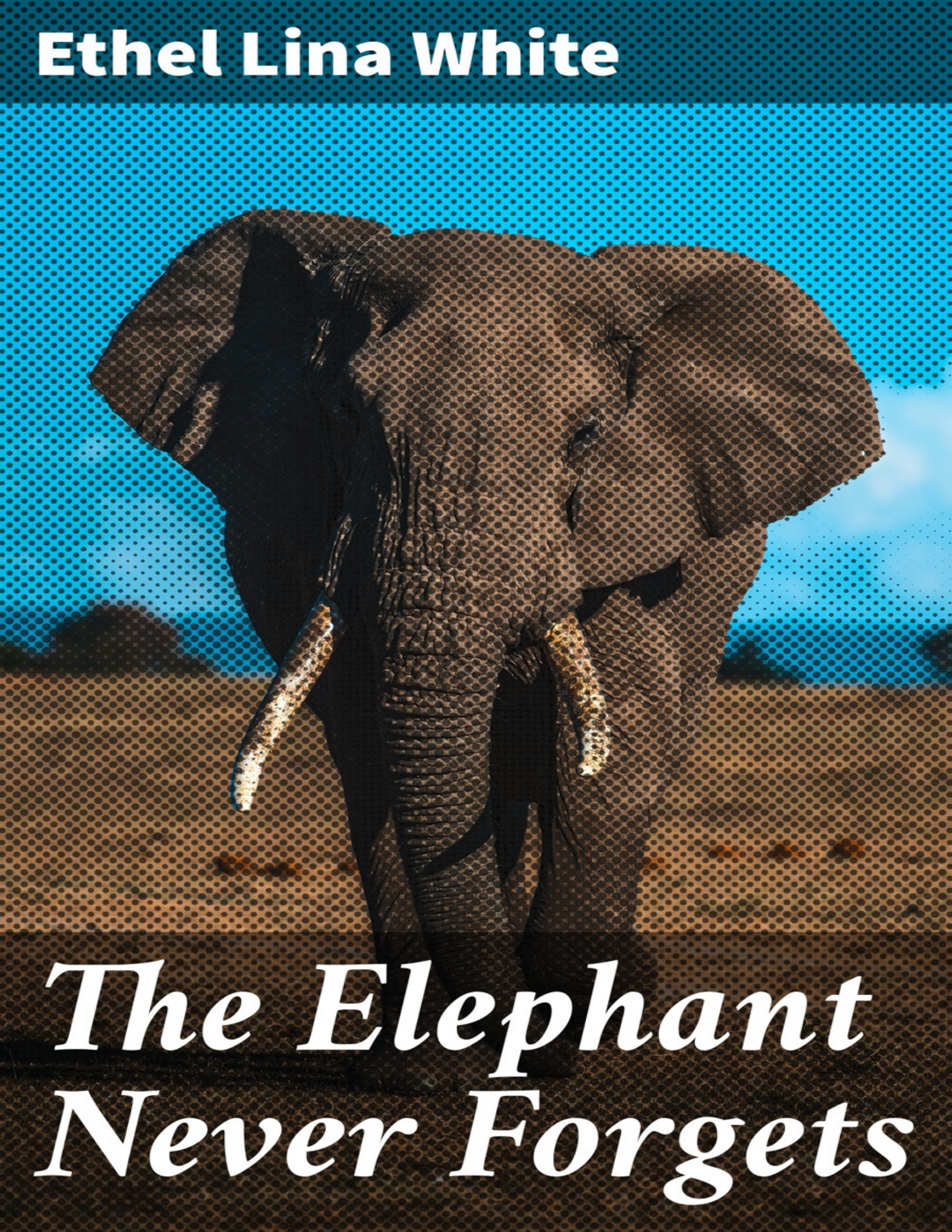
Ethel Lina White



The Elephant Never Forgets

Ethel Lina White

The Elephant Never Forgets

Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338099501

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

AS Anna looked through the double windows of her bedroom at the hotel, she became suddenly conscious of the passage of time. Although the port was not yet sealed, winter had gripped the small northern town almost overnight. The sky was purple-dark with snow-clouds, and the old stunted trees opposite were blown forward by the wind until they rapped the wall with knobby knuckles.

