William Le Queux

Of Royal Blood

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Table of Contents

I. — UNDER ORDERS
II. — JUDITH
III. — THE SHADOW
IV. — THE FACE AND THE MASK
V. — THE STATEMENT OF ANN PRIMROSE
VI. — IN CYPHER
VII. — HER MAJESTY'S AMBASSADOR
VIII. — A MASTER STROKE
IX. — AT THE STATE BALL
X. — HER HIGHNESS'S CONFIDENCE
XI. — WILES AND WISDOM
XII. — A DESPATCH FROM DOWNING-STREET
XIII. — THE ROSE OF LOVE
XIV. — THE EVIL OF THE HAPSBOURGS
XV. — AN AFFINITY OF SOULS
XVI. — SECRET SERVICE
XVII. — THE KING'S MESSAGE
XVIII. — A VOICE IN THE NIGHT
XIX. — MELANIE'S FEAR
XX. — AT THE BRITISH LEGATION
XXI. — WHAT JUDITH KNEW
XXII. — THE PRINCESS ASKS A FAVOUR
XXIII. — EVEN MORE CURIOUS
XXIV. — CONFESSION
XXV. — CONCLUSION
THE END

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I. — UNDER ORDERS

Table of Contents

"YOU understand?"

"Perfectly," I answered.

"And you entirely follow my argument?"

"Entirely."

"It is imperative that active steps must be taken to preserve England's supremacy, and at the same time frustrate this aggressive policy towards us which is undoubtedly growing. I need not tell you that the outlook is far from reassuring. As a diplomatist you know that as well as I do. The war-cloud which rose over Europe at the end of the last Administration is still darkening. It therefore behoves us to avoid a repetition of the recent fiasco at St. Petersburg with regard to Port Arthur, and strive to prevent foreign diplomacy from again getting the better of us. You quite follow me?"

"I have always striven to do my utmost towards that end," I answered.

"I know, Crawford. I'm perfectly conscious of that, otherwise I should not have spoken so plainly as I have now done. Recollect that I've taken you into my confidence in this matter. You did well—exceedingly well—in Vienna, and showed most creditable tact and forethought. Because of that I have recalled you and selected you for this particular duty." And the speaker, the Most Honourable the Marquess of Macclesfield, K.G., her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, paused with his dark expressive

eyes fixed upon me. Under those eyes many a foreign diplomatist had quivered, for so keen was he of perception that he could divine one's inmost thoughts. This calm, thin, gray-faced, rather shabbily attired man, the great statesman upon whose actions and decisions the prosperity and integrity of the British Empire depended, had, from the earliest moment when I had entered the Foreign Office, treated me with friendly consideration and kindly regard, and now as, late on that dull afternoon in February, I sat in his private room in Downing street, whither I had been summoned from the Embassy at Constantinople, he spoke to me not as my master, but as my friend and counsellor.

As an attache at Vienna, at Rome, and at the Porte I had worked under Ambassadors of various moods, but by this feeling of friendliness which the Marquess had extended towards me, I had, in my duties, always felt that I was serving the great statesman personally, and not merely the particular chief which for the time I chanced to be under. Undoubtedly the secret of the success of the Macclesfield Ministry in the management of foreign affairs was in great measure due to the amicability of his lordship towards the staff.

"I cannot disguise from myself that this duty is extremely difficult," he went on, leaning back in his chair after a pause, and glancing around the fine room, with its life-sized portrait of her Majesty upon the green painted wall. "Nevertheless, secret services must sometimes be performed, and I have sufficient confidence in your diplomatic instinct to know that you will never act rashly, nor display any ill-advised zeal. The secret of England's greatness is her smart diplomacy,

and in this affair you have, Crawford, every chance of distinction."

"You may rely upon me to do my very best to fulfil this important appointment to your satisfaction," I replied. "I shall act with care and discretion."

"And to you is due our peace with honour," I remarked.

"Act with that caution combined with dignity, as though you were directly serving her Majesty herself. Remember, I am only her servant."

"No, no," he laughed deprecatingly. "True, I am the figure-head, but it is men such as you who man the ship. No Secretary has been more fortunate in his staff than I am to-day, for I am vain enough to think that although they are scattered in all quarters of the globe, yet a cordiality exists among them which is quite as strong as their patriotism. I am proud to think that in all our Embassies and Ministries we have no traitor."

