E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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CHAPTER I

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"A club for diplomats and gentlemen," Prince Karschoff remarked, looking lazily through a little cloud of tobacco smoke around the spacious but almost deserted card room. "The classification seems comprehensive enough, yet it seems impossible to get even a decent rubber of bridge."

Sir Daniel Harker, a many years retired plenipotentiary to one of the smaller Powers, shrugged his shoulders.

"Personally, I have come to the conclusion," he declared, "that the *raison d'être* for the club seems to be passing. There is no diplomacy, nowadays, and every man who pays his taxes is a gentleman. Kingley, you are the youngest. Ransack the club and find a fourth."

The Honourable Nigel Kingley smiled lazily from the depths of his easy-chair. He was a young Englishman of normal type, long-limbed, clean-shaven, with good features, a humorous mouth and keen grey eyes.

"In actual years," he admitted, "I may have the advantage of you two, but so far as regards the qualities of youth, Karschoff is the youngest man here. Besides, no one could refuse him anything."

"It is a subterfuge," the Prince objected, "but if I must go, I will go presently. We will wait five minutes, in case Providence should be kind to us."

The three men relapsed into silence. They were seated in a comfortable recess of the card room of the St. Philip's Club. The atmosphere of the apartment seemed redolent

with suggestions of faded splendour. There was a faint perfume of Russian calf from the many rows of musty volumes which still filled the stately bookcases. The oil paintings which hung upon the walls belonged to a remote period. In a distant corner, four other men were playing bridge, speechless and almost motionless, the white faces of two of them like cameos under the electric light and against the dark walls. There was no sound except the soft patter of the cards and the subdued movements of a servant preparing another bridge table by the side of the three men. Then the door of the room was quietly opened and closed. A man of youthful middle-age, carefully dressed, with a large, clean-shaven face, blue eyes, and fair hair sprinkled with grey, came towards them. He was well set up, almost anxiously ingratiating in manner.

"You see now what Providence has sent," Sir Daniel Harker observed under his breath.

"It is enough to make an atheist of one, this!" the Prince muttered.

"Any bridge?" the newcomer enquired, seating himself at the table and shuffling one of the packs of cards.

The three men rose to their feet with varying degrees of unwillingness.

"Immelan is too good for us," Sir Daniel grumbled. "He always wins."

"I am lucky," the newcomer admitted, "but I may be your partner; in which case, you too will win."

"If you are my partner," the Prince declared, "I shall play for five pounds a hundred. I desire to gamble. London is beginning to weary me."

"Mr. Kingley is a better player, though not so lucky," Immelan acknowledged, with a little bow.

"Never believe it, with all due respect to our young friend here," Sir Daniel replied, as he cut a card. "Kingley plays like a man with brain but without subtlety. In a duel between you two, I would back Immelan every time."

Kingley took his place at the table with a little gesture of resignation. He looked across the table to where Immelan sat displaying the card which he had just cut. The eyes of the two men met. A few seconds of somewhat significant silence followed. Then Immelan gathered up the cards.

"I have the utmost respect for Mr. Kingley as an adversary," he said.

The latter bowed a little ironically.

"May you always preserve that sentiment! To-day, chance seems to have made us partners. Your deal, Mr. Immelan."

"What stakes?" the Prince enquired, settling himself down in his chair.

"They are for you to name," Immelan declared.

The Prince laughed shortly.

"I believe you are as great a gambler at heart as I am," he observed.

"With Mr. Kingley for my partner, and the game one of skill," was the courteous reply, "I do not need to limit my stakes."

A servant crossed the room, bringing a note upon a tray. He presented it to Kingley, who opened and read it through without change of countenance. When he had finished it, however, he laid his cards face downwards upon the table.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I owe you my most profound apologies. I am called away at once on a matter of urgent business."

"But this is most annoying," the Prince declared irritably.

"Here comes my saviour," Kingley remarked, as another man entered the card room. "Henderson will take my place. Glad I haven't to break you up, after all. Henderson, will you play a rubber?"

The newcomer assented. Nigel Kingley made his adieux and crossed the room. Immelan watched him curiously.