"Time I went back to England," she told herself. "There's nothing to stop for now."

Time. It was curious how this element was to dominate the situation. Anna often had the impression of being imprisoned within a maze, five minutes before closing-time. Its windings were neither numerous nor complicated; but, if she lost her head and took a wrong turning in her haste, she might reach the outlet—only to find the door locked.

The weather that morning corresponded with her own bitter mood. She was feeling bleakly disillusioned as the aftermath of an unpleasant scene with Otto yesterday, when she had broken with him finally, on the score of his disloyalty.

While she had no real ground for complaint because his so-called secretary—Olga—occupied a position in his scheme which she herself had declined to fill—she was appalled by the wholesale scale of his operations in the love-market, and also by his admission that she had helped to finance his romance.

In fact, the only redeeming feature of a bad business was her ability to swear in Russian.

Notwithstanding her fluency, the final score was his, because she could not assail the logic of his defence.

"You know that here we believe in collectivisation," he reminded her. "Since you are a monopolist, what are you doing in Russia?"

The reason was that she was a victim of glamour. Ever since she had met Otto at a debating society in the east end of London, she had been ensnared by his personality. He had not only the golden beard of a Viking and dark-blue eyes which were chill as polar seas, but he was essentially a spell-binder.

Whenever he talked, shoals of bright words bubbled up responsively in her own brain. He became her star and she followed, or rather, accompanied him to Russia, where she helped to finance his new venture—a non-political paper, confined to art, literature and science.

As long as the dream lasted, her surroundings were misted with illusion. It is doubtful whether she ever saw the dim grey northern town as it was in reality. To her, there was glamour in the tall cramped houses and the stone steps leading down to the olive water of the port; glamour in the green-grape twilight; glamour in the blaze of starlight.

Above all, there was glamour in the communal life in Otto's newspaper-office, where violent young men and women gathered around the stove, to talk of everything—from the stratosphere above to the drains which were under the earth.

And now the dream was ended—slain by Olga and the first frost.

As she looked around her, Anna was aware, for the first time, of the dingy purple-pink wallpaper—the colour of pickled cabbage—and the shabby painted furniture of her bedroom.

"Mother would think this pretty grim," she thought.

She was gazing pensively at the fluff under her bed, when the door opened and the middle-aged chambermaid entered, carrying a mop and pail.

She had an impoverished white skin which was dry as rice-paper, and a coronet of black hair.

Crossing to the window, she stood beside Anna and pointed to certain dark blotches on the opposite wall.

"You see those marks," she said. "They put the Guards there and shot them down."

Anna suppressed a shudder as she made a consciously enlightened comment.

"A bad means to a good end, comrade. But it was inevitable to progress."

"Inevitable," agreed the chambermaid. "If the worms are allowed to nibble the cabbage, loyal citizens would have no *bortsch*...In the prisons they serve grey-eyes soup. And when the tide is high, the water trickles through the gratings of the cells."

In spite of her academic agreement that the penalties of disloyalty should be stringent, Anna changed the subject.

"Shall we play chess to-night?" she asked. "It will be my last chance to try to beat you. I'm going back to England to-morrow."

"Why?" asked the chambermaid.

"Why not? After all, I'm English."

"*You?* Anna Stephanovitch? Then why do you speak Russian so well?"

As the woman stared at her with sceptical eyes, Anna began to explain.

"Because, when I was a baby, my mother married a Russian. He was a naturalised British subject, and I've always been called by his name. He took the place of my own father who was killed in the War, before I was born. After he died, my mother married again. She's good at it. And now she's living in the Argentine...But I loved my stepfather and when I came to Russia, it was like coming home."

The chambermaid nodded approval, for she appreciated the double obituary notice in the autobiography.

"So you have lost two fathers. And now you have lost your lover," she remarked. "It is said that Otto is spending money on the woman Olga, who works in the newspaper office. He has bought her a fine new fur coat."

Anna's anger flared up again as she listened, for she guessed that, indirectly, she was the real donor of the coat.

"Otto is not my lover," she said hotly. "And I don't need presents."