"The *esprit de corps* has been engendered by your lordship's personal interest in us, one and all," I remarked. "It was not so during the late Ministry."

He merely raised his grey eyebrows, and tapped the edge of the table with the quill in his thin bony hand. I know that I had made a mistake in uttering that sentence, for he did not like ill things said of his political opponents.

"Ten years ago, Crawford," he exclaimed, after a few moments' reflection, "it is just ten years ago this month if my memory serves me aright, when, in this very room I first made your acquaintance—you, the son of one of our most trusted and valued man who had ever served his Queen at a foreign Court, followed your father's footsteps, and entered

the Foreign Office. You remember the advice and maxims I then gave you. That you have remembered them is evidenced by the discretion and ingenuity you have displayed in the various posts you have occupied. I only ask you still to recollect them while performing the difficult and important duties before you; duties in which I wish you every success and good fortune."

Then his lordship rose, as a sign that our conference was at an end. He shook my hand warmly, with that cordiality which endeared him to every member of the Foreign Office staff, and simultaneous with the re-entry of Menton, his private secretary, who had been dismissed while we had talked, I went out and down the great staircase, that magnificent flight of stairs up which representatives of every country in the world climb to have audience of the grey-haired, refined statesman, whom Bismarck once referred to as "the ruler of Europe." The most tactful, alert, far-seeing Foreign Minister that England had had during the present century, to him was due the extension of the British Empire in all parts of the world during recent years, notably the acquisition of new countries in Africa with their untold mineral wealth, the occupation of Egypt, the firm policy in the Soudan, and the clever checkmating of Russia in the Far East. To his intimates he was mild-mannered, soft-voiced, and essentially a pleasant man, but to those highly ingenious and unscrupulous diplomats of the Powers who were ever striving to undermine England's prestige he was so dry, hard, and matter-of-fact that they feared him, and dreaded entering his presence, because in any argument

they were invariably worsted, while if they attempted diplomacy they were very quickly confounded.

Upon the Marquess of Macclesfield's tact and farsightedness depended the prosperity of England, the lives of her millions, and the peace of Europe. A single stroke of the pen, a hasty or ill-advised action, and a war might result which would cost our Empire millions in money and millions of valuable lives; an ill-worded Note might, he know, cause England's prestige to be wrecked, and thus precipitate her from her present proud position of first among the great nations of the world. Truly his position was no enviable one, and his salary of five thousand a year inadequate for the eternal anxiety ever upon him day and night for the preservation of his country's greatness and the honour of his Sovereign. Restless, whether at his country seat down in Hampshire, or at his town house in Grosvenor-square, he lived ever at the end of a telegraph wire, which brought him hour by hour information or inquiries from the various Embassies abroad, all of which demanded his personal attention and reply.

In the dead of night Paterson, his faithful valet, would awaken him and hand him one of those red despatch-boxes with which a Foreign Service messenger had posted across Europe from Vienna, Constantinople, Berlin, or Petersburg, with orders to deliver it with all possible speed. Indeed, in such a life of terrible brain-tear, it was not surprising that the years of statesmanship had aged him prematurely, that his eyes were sunken, that he had developed a restless nervous habit of pacing the room while talking, or that insomnia would frequently seize him, and at such times he

would go forth in the dead of night into the deserted streets of London, and walk miles and miles for recreation. For the faithful discharge of his difficult duties he had received many times the personal thanks of her Majesty, but, truth to tell, it was the applause and cries of "Good Old Macclesfield!" which fell spontaneously from the lips of those monster audiences he at rare intervals addressed in Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, and other provincial centres, which pleased him most of all. He had been heard to say that those hearty ringing cheers which greeted him when he rose to speak, and again when he re-seated himself, were in themselves sufficient repayment for the constant and terrible strain ever upon him.

At the foot of the great staircase, just as I was passing out into the courtyard wherein the lamps were already lit, as the short day had ended and the yellow twilight was fast fading into night, a cheery voice behind me exclaimed:—

"What, Crawford? Is that you old chap, back from Constant?"