"What is our friend Kingley's profession?" he enquired.

"He has no profession," Sir Daniel replied. "He has never come into touch with the sordid needs of these money-grubbing days. He is the nephew and heir of the Earl of Dorminster."

Immelan looked away from the retreating figure.

"Lord Dorminster," he murmured. "The same Lord Dorminster who was in the Government many years ago?"

"He was Foreign Secretary when I was Governor of Jamaica," Sir Daniel answered. "A very brilliant man he was in those days."

Immelan nodded thoughtfully.

"I remember," he said.

Nigel Kingley, on leaving the St. Philip's Club, was driven at once, in the automobile which he found awaiting him, to a large corner house in Belgrave Square, which he entered with the air of an habitué. The waiting major-domo took him at once in charge and piloted him across the hall.

"His lordship is very much occupied, Mr. Nigel," he announced. "He is not seeing any other callers. He left word,

however, that you were to be shown in the moment you arrived."

"His lordship is quite well, I hope?"

"Well in health, sir, but worried, and I don't wonder at it," the man replied, speaking with the respectful freedom of an old servant. "I never thought I'd live to see such times as these."

A man in the early sixties, still good-looking, notwithstanding a somewhat worn expression, looked up from his seat at the library table on Kingley's entrance. He nodded, but waited until the door was closed behind the retreating servant before he spoke.

"Good of you to come, Nigel," he said. "Bring your chair up here."

"Bad news?" the newcomer enquired.

"Damnable!"

There was a brief silence, during which Nigel, knowing his uncle's humours, leaned back in his chair and waited. Upon the table was a little pile of closely written manuscript, and by their side several black-bound code books, upon which the "F.O.Private" still remained, though almost obliterated with time. Lord Dorminster's occupation was apparent. He was decoding a message of unusual length. Presently he turned away from the table, however, and faced his nephew. His hands travelled to his waistcoat pocket. He drew out a cigarette from a thin gold case, lit it and began to smoke. Then he crossed his legs and leaned a little farther back in his chair.

"Nigel," he said, "we are living in strange times."

"No one denies that, sir," was the grave assent.

Lord Dorminster glanced at the calendar which stood upon the desk.

"To-day," he continued, "is the twenty-third day of March, nineteen hundred and thirty-four. Fifteen years ago that terrible Peace Treaty was signed. Since then you know what the history of our country has been. I am not blowing my own trumpet when I say that nearly every man with true political insight has been cast adrift. At the present moment the country is in the hands of a body of highly respectable and well-meaning men who, as a parish council, might conduct the affairs of Dorminster Town with unqualified success. As statesmen they do not exist. It seems to me, Nigel, that you and I are going to see in reality that spectre which terrified the world twenty years ago. We are going to see the breaking up of a mighty empire."

"Tell me what has happened or is going to happen," Nigel begged.

"Well, for one thing," his uncle replied, "the Emperor of the East is preparing for a visit to Europe. He will be here probably next month. You know whom I mean, of course?"

"Prince Shan!" Nigel exclaimed.

"Prince Shan of China," Lord Dorminster assented. "His coming links up many things which had been puzzling me. I tell you, Nigel, what happens during Prince Shan's visit will probably decide the destinies of this country, and yet I wouldn't mind betting you a thousand to one that there isn't a single official of the Government who has the slightest idea as to why he is coming, or that he is coming at all."

"Do you know?" Nigel asked.

"I can only surmise. Let us leave Prince Shan for the moment, Nigel. Now listen. You go about a great deal. What do people say about me—honestly, I mean? Speak with your face to the light."

"They call you a faddist and a scaremonger," Nigel confessed, "yet there are one or two, especially at the St. Philip's Club, diplomatists and ambassadors whose place in the world has passed away, who think and believe differently. You know, sir, that I am amongst them."

Lord Dorminster nodded kindly.

