent.

“As much more when I come back safe,” was all I said.

Rostoy snatched at his pay, his eyes sparkling with greed.

“Good-by and a good journey!” he cried as I strode out.

Once in the street, I had no difficulty in finding a sleigh, this time an open one, to convey me to the railway station. I glanced at my watch, which I had set by the church clock, and calculated that I should have a few minutes to spare.

But I had not allowed for Russian ideas as to time. As the sleigh drew up at the great terminus, and I came in view of the station clock, I saw that it was on the stroke of midnight.

Flinging the driver his fare I rushed toward the barrier.

“Moscow!” I shouted to the railway official in charge.

“The train has just left,” was the crushing reply.

CHAPTER VII

THE RACE FOR SIBERIA

The unnatural strain I had put on my strength, undermined as it had been by the drugged vodka, gave way under this depressing failure, and for an instant I seriously thought of abandoning my effort to catch the Czar's messenger.

I could leave Colonel Menken to pursue his journey, taking care of himself as best he could, while I followed by a later train. But I had little thought of that, as to adopt such a course would be to abandon the gallant officer to his fate. Whatever the War Syndicate might or might not know or suspect about myself, there could be no doubt that they knew all there was to know about Menken, and that the Colonel would never be allowed to reach Dalny with his despatch, alive.

"Show me the passenger list," I demanded sternly, determined to use to the full the advantages conferred on me by my uniform.

The station inspector hastened to obey. He took me into the booking office, opened a volume, and there I read the name and destination of every passenger who had left for Moscow that night. It is by such precautions that the Russian police are enabled to control the Russian nation as the warders control the convicts in an English prison.

At the very head of the list I read the name of Colonel Menken, passenger to Dalny, on his imperial majesty's service.

It was incredible folly thus publicly to proclaim himself as an object of suspicion to the powerful clique engaged in thwarting the policy of their nominal ruler.

I glanced my eye down the list in search of some name likely to be that of an emissary of the Syndicate. It was with something like a shock that I came upon the conspicuous entry —

"The Princess Y — , lady-in-waiting to H. I. M. the Dowager Empress, passenger to Port Arthur, on a visit to her uncle, commanding one of the forts."

Stamping my foot angrily, in order to impress the railway official, I said —

"Order a pilot engine immediately to take me to Moscow. Tell the driver he is to overtake the express, and enter the Moscow station behind it."

There was some demur, of course, and some delay. But I wore the livery of the dreaded Third Section, and my words were more powerful than if I had been the young man who wears the Russian crown.

By dint of curses, threats, blows and an occasional ruble note, I got my way. Indeed, I managed things so well that the railway officials did not even ask me for my name. I showed them my official badge; but when they made their report in the morning they would only be able to say that an inspector of the Secret Police had ordered a pilot engine to take him to Moscow in pursuit of the midnight express.

The impression which I was careful to convey, without putting it into words, was that I was on the track of an absconding Nihilist.

Within half an hour of my arrival at the terminus a light but powerful locomotive drew up on the main line of rails, with everything in readiness for an immediate start.

I leaped into the driver's cab, where I found the driver himself and two stokers hard at work increasing the head of steam, and gave the order to go.

The driver touched the tap, the whistle rang out once, and the wheels began to revolve. Ten seconds later we were beyond the station lights and facing the four hundred miles of frozen plain that lay between us and Moscow.

Every one has heard the story of this famous piece of road. The engineers of the line, accustomed to map out their routes in other countries with reference to the natural obstacles and

the convenience of commerce, waited upon the great autocrat, Nicholas I., a very different man from his descendant, and asked him for instructions as to laying out the first railway in the Russian Empire.

The Czar called for a map of his dominions, and then, taking a ruler in his hand, drew a straight line between the old and new capitals.

And so the line has been made, a symbol to all who travel on it of the irresponsible might of the Russian Czardom.

It was not till we were fairly on our way, and the speed had risen to something like fifty miles an hour, that I realized what I had done in entering on this furious race.

I had never traveled on a detached engine before, and the sensation at first was quite unnerving.

Unlike a motor car, in which the hand of the driver has to be perpetually on the steering-gear, and his eye perpetually on the alert, the pilot engine seemed to be flung forward like a missile, guided by its own velocity, and clinging to the endless rails with its wheels as with iron claws. With the rush as of wind, with the roar as of a cataract, with the rocking as of an earthquake, the throbbing thing of iron sprang and fled through the night.

Hour after hour we rushed across the blinding desert of snow, in which nothing showed except the flying disk of light cast by the engine lamps, and the red and white balls of fire that seemed to start, alight, and go out again as we frantically dashed past some wayside station.

As the speed increased the light pilot engine, not steadied by a long train of coaches, almost rose from the rails as it raced along. Over and over again I thanked my stars that there were no curves to be taken, and I blessed the memory of that famous ruler wielded by the hand of Nicholas I. Here and there, at some slight rise in the ground, the engine literally did leave the rails and skim through the air for a few yards, alighting with a jar that brought my teeth together like castanets, and rushing forward again.