I turned quickly and saw before me a tall slim figure in overcoat and silk hat, whom I recognised as my old whilom colleague Gordon Clunes, of the Treaty Department; a dark-haired, spruce, easy-going fellow with whom I had lived in chambers in the Albany eight years ago, before being nominated attache.

"By Jove! Gordon!" I cried, grasping his hand, "I thought you always went at three, so I meant to look in and see you to-morrrow."

"Busy, old chap," he laughed, in explanation. "But why are you home? What's occurred?"

"I was recalled by the Chief," I answered.

"Recalled? Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Not at all. I'm appointed to Brussels," I laughed.

"To Brussels!" he echoed in a strange tone of surprise, I thought. Then for a few moments he was silent in contemplation.

"Yes, but why are you surprised?" I inquired, puzzled. It seemed as though he begrudged me my advancement.

"It will be a pleasant change to you," he responded, with that air of irresponsibility I had known so well in the old days. "Brussels is a much better post than Constantinople, and only a few hours from London. Why, Henky, when he was attache there, used to keep on his rooms in London and run over about once a fortnight—sometimes oftener."

"Poor Henky wasn't very remarkable for his attention to duty," I laughed, remembering how when he was attache with me at Vienna he used often to receive a mild reprimand from the Ambassador. But the Honourable Alfred Henniker was a merry Guardsman, and such a renowned lady-killer that we at the Embassy nicknamed him the Fly-paper because all the girls stuck to him.

Brussels was, as my friend Clunes had pointed out, a much more desirable diplomatic post than Constantinople, where society is so mixed, and where leave is almost unobtainable.

"When do you go?" my friend inquired.

I told him that it was uncertain, and that having only arrived from Turkey the night before, after an absence of eighteen months, I hoped to get a few weeks' leave in England. I was staying with a maiden aunt—a very prim and

proper old lady who lived in Warwick Gardens, Kensington, and who had long ago given me to understand that in the event of her decease I should fall in for a very fair share of this world's goods. Therefore, as diplomacy is an expensive profession, and further, as my income was a decidedly limited one, I felt in duty bound to pay the old lady a visit whenever I came to town, while on her part she seemed to be proud of talking to her friends of the advancement and success of her 'nephew in the Diplomatic Service.'

As we walked together along Downing-street, gloomy and deserted save for the solitary detective on guard against anarchist outrages who wished us "Good evening, gentlemen," as we passed, we spoke of mutual friends, and I referred to his own recent marriage which I had seen announced in the papers.

"Yes," he laughed. "Couldn't stand bachelor life any longer, my dear fellow, so having let our old chambers, I took a wife, and am now settled down as a respectable citizen. I live at Richmond. Come down and dine to-morrow night. My wife will be delighted to meet you. I've told her long ago of our menage, and of the five years we spent together. Those were merry days, weren't they—eh?"

"Yes," I replied, smiling at some amusing remembrances which at that moment crossed my mind. "They were. Thank you for your invitation. I'll be pleased to come."

"Then, here's a card," he said. "You'll easily find the house. It's one of those new ones on the way up to the Terrace Gardens. But I must take this cab to Waterloo, or I shan't catch my tram. Good-bye till to-morrow, old fellow," and with a cordial hand-grip, he sprang into a hansom, while

I, full of thoughts of my new appointment, turned and strolled on towards that centre whither all diplomats drift, the St. James's Club, in Piccadilly.

Glad of an opportunity to escape from the terrible formality of dining at my aunt's, where old Bateson waited upon one with the air of a funeral mute, I dressed next evening and took train to Richmond, where I had no difficulty in finding Gordon's place, a large new house about halfway up Richmond Hill. It was a decidedly pleasant place, built in artistic early English style, the interior being mostly decorated in dead white, with a square hall and oak staircase, and rooms with high oak wainscoting and wrought iron electric light brackets. In the hall where he welcomed me a fire burnt brightly, and in his little den beyond, with its high-backed antique chairs, everything was decidedly cosy. Indeed I envied him, and remarked upon the perfectly artistic arrangement of his abode.

"Yes," he laughed. "It's my wife's fancy to have a house like this. She is fond of having things different to other people—a woman's weakness for the distinct, I suppose."