"Well," he said, "I fancy I am about to prove myself. Seven years ago, it was," he went on reminiscently, "when the new National Party came into supreme power. You know one of their first battle cries—'Down with all secret treaties! Down with all secret diplomacy! Let nothing exist but an honest commercial understanding between the different countries of the world!' How Germany and Russia howled with joy! In place of an English statesman with his country's broad interests at heart, we have in Berlin and Petrograd half a dozen representatives of the great industries, whose object, in their own words, is, I believe, to develop friendly commercialism and a feeling of brotherhood between the nations. Not only our ambassadors but our secret service were swept clean out of existence. I remember going to Broadley, the day he was appointed Foreign Minister, and I asked him a simple question. I asked him whether he did not consider it his duty to keep his finger upon the pulses of the other great nations, however friendly they might seem, to keep himself assured that all these expressions of good will were honourable, and that in the heart of the German nation

that great craving for revenge which is the natural heritage of the present generation had really become dissipated. Broadley smiled at me. 'Lord Dorminster,' he said, 'the chief cause of wars in the past has been suspicion. We look upon espionage as a disgraceful practice. It is the people of Germany with whom we are in touch now, not a military oligarchy, and the people of Germany no more desire war than we do. Besides, there is the League of Nations.' Those were Broadley's views then, and they are his views to-day. You know what I did?"

Nigel assented cautiously.

"I suppose it is an open secret amongst a few of us," he observed. "You have been running an unofficial secret service of your own."

"Precisely! I have had a few agents at work for over a year, and when I have finished decoding this last dispatch, I shall have evidence which will prove beyond a doubt that we are on the threshold of terrible events. The worst of it is—well, we have been found out."

"What do you mean?" Nigel asked quickly.

His uncle's sensitive lips quivered.

"You knew Sidwell?"

"Quite well."

"Sidwell was found stabbed to the heart in a café in Petrograd, three weeks ago," Lord Dorminster announced. "An official report of the enquiry into his death informs his relatives that his death was due to a quarrel with some Russian sailors over one of the women of the quarter where he was found."

"Horrible!" Nigel muttered.

"Sidwell was one of those unnatural people, as you know," Lord Dorminster went on, "who never touched wine or spirits and who hated women. To continue. Atcheson was a friend of yours, wasn't he?"

"Of course! He was at Eton with me. It was I who first brought him here to dine. Don't tell me that anything has happened to Jim Atcheson!"

"This dispatch is from him," Lord Dorminster replied, indicating the pile of manuscript upon the table,—"a dispatch which came into my hands in a most marvellous fashion. He died last week in a nursing home in—well, let us say a foreign capital. The professor in charge of the hospital sends a long report as to the unhappy disease from which he suffered. As a matter of fact, he was poisoned."

Nigel Kingley had been a soldier in his youth and he was a brave man. Nevertheless, the horror of these things struck a cold chill to his heart. He seemed suddenly to be looking into the faces of spectres, to hear the birth of the winds of destruction.

"That is all I have to say to you for the moment," his uncle concluded gravely. "In an hour I shall have finished decoding this dispatch, and I propose then to take you into my entire confidence. In the meantime, I want you to go and talk for a few minutes to the cleverest woman in England, the woman who, in the face of a whole army of policemen and detectives, crossed the North Sea yesterday afternoon with this in her pocket."

"You don't mean Maggie?" Nigel exclaimed eagerly.

His uncle nodded.

"You will find her in the boudoir," he said. "I told her that you were coming. In an hour's time, return here."

Lord Dorminster rose to his feet as his nephew turned to depart. He laid his hand upon the latter's shoulder, and Nigel always remembered the grave kindliness of his tone and expression.

"Nigel," he sighed, "I am afraid I shall be putting upon your shoulders a terrible burden, but there is no one else to whom I can turn."

"There is no one else to whom you ought to turn, sir," the young man replied simply. "I shall be back in an hour."

CHAPTER II

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Lady Maggie Trent, a stepdaughter of the Earl of Dorminster, was one of those young women who had baffled description for some years before she had commenced to take life seriously. She was neither fair nor dark, petite nor tall. No one could ever have called her nondescript, or have extolled any particular grace of form or feature. Her complexion had defied the ravages of sun and wind and that moderate indulgence in cigarettes and cocktails which the youth of her day affected. Her nose was inclined to be retroussé, her mouth tender but impudent, her grey eyes mostly veiled in expression but capable of wonderful changes. She was curled up in a chair when Nigel entered, immersed in a fashion paper. She held out her left hand, which he raised to his lips.