I clung to a small brass hand-rail, and strained my eyes through the darkness. I could not have sat down, even had there been a seat provided for me – the pace was too tremendous. I was tired and unwell, and a slight feeling of headache and sickness began to gain on me, engendered by the vibration of the engine, the smell of oil, and the fearful heat of the furnace.

It was some hours since we had started, but it was still pitch dark, with the wintry blackness of a northern night. I leaned and gazed forward with dull eyes, when I was aware of two red sparks that did not grow and rush toward us as I expected.

Were we slackening speed by any chance? I turned to the engine driver, and pointed with my hand.

The grimy toiler nodded. Then making a trumpet of his hands he shouted above the rattle of the wheels —

“The rear-lights of the express!”

CHAPTER VIII

THE CZAR'S MESSENGER

I drew out my watch and glanced at it by the light of the flaring stoke-hole. It was just half-past eight.

The time taken up on the journey between Petersburg and Moscow varies greatly according to the state of the weather and the amount of snow on the line. But even in the summer the best trains are allowed twelve hours, while the slow ones take nearly twenty-four. The special Siberian express was timed to reach the ancient capital of the czars at ten o'clock in the morning, and we had overtaken it with rather more than an hour to spare.

I ordered the driver to creep up gradually, but not to approach too near the hindmost coach of the train in front until Moscow was in sight.

Obedient to my instructions, he slackened speed by degrees, till we were rolling along at the same rate as the express, with a space of three or four hundred yards between us.

Presently a red flag was thrust out from a side window at the rear of the last coach and waved furiously. The driver of my engine responded with first a green and then a white signal, indication that there was no danger though caution was desirable.

The express perceptibly quickened its speed, but of course without our allowing it to get farther ahead. At last the spires of the Kremlin, and the green copper domes gleamed out across the waste, and I nodded to the driver to close up.

He managed the maneuver with the skill of an artist. Inch by inch we neared the guard's van in front, and our buffers were actually touching as the engine in front blew off steam and we slowed alongside the Moscow station.

Before the wheels of the express had ceased to move I was out on the platform, and running up to the guard of the express.

"I have come on the pilot engine from Petersburg," I told him hurriedly. "Tell no one of my arrival. Do not report the chase. If you are questioned, say that you have orders to say nothing. And now tell me which is the train for Dalny and Port Arthur, and when does it leave?"

The guard, thoroughly cowed, promised implicit obedience. He showed me a long corridor train with handsome sleeping cars and dining saloons, which was drawn up ready at another platform.

"That is the train which goes to Baikal," he told me. "If the ice on the lake will bear, rails may be laid right across it; if not, there will be sleighs to transport the passengers to a train on the other side. The train leaves at noon."

I thanked him and strolled off down the platform, glancing into the carriages of the newly-arrived train as I passed in search of the Czar's messenger.

I did not anticipate that any harm could have happened to him so soon after leaving Petersburg. The object of the conspirators would be defeated if Nicholas II. learned of any accident to his messenger in time to send another despatch. It was more likely, at least so I argued, that the Princess Y – would accompany her victim across Siberia, gradually worming her way into his confidence, and that only at the last moment would she show her hand.

It was with a slight start that I encountered the face of the fair emissary of M. Petrovitch, as she came to the door of her sleeping compartment and looked out.

I was delighted to observe that this time she did not suspect me. In fact, she evidently mistook me for one of the ordinary station officials, for she gave me a haughty command:

"Go and see if there is a telegram for the Princess Y – ."

Making a respectful salute I hastened off in the direction of the telegraph office. On the way I interrupted a man in uniform carrying an envelope in his hand.

“For the Princess Y – ?” I demanded.

The man scowled at me and made as if to conceal the telegram. I saw that it was a case for a tip and handed him a ruble note, on which he promptly parted with his trust.

I turned around, and as soon as the messenger had moved off, I tore open the envelope and read the message. Fortunately, it was not in cipher, the rules against any such use of the wires, except by the Government, being too strict.

This is what I read:

“Our friend, who is now an inspector, will join you at Moscow. Look out for him. He has left his luggage with us, but does not know it.”

Accident, which had hitherto opposed my designs, was favoring them at last. It was clear that Rostoy had betrayed me, and that Petrovitch had sent this wire to the Princess to put her on her guard. But what was the “luggage” which I was described as having left in the hands of M. Petrovitch?

I thought I knew.

Crumpling up the tell-tale message in my pocket, I darted into the telegraph office, and beckoned to the clerk in charge.

“On his majesty’s secret service,” I breathed in his ear, drawing him on one side. I showed him my police badge, and added, “An envelope and telegram form, quick!”

Overwhelmed by my imperative manner, he handed me the required articles. I hastily scribbled:

“Our friend has parted with his luggage, though he does not know it. He has been unwell, but may follow you next week. To save trouble do not wire to us till you return.”

Slipping this into the envelope, I addressed it to the Princess, and hastened back to the carriage where I had left her.

I found her fuming with impatience and scolding her maid, who looked on half awake. I handed her the bogus telegram with a cringing gesture. She snatched at it, tore off the cover and read, while I watched her furtively from under my lowered eyelashes.

The first part of the message evidently gave her the greatest pleasure. The second part, it was equally evident, puzzled and annoyed her.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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