My train had brought me there about a quarter of an hour too early; therefore, when I had removed my coat, we sat chatting in my old friend's little study, lounging lazily before the fire and enjoying a quiet few minutes.

"By Jove!" Gordon exclaimed, after a pause. "It's really a stroke of good fortune, old fellow, to be appointed to Brussels. The Chief has indeed been generous. I only wish I could get a post abroad, but somehow I'm always passed over."

"Why, surely you don't want to give this up?" I said. "How long have you been here?"

"About a year."

"And yet you want to go abroad!" said I. "I tell you, Gordon, you wouldn't be half so happy, living in a foreign town, with your wife snubbed by some of the women with whom you have, for diplomatic purposes, to be nice to. It's all very well to be an attache while you're a bachelor, but afterwards—well, the thing's impossible."

"And you've had a rattling good time of it—eh?" he asked, smiling.

"Well, on the whole, yes," I responded.

"At any rate you've earned distinction, and I congratulate you," he said earnestly. He was a good fellow, one of my best friends and I had always kept up a weekly or fortnightly correspondence with him ever since I had been appointed abroad. The post he held was one of greatest trust. Indeed, perhaps no one in the whole Department of Foreign Affairs, excepting the Minister himself, knew so many secrets of State as did Gordon Clunes. He was a free, merry, open-hearted fellow, but was discretion itself. With regard to those secret drafts which daily passed through his hands, and were seen by no other eyes than those of Lord Macclesfield, he was a veritable sphinx. There are a good many drones in the Foreign Office hive, but Gordon was by no means an idler. I had often regretted that he had not been appointed to one of the Embassies, but it seemed as though the Marques reposed such perfect confidence in him that his presence at headquarters was much more valuable.

"I know I have your best wishes old chap," I remarked, "and I believe that Brussels is a very pleasant Embassy. Lots of life, and within easy distance of London."

"My dear fellow, Dick Crouch, who was nominated there three years ago, once told me that it was gayer than Vienna. Old Drummond is a brick, and you can get leave almost at any time. When Crouch couldn't get it he used to bring over despatches, and save the messenger a journey."

"Perhaps I can do the same," I said.

"No doubt you will," he replied. "The Chief was talking with the Permanent Secretary in my room to day, and mentioned that you had been appointed on secret service. You didn't tell me so."

"I really didn't think it necessary," I said, slightly annoyed. "I understood from the Chief that this fact was entirely between ourselves. Truth to tell, I don't like the expression secret service."

"Savours too much of spy, doesn't it, old fellow?" he laughed. "But," he added, "that's the very essence of diplomacy. The successful Diplomat is the man who keeps his weather-eye constantly upon his opponent's doings, and presents elaborate reports to headquarters. Isn't every Ambassador a spy, more or less?"

"Certainly," I responded, "But I'm not an Ambassador yet."

"But you're a deal more shrewd than some of the old fossils, who potter over trifles and send along screeds to the Chief over every vice-consul's worry."

"Then you think I'll make a good spy?" I asked, laughing.

"My dear, old fellow," he said, slapping me on the hack as he rose, "there are few of those blanked foreigners who'll be able to get the better of you. The way in which you got at that secret in Vienna is sufficient proof of that."

"How did you know?" I inquired, starting in surprise that he should be aware of a matter which I fully believed was private between Lord Macclesfield and myself.

"By the alteration in the treaty," my friend responded promptly. "The alteration was in your handwriting, and not in the Ambassador's. Your tact and shrewdness in that affair avoided a very ugly difficulty. Of course," he added, confidentially, "I'm not such a fool as to breathe a single word of it. Not a soul in the office knows that you are on secret service besides myself."

There was a pause, broken only by the low ticking of the clock.

"And you will preserve my secret?" I said, looking him straight in the face. "Remember that there are secret agents around us even here; and if the truth of my real position leaked out I should no doubt find all my efforts thwarted. Upon secrecy alone my success depends."

"I know, Philip," he replied, in deep earnestness. "You have trusted me before—you can trust me now—can't you?"

"Of course, I know I can," I answered, reassured, and the strange sense of misgiving which had suddenly crept upon me a few moments before was at once succeeded by a feeling of reassurance in my old friend's fidelity.