"Well, Nigel, dear," she exclaimed, "what do you think of my new profession?"

"I hate it," he answered frankly.

She sighed and laid down the fashion paper resignedly.

"You always did object to a woman doing anything in the least useful. Do you realise that if anything in the world can save this stupid old country, I have done it?"

"I realise that you've been running hideous risks," he replied.

She looked at him petulantly.

"What of it?" she demanded. "We all run risks when we do anything worth while."

"Not quite the sort that you have been facing."

She smiled thoughtfully.

"Do you know exactly where I have been?" she asked.

"No idea," he confessed. "What my uncle has just told me was a complete revelation, so far as I was concerned. I believed, with the rest of the world, what the newspapers announced—that you were visiting Japan and China, and afterwards the South Sea Islands, with the Wendercombes."

She smiled.

"Dad wanted to tell you," she said, "but it was I who made him promise not to. I was afraid you would be disagreeable about it. We arranged it all with the Wendercombes, but as a matter of fact I did not even start with them. For the last eight months, I have been living part of the time in Berlin and part of the time in a country house near the Black Forest."

"Alone?"

"Not a bit of it! I have been governess to the two daughters of Herr Essendorf."

"Essendorf, the President of the German Republic?"

Lady Maggie nodded.

"He isn't a bit like his pictures. He is a huge fat man and he eats a great deal too much. Oh, the horror of those meals!" she added, with a little shudder. "Think of me, dear Nigel, who never eat more than an omelette and some fruit for luncheon, compelled to sit down every day to a *mittagessen!* I wonder I have any digestion left at all."

"Do you mean that you were there under your own name?" he asked incredulously.

She shook her head.

"I secured some perfectly good testimonials before I left," she said. "They referred to a Miss Brown, the daughter of Prebendary Brown. I was Miss Brown."

"Great Heavens!" Nigel muttered under his breath. "You heard about Atcheson?"

She nodded.

"Poor fellow, they got him all right. You talk about thrills, Nigel," she went on. "Do you know that the last night before I left for my vacation, I actually heard that fat old Essendorf chuckling with his wife about how his clever police had laid an English spy by the heels, and telling her, also, of the papers which they had discovered and handed over. All the time the real dispatch, written by Atcheson when he was dying, was sewn into my corsets. How's that for an exciting situation?"

"It's a man's job, anyhow," Nigel declared.

She shrugged her shoulders and abandoned the personal side of the subject.

"Have you been in Germany lately, Nigel?" she enquired.

"Not for many years," he answered.

She stretched herself out upon the couch and lit a cigarette.

"The Germany of before the war of course I can't remember," she said pensively. "I imagine, however, that there was a sort of instinctive jealous dislike towards England and everything English, simply because England had had a long start in colonisation, commerce and all the rest of it. But the feeling in Germany now, although it is marvellously hidden, is something perfectly amazing. It absolutely vibrates wherever you go. The silence makes it

all the more menacing. Soon after I got to Berlin, I bought a copy of the Treaty of Peace and read it. Nigel, was it necessary to have been so bitterly cruel to a beaten enemy?"

"Logically it would seem not," Nigel admitted. "Actually, we cannot put ourselves back into the spirit of those days. You must remember that it was an unprovoked war, a war engineered by Germany for the sheer purposes of aggression. That is why a punitive spirit entered into our subsequent negotiations."

She nodded.

"I expect history will tell us some day," she continued, "that we needed a great statesman of the Beaconsfield type at the Peace table. However, that is all ended. They sowed the seed at Versailles, and I think we are going to reap the harvest."

"After all," Nigel observed thoughtfully, "it is very difficult to see what practical interference there could be with the peace of the world. I can very well believe that the spirit is there, but when it comes to hard facts—well, what can they do? England can never be invaded. The war of 1914 proved that. Besides, Germany now has a representative on the League of Nations. She is bound to toe the line with the rest."