"Then you are rich like all the English? At home, do you have white bread, and sugar instead of a toffee apple dip?"

"Yes," replied Anna bitterly. "At my home, there was always too much of everything, while people were starving."

Her eyes were sombre as she gazed down at the line of wind-tormented trees. In spite of his flash of spirit in

response to her every mood, her stepfather had been a gross-looking, bearded man, who was too fond of creature comforts.

"My stepfather was very stout," she told the chambermaid. "But inside, he was thin. His mind was like a pure flame. He ate too much and he died, at dinner, from a stroke. He choked and was dead in one minute."

"His food burst him," declared the chambermaid.

She was enchanted with the anecdote, but Anna's face was tragic as she thought of the Hampstead mansion—that over-stuffed nest of domestic luxury—and the extravagant meals.

At the time she was too young to understand that her mother's lavish housekeeping was supplementary to her fundamental determination—to keep a good husband happy to the day of his death.

Filled with a sense of angry frustration at the social inequality, the girl divided society into a chronically overfed middle-class and an eternally hungry proletariat—while she used the adjective "bourgeois" to cover every insult the most fertile imagination could invent.

Her own protest took the form of rebellion, when she ran away from school and got a job in a draper's shop.

She soon came back, but her mutiny persisted. After her stepfather's death, her pent-up energy found relief in a series of social experiments.

"Anna's broken out again," her mother would confide to the expensive scented ladies who accompanied her to the cinema—which met every intellectual need. "I'm told she's selling flowers in High Holborn. So anti-social to the other

poor flower-girls, with so much competition in everything...But it amuses her, and she's not brought home any 'little things' yet."

Selling flowers in the street...Sleeping under an archway...The shop...A pickle factory...As the pictures flitted across Anna's mind, the chambermaid caught her arm.

"Look who's here," she said.

With a strange thrill of excitement, Anna gazed down at a woman who was striding across the road. In a brutal and debased manner she was beautiful, with blonde colouring and vivid blue eyes. Her bobbed flaxen hair was cut in a straight fringe across her forehead and her loose lips were scarlet. She wore breeches, a sheepskin coat, and men's boots, which made her feet appear enormous.

Anna was struck by the fact that the few pedestrians shrank away from her, as though they wished to escape her notice.

"That is Hirsch," said the chambermaid. "She is the People's Prosecutor."

"I've not seen her before," said Anna. "I wonder what she has come for."

"Business." The chambermaid lowered her voice as she added, "Business which is transacted in *cellars*."

"You mean—executions?"

"Surely. She has shot hundreds down in the cellars. It is a patriotic duty and the pay is handsome. But they say that so much killing has turned her crazy."

Anna could not understand her sudden spurt of terror.

"I'm a British subject," she reminded herself. "My passport is in order. I have money. And I'm going back to

England to-morrow."

At that moment, she was so close to the outlet of the maze, that one step would take her through the door.

CHAPTER II

Table of Contents

THE town looked different when Anna left the hotel, in order to buy her ticket for a soft place in the train. The change was actual and not the effect of lost illusions. During the night, the wind had stripped the trees and the streets were carpeted with layers of leaves.

They covered every surface so thickly that they blotted out inequalities and outlines. Unable to see where the pavement ended, Anna side-stepped off the kerb, caught her heel in a crack, and slipped to her knees in the gutter.

This time, she swore in English.

"Thank goodness, I'll soon be walking on a decent pavement again," she told herself as she scrambled to her feet.

She did not know it, but the moment was epic...When she ran away from school, to earn her living in a shop, her stepfather had refused to interfere.

"No," he said to his wife's hysterical pleading. "I will not send detectives after her as if she were criminal. The little one has intelligence and will come to no harm. Let her stand on her own feet for a while. Presently she will return."

But Anna had never come back...It is true that a subdued schoolgirl of the same name and appearance was soon in residence again at the Hampstead mansion; but she—herself—was still wandering in the rebel territory of her mind.

It was not until she paid tribute to the good offices of the L.C.C. that she took her first step back to the home which

was no longer there.

Just then, London seemed so near that she could almost see the buses inside Victoria Station yard and the scarlet electric signs quivering through a dun transparency. These lights stood for safety even if they conjured up no thrill.