Just at that moment the door opened and my hostess entered, a dainty figure in pale coral, sweet-faced, fair-haired, and wearing a beautiful collar of amethysts and

pearls around her white slender throat. She was not more than twenty-three, graceful, with large expressive eyes of deep blue, and a figure almost perfect in its symmetry. Gordon introduced me as his "old friend and fellow bachelor, Phil," and as I took the slim white hand she extended our eyes met in a quick glance of recognition.

I held a suspicion that I felt her hand tremble in mine.

Her face was certainly familiar to me; too familiar it somehow seemed. Yet try how I would I could not recollect under what conditions or when or where we had met. That she, too, had recognised me was also evident, yet her quick and strenuous effort to cover her surprise and confusion was in itself suspicious.

In an instant I divined her intention. She had recovered herself with a swiftness that was marvellous; so quickly, indeed that her husband had not noticed it, and I saw that if I claimed acquaintance with her she intended to deny it.

We had met somewhere under extraordinary conditions, I knew, yet with tantalising perversity my memory in this direction was an utter blank.

She smiled upon me, yet there was a hardness about the corners of her mouth which I did not fail to notice, and standing in the centre of that cosy little room with her necklet of amethysts glistening in the electric glow she greeted me with an amiable effusiveness which, by some strange intuition, I knew disguised an intense and bitter hatred.

II. — JUDITH

Table of Contents

DINNER was a pleasant affair in the panelled room through the long windows of which I could see the valley of the Thames, with its riverside lights twinkling afar. Two elderly men and a couple of pretty girls had been invited to meet me, and the gossip was light and amusing. My hostess was the life and soul of the party, bright, vivacious, and full of mirth, yet I could not disguise the fact that she regarded me with some suspicion. During the meal I tried hard to recollect where we had met before, but failed utterly. Her conversation was that of a well-educated, clever woman. Her face was familiar; her lips, a trifle thick and full, had once before struck me as unusual in one of her beauty and grace. But where I had seen her I could not remember.

"Gordon tells me that you've just had the good fortune to be appointed to Brussels," exclaimed a pretty, dark-haired girl in blue who sat next to me, but whose name I had not caught when introduced to her.

"Yes," I laughed. "Do you know Brussels?"

"I was at school there four years," she answered, toying with her hock glass. "But I didn't see very much of it. Our excursions were mainly confined to Sunday walks in the Bois."

"You'll return, perhaps, when you are married," I said, smiling. "It's a very pleasant city for a honeymoon."

"We spent part of our honeymoon there, on our way to the Rhine," interrupted Mrs. Clunes. "It was quite as bright

as Paris, without all that rush and turmoil. And the Bois de la Cambre—isn't it charming?"

"Yes," I said, for as part of my training for a diplomatic career I had spent a year in the Belgian capital, and practically knew every inch of it, from the Quartier where the English reside, away to Laeken, and from St. Giles to Schaerbeck.

"I only wish we could live there, instead of here," she continued, with a slight pout. "I do hope that some day Gordon will get nominated abroad. I should love a cosmopolitan life."

"Life at an embassy would be awfully jolly," observed my neighbour in blue. "One must meet so many interesting people, from kings and queens downwards."

"Kings and queens are not as a rule interesting people," I said. "The monarchs I have met have not impressed me very much. They look much more regal in the illustrated papers than they are in real life. The most interesting persons as a rule are those foreign secret agents who are always seeking to pry into our affairs and learn what we don't desire that they should know."

"I've heard a lot of strange stories about those spying individuals," said my hostess, at once interested. "What are they like? Do tell me."

"Well," I said, "every one of the Governments of Europe, with the possible exception of Switzerland, finds it necessary to maintain a corps of secret agents for confidential duty. Their remuneration being defrayed from the Secret Service Fund at the disposal of every Prime Minister, the national treasury takes no cognisance of their

expenses or of their names. These latter are only known to the Premier and to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. They are ignored at the regular police headquarters, while the general public very often has no knowledge of the existence of such a force. Their duty is to learn all that transpires in the various Embassies and report to the Chancellerie. They number people in every class of life, and almost every nationality."

"And does not our British Government take steps to combat the efforts of these spies?" asked the old gentlemen opposite.