"It is not in Germany alone that we are disliked," Maggie reminded him. "We seem somehow or other to have found our way into the bad books of every country in Europe. Clumsy statesmanship is it, or what?"

"I should attribute it," Nigel replied, "to the passing of our old school of ambassadors. After all, ambassadors are born,

not made, and they should be—they very often were—men of rare tact and perceptions. We have no one now to inform us of the prejudices and humours of the nations. We often offend quite unwittingly, and we miss many opportunities of a *rapprochement*. It is trade, trade, trade and nothing else, the whole of the time, and the men whom we sent to the different Courts to further our commercial interests are not the type to keep us informed of the more subtle and intricate matters which sometimes need adjustment between two countries."

"That may be the explanation of all the bad feeling," Maggie admitted, "and you may be right when you say that any practical move against us is almost impossible. Dad doesn't think so, you know. He is terribly exercised about the coming of Prince Shan."

"I must get him to talk to me," Nigel said. "As a matter of fact, I don't think that we need fear Asiatic intervention over here. Prince Shan is too great a diplomatist to risk his country's new prosperity."

"Prince Shan," Maggie declared, "is the one man in the world I am longing to meet. He was at Oxford with you, wasn't he, Nigel?"

"For one year only. He went from there to Harvard."

"Tell me what he was like," she begged.

"I have only a hazy recollection of him," Nigel confessed. "He was a most brilliant scholar and a fine horseman. I can't remember whether he did anything at games."

"Good-looking?"

"Extraordinarily so. He was very reserved, though, and even in those days he was far more exclusive than our own

royal princes. We all thought him clever, but no one dreamed that he would become Asia's great man. I'll tell you all that I can remember about him another time, Maggie. I'm rather curious about that report of Atcheson's. Have you any idea what it is about?"

She shook her head.

"None at all. It is in the old Foreign Office cipher and it looks like gibberish. I only know that the first few lines he transcribed gave dad the jumps."

"I wonder if he has finished it by now."

"He'll send for you when he has. How do you think I am looking, Nigel?"

"Wonderful," he answered, rising to his feet and standing with his elbow upon the mantelpiece, gazing down at her. "But then you *are* wonderful, aren't you, Maggie? You know I always thought so."

She picked up a mirror from the little bag by her side and scrutinized her features.

"It can't be my face," she decided, turning towards him with a smile. "I must have charm."

"Your face is adorable," he declared.

"Are you going to flirt with me?" she asked, with a faint smile at the corners of her lips. "You always do it so well and so convincingly. And I hate foreigners. They are terribly in earnest but there is no finesse about them. You may kiss me just once, please, Nigel, the way I like."

He held her for a moment in his arms, tenderly, but with a reserve to which she was accustomed from him. Presently she thrust him away. Her own colour had risen a little.

"Delightful," she murmured. "Think of the wasted months! No one has kissed me, Nigel, since we said good-bye."

"Have you made up your mind to marry me yet?" he asked.

"My dear," she answered, patting his hand, "do restrain your ardour. Do you really want to marry me?"

"Of course I do!"

"You don't love me."

"I am awfully fond of you," he assured her, "and I don't love any one else."

She shook her head.

"It isn't enough, Nigel," she declared, "and, strange to say, it's exactly how I feel about you."

"I don't see why it shouldn't be enough," he argued. "Perhaps we have too much common sense for these violent feelings."

"It may be that," she admitted doubtfully. "On the other hand, don't let's run any risk. I should hate to find an affinity, and all that sort of thing, after marriage—divorce in these days is such shocking bad form. Besides, honestly, Nigel, I don't feel frivolous enough to think about marriage just now. I have the feeling that even while the clock is ticking we are moving on to terrible things. I can't tell you quite what it is. I carried my life in my hands during those last few days abroad. I dare say this is the reaction."

He smiled reassuringly.

"After all, you are safe at home now, dear," he reminded her, "and I really am very fond of you, Maggie."

"And I'm quite absurdly fond of you, Nigel," she acknowledged. "It makes me feel quite uncomfortable when I reflect that I shall probably have to order you to make love to some one else before the week is out."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," he declared firmly. "I am not good at that sort of thing. And who is she, anyhow?"