Her feelings were mixed as she scuffled through the fallen leaves. Common sense made her realise the futility of regret, which was partly due to season.

She could not recall the summer, when the salt mist veiled the old buildings of the port to the dim beauty of faded tapestry, and the trees in the avenue told stories in husky whispers. Impossible, too, to recapture the fraternity spirit of those endless, unlicensed talks around the stove in Otto's office, when the only convention was always to use the unexpurgated word.

Of all these wild men and girls, there were only three persons with whom she came into more than casual contact. These were Otto, Olga and Conrad Stern.

Now, only Conrad remained.

"I must say 'Good-bye' to him," she thought regretfully. "Pity. Sheer waste of an interesting man."

Yet although he was one of those who counted, she did not want to stay in this strange town, which was all that remained of the dark enchanted city of her dream. The tall thin houses seemed to have shrunk as though they were frost-bitten to their foundations, while their fronts were grey as clinkered ash. Involuntarily she thought of their cellars, as the People's Prosecutor, in her blonde brutality, tramped across her mind.

This was a town where people disappeared. To-day you spoke to a man and arranged to meet him on the morrow. If he did not keep his appointment, you asked no questions. And you might not see him again.

In her eagerness to identify herself with the *Komsomol*, or communal youth of the country, Anna shared their enthusiasm for an experiment so stupendous, that it stunned—even while it stirred—her imagination. Yet while she agreed that its enemies must be destroyed, she shrank from a method of espionage where the individual was at the mercy of his fellow.

As a rule, she hurried by the prison, where the tidal river, which swept one side, was now in flood. It rushed past the wall in a swift brown wave which appeared almost level with the lowest line of windows.

Drawn by a morbid fascination, she lingered for a minute. The wind had piled up an enormous drift of leaves against an iron door. It imparted an air of desuetude, as though people had gone inside, but had never pushed the portal outwards again.

She walked on quickly before she could think too vividly of the fate of any prisoners inside. Cells weeping with river water. The grey eyes of fish floating in soup. A last appointment to meet a lady—a blonde with a taste for cellars.

When she reached the square, on her way to the post office—it had an air of desertion. There were no market-stalls to dwarf its size to-day. The giant equestrian statue in the middle seemed magnified to a symbol of civic authority.

As she passed beneath the pedestal, his rearing horse appeared on the point of crashing down upon her skull.

Her intention was, as usual, first to collect any mail, and then to go to the café. That morning, the woman official did not disappoint her, for she handed her a letter from a pigeon-hole.

She recognised the handwriting on the envelope, and stuffed it into her bag, unopened. Her community spirit did not extend to former school friends—and Gloria James could wait.

When she was inside the double doors of the café, she stood looking for Conrad Stern. The room was overheated by an enormous stove, but, apart from its atmosphere, it was a pleasant refuge from the grey outside world. A brass samovar bubbled cheerfully and each indiarubber plant wore its jacket of coloured, plaited paper. Above all rose the thrum of talk, like the whir of a myriad spinning-tops.

Conrad Stern was seated at a small table—by a window. Closely-shorn, clean-shaven and monocled, his appearance was in strong contrast with most of the shaggy company, although he would have been a striking personality in other circumstances. There was distinction in his tall thin figure and the moulding of his face which always made Anna curious to unveil the mystery of his origin.

When she drew nearer, he rose to meet her.

"I rather hoped you might come here," he said.

"I wanted to meet you too," Anna told him. "I'm going back to England."

"Then—" he hesitated before he added, "then you know about Otto?"

"Yes. I've heard also that Olga has a new fur."

Humiliated by the knowledge that their quarrel was already in circulation, Anna tried to speak lightly.

"I'm not quite blind," she said. "Of course, just at first I thought he was rather splendid. But lately I've realised how cheap he really is. In fact, we had a row."

She remembered the essential adjective and added hastily, "we had a bloody row."

Conrad Stern smiled slightly as he crossed to the buffet to get tea for her. When he returned with the cup of weak, scalding fluid, he asked an abrupt question.

"How are you off for money?"

"I've enough for my journey," she told him.

"Good." His voice held relief. "Passport in order?"