"In a measure it does," I responded carelessly. "It, of course, behoves us to be wary with this horde of secret agents about us, for their ingenuity is simply marvellous."

"Of course there are lots of books which reveal the elaborate system of espionage in Russia," observed the girl in blue.

"Ah! that's quite a different affair," I replied. "The Russian agents are mostly employed for the purpose of keeping watch upon the doings of those of the Czar's subjects who live beyond the frontiers of Russia; and when it is borne in mind that those number close upon a million, and that every Russian has in his blood the characteristic Asiatic taste for conspiracy and intrigue against his Government, it can be readily understood that the secret agents of the Chancellerie of the Emperor have their hands pretty full. It is not the agents of the Ministry of the Interior that troubles us, but the system of spies established in every country in Europe with a view to learning the secrets of British diplomacy. We hold the balance of power you see; and

because of this every effort is being made to reduce our prestige and undermine our supremacy."

"It certainly behoves you all to be as secret as the grave," my hostess said. "I don't think I should like to be in possession of a State secret which a hundred unscrupulous persons were seeking to discover. One must feel awfully uncomfortable."

"But you are a woman, my dear," laughed her husband. "They say that your sex can't keep a secret," a remark whereat everyone laughed.

"Ah! perhaps not," answered the merry, light-hearted little woman. "But it seems so horrible if you can't tell who is your friend and who's your enemy," and she fixed her eyes upon me with a strange look of misgiving.

"Exactly," I said. "This secret service, being beyond the pale of the law, is contrary to all notions of what is straightforward and honourable. The methods of action these agents employ are often most questionable and unsavoury. Indeed, for example at Vienna, where perhaps the secret service is permitted to play the greatest role, his Majesty has been compelled by the stress of public opinion to consent to the imprisonment and suspension from office of the chief of the service for making use of dishonourable manoeuvres. Again, in Germany, in response to the memorable speech by the Liberal leader Richter in the Reichstag, exposing the unscrupulousness of secret agent von Rumpf, his role as a provoker and instigator of crime, and his employment, not only of criminal methods, but even of criminals, in order to succeed in the intrigues in which he was engaged, the Minister of the Interior proclaimed the

doctrine that the Executive and his Government have a right to use the extra-legal, or to put it plainly, unlawful, methods for attaining its aims when the ordinary legal methods are inadequate and unavailing. This declaration is in itself sufficient to show to what an extent espionage is carried at a foreign Court."

"If such is the case, then each of our Embassies is surrounded by enemies," observed young Mrs. Clunes.

"Of course it is," exclaimed her husband. "Don't you recollect that I told you once how cleverly they work the *cabinet noir* in France, in Germany, and in Russia—so ingeniously, indeed, that our representatives at those Courts dare not send a single despatch through the post, otherwise it is opened and copied."

"Then they open official letters?" exclaimed the girl in blue at my side.

"To the *cabinet noir* nothing is sacred," I said.

"It is established for the purpose of dealing with both official and private correspondence, and the manner in which letters are opened and resealed is in itself a marvel of ingenuity. So well is it done that letters sealed with wax are opened and again secured, leaving the original seal intact, without a trace remaining that it has been tampered with."

"We've had one or two experiences of that sort of thing of late, Crawford, haven't we?" remarked my friend with a meaning look.

"Yes," I answered. "At Constantinople lately one or two matters which we believed secret, while we were trying to adjust affairs between Turkey and Greece after the war, leaked out in a very mysterious way. Active inquiries were

made, and it was found that the Russian *cabinet noir* was at work, and, further, that at Petersburg they were fully informed of all our secret instructions received from Lord Macclesfield."

My hostess sighed. As her white chest heaved her necklet of amethysts glistened, and her lips became compressed. I noticed this latter involuntary movement of the muscles of her face, and saw that she was anxious to change the subject. I admit that at that moment I entertained a growing suspicion of her.

That she was eminently graceful and charming there could be no two opinions. Gordon, however, had never told me who she was. When I had been a month at Constantinople I received a letter suddenly announcing his marriage, to which I had responded by sending a cheque to a London silversmith with instructions to forward a wedding-present, and by writing him a letter of congratulation. Then I had seen the announcement in the *Standard* a week later that he had married, at the village of Rockingham, 'Judith, daughter of the late William Carter-Harrison,' and had wondered whether or not she were pretty.