They were interrupted by a sudden knock at the door—not the discreet tap of a well-bred domestic, but a flurried, almost an imperative summons. Before either of them could reply, the door was opened and Brookes, the elderly butler, presented himself upon the threshold. Even before he spoke, it was clear that he brought alarming news.

"Will you step down to the library at once, sir?" he begged, addressing Nigel.

"What is the matter, Brookes?" Maggie demanded anxiously.

"I fear that his lordship is not well," the man replied.

They all hurried out together. Brookes was evidently terribly perturbed and went on talking half to himself without heeding their questions.

"I thought at first that his lordship must have fainted," he said. "I heard a queer noise, and when I went in, he had fallen forward across the table. Parkins has rung for Doctor Wilcox."

"What sort of a noise?" Nigel asked.

"It sounded like a shot," the man faltered.

They entered the library, Nigel leading the way. Lord Dorminster was lying very much as Brookes had described him, but there was something altogether unnatural in the collapse of his head and shoulders and his motionless body.

Nigel spoke to him, touched him gently, raised him at last into a sitting position. Something on which his right hand seemed to have been resting clattered on to the carpet. Nigel turned around and waved Maggie back.

"Don't come," he begged.

"Is it a stroke?" she faltered.

"I am afraid that he is dead," Nigel answered simply.

They went out into the hall and waited there in shocked silence until the doctor arrived. The latter's examination lasted only a few seconds. Then he pointed to the telephone.

"This is very terrible," he said. "I am afraid you had better ring up Scotland Yard, Mr. Kingley. Lord Dorminster appears either to have shot himself, as seems most probable," he added, glancing at the revolver upon the carpet, "or to have been murdered."

"It is incredible!" Nigel exclaimed. "He was the sanest possible man, and the happiest, and he hadn't an enemy in the world."

The physician pointed downwards to the revolver. Then he unfastened once more the dead man's waistcoat, opened his shirt and indicated a small blue mark just over his heart.

"That is how he died," he said. "It must have been instantaneous."

Time seemed to beat out its course in leaden seconds whilst they waited for the superintendent from Scotland Yard. Nigel at first stood still for some moments. From outside came the cheerful but muffled roar of the London streets, the hooting of motor horns, the rumbling of wheels, the measured footfall of the passing multitude. A boy went

by, whistling; another passed, calling hoarsely the news from the afternoon papers. A muffin man rang his bell, a small boy clattered his stick against the area bailing. The whole world marched on, unmoved and unnoticing. In this sombre apartment alone tragedy reigned in sinister silence. On the sofa, Lord Dorminster, who only half an hour ago had seemed to be in the prime of life and health, lay dead.

Nigel moved towards the writing-table and stood looking at it in wonder. The code book still remained, but there was not the slightest sign of any manuscript or paper of any sort. He even searched the drawers of the desk without result. Every trace of Atcheson's dispatch and Lord Dorminster's transcription of it had disappeared!

CHAPTER III

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On a certain day some weeks after the adjourned inquest and funeral of Lord Dorminster, Nigel obtained a long-sought-for interview with the Right Honourable Mervin Brown, who had started life as a factory inspector and was now Prime Minister of England. The great man received his visitor with an air of good-natured tolerance.

"Heard of you from Scotland Yard, haven't I, Lord Dorminster?" he said, as he waved him to a seat. "I gather that you disagreed very strongly with the open verdict which was returned at the inquest upon your uncle?"

"The verdict was absolutely at variance with the facts," Nigel declared. "My uncle was murdered, and a secret report of certain doings on the continent, which he was decoding at the time, was stolen."

"The medical evidence scarcely bears out your statement," Mr. Mervin Brown pointed out dryly, "nor have the police been able to discover how any one could have obtained access to the room, or left it, without leaving some trace of their visit behind. Further, there are no indications of a robbery having been attempted."

"I happen to know more than any one else about this matter," Nigel urged,—"more, even, than I thought it advisable to mention at the inquest—and I beg you to listen to me, Mr. Mervin Brown. I know that you considered my uncle to be in some respects a crank, because he was far-seeing enough to understand that under the seeming