"Yes. The original visa expired, but Otto got it renewed, the other day. Whenever they wanted to see my papers at the hotel, he wangled things for me. A man can always slip his mistress through when he can't take his wife."

Anna laughed as she spoke, for she had been rather flattered by the general assumption of a freedom of which she had never availed herself. It made her feel definitely Russian. Aware, however, of Conrad's silence, she denied the rumour, for the first time.

"Of course, I was never that," she said.

The frost of his face relaxed as he smote the table with his palm.

"Why didn't you tell me that before?" he asked. "As long as you were Otto's friend, you were not in my landscape. We've wasted too much time. We might have been—comrades."

Although his smile revealed the lines in his thin face, she was thrilled by its fascination. Some of the vanished glamour of the summer seemed to quiver again in the smoky air. Her mother would have seen the shape of "little things" to come in the unwashed company, but she was conscious only of warm intimacy and understanding.

"And now you know?" she asked.

"Now it is too late. You are going back to England and I am leaving this town at once. I have the prospect of a job elsewhere. I only waited to see you, in case you wanted any help about your journey."

"Why?"

"Because we are compatriots. You come from Hampstead and I was born and bred in Hammersmith. It is true that I have wandered far from the Broadway. But Hammersmith may have my bones."

Anna did not believe him, although she made another effort to break his reserve.

"What exactly are you?"

"When all other alibis fail, one can always call oneself a journalist," he told her, with the flicker of a smile.

She gave up the attempt to pump him.

"How did you guess I would go back to England?" she asked.

"It seemed indicated." He glanced at his wrist-watch and added, "Time I left. And time you went to the station to get your ticket."

Their moment had passed and the air was heavy with parting. Conrad held her hand tightly as he asked her a directly personal question.

"Were you in love with Otto?"

"No," she admitted. "It was only infatuation."

"I thought so. Is there a young man in England?"

"There may be."

"Then marry him at once and raise a family. A boy, a girl, or a baby Austin, according to taste. And forget Russia...Good-bye."

The place seemed very lonely after he had gone, yet Anna got fresh tea, merely as an excuse to linger. She knew that she should not delay in buying her railway ticket. Time was passing, and, at this crisis, time was precious.

The truth was that she lacked the moral courage to go to the office where she had deposited most of her money. In spite of her philosophy she shrank from the ordeal of seeing Otto and Olga together. And—definitely—she did not want to see the new fur.

The clock ticked on, but still she sat and smoked. Presently she drew out Gloria James's letter and read it. It told her that her former schoolfellow was on her way back from a visit to the East, with her husband and her baby.

"It's a business trip," she wrote, "and we'll be stopping off for a day or so at your burg. Wait for us, and we can all travel back to England together."

Anna shuddered at the prospect of staying a moment longer than was necessary in a dreary town which was drained of interest.

"Declined—without thanks," she murmured.

As she crossed over to the buffet to pay her score, she realised that she would be spared the pang of seeing the lovers together, for Olga was in the café, alone. She was a

fair Jewess, with plaits of golden hair and a famished intellectual face, which was subtly cheapened by the meretricious fur coat she wore.

When Anna crossed to her table, she put down her glass of vodka and spoke aggressively.

"If you've come to talk of Otto, I won't talk of him to *you*."

Surprised by her rival's vehemence, Anna spoke with stressed calm.

"I don't want to discuss him. I've merely come to say 'Good-bye.' But why aren't you at the office?"

Olga stared at her while her lips began to quiver.

"Haven't you heard?" she asked incredulously.

"Heard what?"

A gloomy triumph smouldered in Olga's eyes as she surrendered herself to the drama of her announcement.

"The office was raided, last night, by the *Ogpu*. They took away the papers and all the money in the safe. And they carried my Otto away in the Black Raven."

As she listened, Anna's head began to spin.

"All the money," she repeated blankly.

CHAPTER III

Table of Contents

AS Anna stared blankly before her, suddenly she realised the real reason for Conrad Stern's intervention. His question about Otto held no reference to the quarrel. He merely assumed that she had heard of the raid, and therefore, could have no wish to stay longer in Russia.