Gordon had not much changed in the years I had been absent. Ten years ago we were both second division clerks, and we had certainly enjoyed London life and had a very large circle of friends. He was always gay and light-hearted, fond of practical joking and eternally declaring that he should never marry. Yet he had now taken to himself a wife, and had become just a trifle graver than before, as of course befitted a responsible householder whose name was on the jury-list.

At last, when dessert was finished, the ladies left, and presently after a brief gossip we rejoined them in the drawing-room. The size and tasteful decoration of the place surprised me. The walls were entirely in white, with a ceiling of that type for which Adams was noted a century ago; blazing logs burned upon old-fashioned fire-dogs, and there was a capacious chimney-corner with its settle and old oak arm-chair. It needed not a second glance to ascertain that the furniture, every bit of it, was genuine old oak, and as we entered I could not refrain from repeating to Gordon my admiration of his tasteful home.

"It is Judith's fancy," he repeated, happily. "I was for a house in Kensington; but she loves Richmond because in summer we can get on the river, or go for pleasant drives. She's always been used to the country, and declares that London suffocates her."

"Can you wonder at it?" his wife asked me, overhearing our conversation. "To me London is dreadful. I go up once or twice a week to do shopping, or to a theatre, but really I'm always glad to get back here to the quietness of my home. And besides, the view from these windows is the best within a hundred miles of London."

"Of course," I replied, for although I could see nothing in the darkness I knew well the picturesque scene from the windows of the Star and Garter, where I had so often dined in the days before I went abroad. Below lay a broad green valley, with the Thames winding away like a silver ribbon between trees and meadows past Twickenham Ferry to Teddington Lock, a magnificent picture at any time but doubly so when the silent highway reflected back the golden

blaze of summer sunset. "But your decorations here are in such excellent taste, yet so extremely simple. I envy Gordon his home. Only one room have I seen before similar to this."

"Where?" my friend inquired.

"In Vienna. It belonged to a lady I knew."

"Vienna!" exclaimed his wife, with sudden interest. "Were you at the Embassy there?"

"Yes," I replied. "I was there about two years."

"Then you may perhaps have known of an officer named Krauss—Oswald Krauss?"

In an instant the truth came upon me as a lightning flash. Perhaps I started at mention of that name—a name which to me carried with it recollections of a hideous but hidden page in my history—at any rate, even though I felt myself standing immovable, glaring at her, I managed to recover myself sufficiently to answer:

"The name Krauss is exceeding common in Vienna. I have no recollection of any man whose Christian name was Oswald. What was he?"

"His father was Baron Krauss, of Budapesth," she answered, simply, her blue eyes fixed upon me, with a curious look of severity.

"No," I answered with affected carelessness, "I have no recollection of ever meeting him."

That calm inquiry she had uttered held me breathless. No. I had not been mistaken when suspicion had seized me that we were not altogether strangers. This woman in coral had, by mention of that name, a hated name graven for ever upon my memory because of the burden of evil which had fallen upon me, brought back to me in all their hideous

reality those circumstances which I had so long striven to forget. Our eyes again met, and in the blue depths of hers there was a smile of mocking triumph.

This woman who was Gordon's wife held the secret of my sin.

III. — THE SHADOW

Table of Contents

NEXT morning, determined to learn something further regarding the mystery of Gordon's wife, and either to confirm or to dispel my apprehensiveness, I devised an excuse, and going down to the Foreign Office, found him in his room, poring over some long formal document, which he instinctively covered with his blotting pad as the messenger ushered me in.

His greeting was cordial as usual, and presently when he had chatted a little time, he asked suddenly, "Well, Phil, and how do you like Judith?"

"She's altogether charming," I answered. "By Jove, old chap, I envy you. A menage like yours is a distinct improvement on the Albany, even though our Sunday evening concerts with little chorus-girls as performers were pleasant gathering—weren't they?"

"They were," he laughed. "Good Heavens! what a life we led in those days! But after you went, and I was alone, I fancy I must have settled down a bit."

"You have indeed settled down," I said. "For you have a wife to be proud of. She came from the Midlands somewhere, if I remember the announcement in the papers?"