Her thoughts were recalled by the sight of Olga's stricken face. It brought home the truth that this was the Jewess's tragedy. Although she was both shocked and sorry personally, to hear of Otto's arrest, he had hurt her so much that she felt no sense of real loss.

"It must be some terrible mistake," she cried. "Why should they arrest him?"

Olga shook away her hand and laughed.

"For anti-Soviet propaganda," she said defiantly.

Anna felt as though Olga had struck her between her eyes.

"But the paper was non-political," she protested feebly.

"The paper was only a blind. He had you all fooled. Both sides were paying him—the Fascists and his rich intellectual friends."

"Don't talk like that. We must do him the justice to believe that he acted from conviction."

"Why must we?" Olga's thin red lips writhed with scorn, as she explained. "It's quite simple. He wanted money—that is all. The best posts in a government are always already filled. A young and ambitious man must be an 'Anti,' because a revolution will give him his chance to rise."

"Still I can't see why he should want money so desperately as all that. He had enough."

"Not enough for me. You understand, one must experience *everything.* But I had never known luxury...It was good while it lasted, especially when one knows the end...Now the future holds more experience. One can only wait."

The fatalistic attitude did not appeal to Anna, in spite of the jar to her feelings. Otto had betrayed his country—and the magnitude of this offence dwarfed his disloyalty to herself. All the same, it seemed scarcely civilised to abandon him to his fate.

At the memory of a muddy swell of water sweeping past the prison wall, she spoke urgently.

"Olga, we must do something at once. We must go to the prison and arrange bail for him."

The mention of the British procedure made Olga shake her head with a gloomy triumph in defeatism.

"It is all utterly hopeless," she told Anna. "We have all been to the prison—even the secret Stern. But they will tell us nothing of Otto. They say they do not know. All lies—but we shall never know. This is the end."

She lit another cigarette and stared at Anna with sombre eyes.

"Are you not unhappy now that you quarrelled with him yesterday?" she demanded. "You hurt him so deeply. Is it not misery to remind yourself that you would be spared this regret if only you had waited for one short day longer?"

Anna did her best to hide her real feeling, for the reproach had made her realise her luck.

Had she waited that extra day, her private money would now be confiscated with the rest of the funds.

Since her bedroom at the hotel was too communal for the safe-keeping of valuables, Otto had acted as her banker and kept her surplus funds at the office. During yesterday's quarrel, however, he marked his displeasure by opening the safe and taking out an envelope.

"Since you do not trust me," he said, "I refuse to hold this for you. Oblige me by counting it now, in my presence. You will find I have borrowed a little, from time to time—but I have always left an I.O.U."

Instead of being ashamed by his gesture and assuring him of her confidence in him, Anna was unfeignedly glad to take possession. What was worse, she exhibited a business spirit, which—besides being bourgeois—led to the revelation of Olga's fur coat.

At the end of the stocktaking interlude, they parted in mutual anger. Otto stamped out of the office, while Anna lingered, in order to place her money in a temporary hiding-place. On the morrow she would get a strong lock fitted to her suitcase; but, in the meanwhile, it seemed unwise to carry her surplus in her bag, for fear of mischance.

She knew of a cache which was her secret.

There was a deep crack at the back of one of the pigeon-holes in the battered roll-top desk, through which she pushed the envelope. It was completely concealed behind the matchwood lining, and she was confident that no one would guess its existence.

But even as she congratulated herself on her foresight, the recollection of the raid caused a doubt to form in her

mind.

"Olga," she said, "wait here for me. I have something to do. I won't be long away."

With the sense that she could not reach the office quickly enough, she ran across the deserted square and turned into an alley where she scuffled through layers of half-frozen leaves.

To her relief, the wooden building wore its usual appearance. The door was unlocked and was unguarded by an official. As she rushed up the dark, crazy stairs her heart pounded with suspense. In her haste, she forgot to avoid the broken step and her heel crashed through the rotten wood; but she wrenched it free of splinters and raced up through the darkness of the top flight.

Her luck seemed to hold, for the office was deserted. It presented a scene of desolate disorder with its grimed windows and cold stove. The dirty walls were washed a pale blue—the hue of skim milk—and were covered with pencil scribbles. Although the files and official literature had been removed, the refuse was left, and the floor was littered with papers.

Anna was conscious of nothing but the roll-desk, which was still cluttered with rubbish. Scooping out a bundle of soiled typescript, she thrust her arm into the pigeon-hole and explored the crack.

To her joy, she could feel the top of the envelope.

Even as she congratulated herself, she heard the whine of the street-door being pushed over the stone passage. At the sound she began to panic.

"If it's an official he will confiscate my money," she thought. "I *must* get it before he comes."

Its removal was a delicate task for slim fingers, and, with time to spare, she could have managed it easily. But flurried by the clatter of heavy boots mounting the stairs, she made a frantic dive to grip a corner and only succeeded in prodding it farther back behind the lining.

As she fished frantically for it, she could feel it slipping away from under her touch. It was now a hopeless enterprise, for the steps had reached the door. She had barely time to spring away from the desk before a youth entered the room.

It was not the police, but one of the regular gang—a shaggy youth who had used the office as a club. Anna remembered that his name was "Ivan," and that, although she accepted him fraternally, she would not have tolerated him as a casual acquaintance.

He was an unpleasant-looking person, with shifty eyes; his hair was long and greasy, while his skin was pitted as a photograph of the surface of the moon.

"What are you doing here, Comrade?" he asked suspiciously.

"I have only just heard the news," she replied quickly. "So I came to see if any one was here who could tell me more. I am quite in the dark about it all."

"I, too," declared Ivan, with an emphasis which matched her own. "Before to-day, I knew nothing at all."

She had to accept his statement, although she was not impressed by his crafty glance.

"It has been a shock to both of us," she said. "But what have *you* come for?"

"To pick up any trifle they have left," replied the youth. "Paper and pencils are always useful to a student. Also I wish to write letters here. Maybe, I could find a stamp."

Anna clenched her fingers impatiently as Ivan seated himself at the desk. It was evident that he planned a lengthy session, for he laid his lunch—a parcel of garlic-sausage sandwiches—on the blotting-pad.

Tantalised by the check, she wondered whether she could appeal to him for help. She was trying to decide if she could trust him, when, fortunately, she remembered a story about his early youth.

It was whispered that, as a boy, he had been one of the *Besprizorny*—a band of child-robbers—that operated on a ruthless and wholesale scale.

It was not exactly a recommendation for honesty. Besides, she doubted the value of his services, for his hands were too clumsy for delicate manipulation. He would probably try to spike the envelope with his knife, in which case the notes might be mutilated.

"I think I could ease it out myself, with a manicure tool," she reflected. "But I must wait until he is gone."

"I must go back to Olga," she told Ivan. "When will you be leaving?"

"Seychas."

She might have known the answer would be the inevitable Russian "Presently," which spanned, without measuring, every interval of time. There was nothing to do now but to prepare for action and wait her opportunity.

She did not run on her return journey to the café. When she entered it, she found that Olga had gone without leaving any message. To fill the gap of waiting until Ivan had finished his letters, she walked back to the hotel as slowly as the temperature admitted.

The leaves underfoot rustled hoarsely at every step, as though in protest. In the lanes between the tall houses, she caught glimpses of a heaving ale-coloured sea, clotted thickly with cat-ice. Gone was the husky murmur of the trees and the lapping of wine-dark water in an enchanted dusk.

When she reached the hotel, the chambermaid met her in the hall.

"Now you have bought your ticket," she said to Anna, "we can begin our last game of chess."

Anna grimaced slightly at the reminder of her unfulfilled promise to Conrad Stern, as she set the pieces on the board. She lingered in the vestibule making the opening moves, in readiness for her inevitable nightly defeat by the chambermaid, and then went upstairs, to fetch her manicure-case.

As she hastened back to the office, she wondered hopefully whether Ivan had finished his letter.

"Perhaps in another five minutes I shall be on my way to buy my ticket," she thought. "He *must* be gone. I've given him enough time to clear out the place."

It was an ill-omened suggestion, for, when she entered the room, she stared around her in dismay.

Apparently the former boy-robber had broken his own record. He was there still, seated on the floor and chewing