"Yes. From a little place called Rockingham."

"She surely wasn't a village belle? She's far too refined for that."

"Hardly, old follow. She was born in London; but she lived a good deal on the Continent and afterwards with an aunt at

Rockingham, for several years."

"And how did you come to know her?" I inquired, trying to conceal my anxiety and inquisitiveness.

"I was staying with some people at Ketton, in the vicinity, and we were introduced at a local flower-show held in the Castle grounds."

"And you fell in love with her?"

He nodded.

"Well," I said, "I don't wonder that you did. I'm sure I wish you both every happiness. Has she any brothers?"

"No," he answered. "She was left an orphan at ten, and her aunt, quite a cosmopolitan old lady, has ever since looked after her. Her father was a wealthy man, and when she came of age, three years before I married her, she inherited a very respectable fortune."

"Oh!" I exclaimed, surprised. "Then she had money?"

"Of course, my dear follow. You don't think that I could build and furnish a house like Holmwood on my salary? Heaven knows we who work at home get a paltry pittance enough. If the Government doubled our remuneration it wouldn't be adequate for the work we do. We are ill-paid, everyone of us—from the chief downwards. People think there are fat emoluments in our department, but we could very soon undeceive them."

"You're quite right," I sighed, for with us in the diplomatic service, as with those at home in Downing-street, there is always a perpetual grumbling regarding the cheeseparing policy of the Government. Many of the chief positions of trust are absurdly ill-paid. "However," I added, "you ought not to grumble, now that you are comfortably off. Look at

me! The old governor left me twenty-five thousand when he died six years ago, and I'm nearly at an end of it already."

"Vienna cost you a lot, I suppose?"

"Dearest place in Europe," I answered. "I had to keep horses, and go the pace thoroughly. A fellow with only his salary can't live in Vienna. He'd be snubbed by everybody, and in three months life would be intolerable."

"And how about your new appointment?"

"Gay, but not quite so expensive," I responded. "I must lie low for a time, then things will be brighter with me. I can't go on at the pace I've been going."

"No," he said, a trifle coldly. "Take my tip, old man, and live a bit more economically. Your extravagance in Vienna was noticed."

I smiled. Had not Lord Macclesfield himself commended me for my work in Vienna? And had I not, in order to perform that mission—a secret one—been compelled to spend my own money recklessly to gain success? His lordship alone knew the reason of my extravagance, and had congratulated me upon my vigorous action.

We gossiped on for perhaps half an hour, then strolled along to the Ship, that small restaurant a few doors from Charing Cross, where so many Foreign Office men take their lunch. There we ate our mid-day chop together, and then, having satisfied myself upon one or two points regarding his wife, we parted.

What he had told me did not allay my fears. The facts that she was an orphan, that she had lived with an aunt in an unknown country village, and that she had inherited money were all suspicious. No, I could not rid myself of a

most uncomfortable feeling, a kind of presage of some coming evil. That look of triumph and hatred in her blue eyes was ever before me, haunting me night and day. She meant mischief.

Yes, now more than ever was I confident that she possessed the secret which I had foolishly thought none knew beside myself.

Next day I left London on a round of dutiful visits to various friends in the north, and as it was a particularly dry spring, I managed to get a good deal of enjoyment and plenty of outdoor exercise. To me, tired of the hot, dusty, evil-smelling streets of Constantinople, English rural life was an exceedingly pleasant change, and for nearly three weeks I made one of a particularly gay house party at Dedisham, Sir Henry Halsford's place beside the Arun, in Sussex. There were about fifteen guests, besides myself, and as many of them were young there was an unvarifying round of gaiety.

Among the men staying there one was a quiet fellow of middle age named Poynter—a relative of Lady Halsford's, to whom I took a particular fancy. We often walked or rode out together, and in the evening we would play billiards, or smoke and chat about the Continental capitals I knew. He was a man of leisure who had travelled constantly in Europe, as so many men do, for the purpose of obtaining a decent climate, spending each winter in Nice, spring at Florence, Aix or Biarritz, summer in Switzerland, and autumn in Scotland, until he had become, like myself, a thorough cosmopolitan.

One dry bright afternoon we had together walked over the hill to Dewestryde to make a call on some people, and