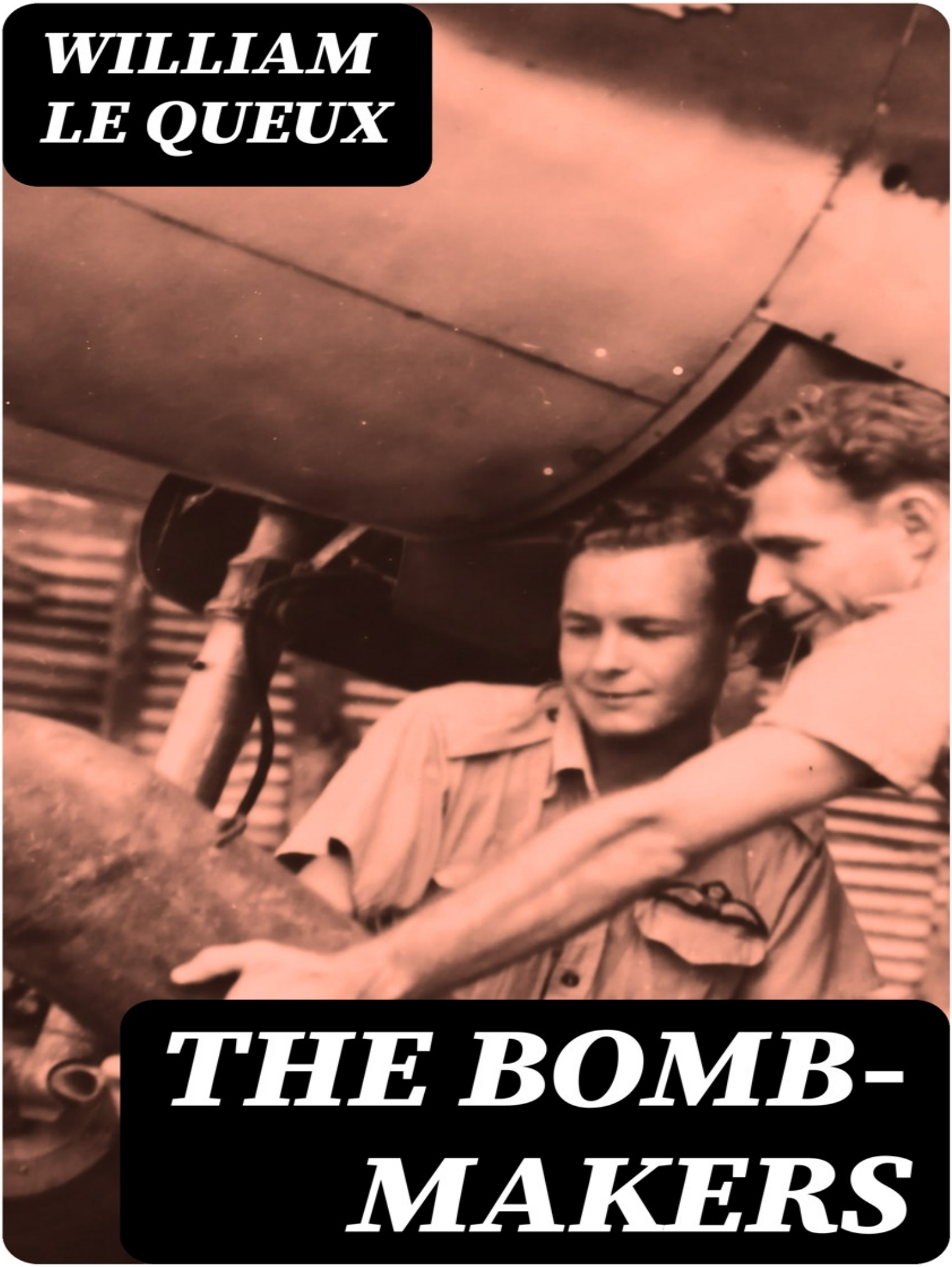
WILLIAM LE QUEUX



THE BOMB-MAKERS

William Le Queux

The Bomb-Makers

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"Being some Curious Records concerning the Craft and Cunning of Theodore Drost, an enemy alien in London, together with certain Revelations regarding his daughter Ella"

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Chapter One.

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The Devil’s Dice.

“Do get rid of the girl! Can’t you see that she’s highly dangerous!” whispered the tall, rather overdressed man as he glanced furtively across the small square shop set with little tables, dingy in the haze of tobacco-smoke. It was an obscure, old-fashioned little restaurant in one of London’s numerous byways—a resort of Germans, naturalised and otherwise, “the enemy in our midst,” as the papers called them.

“I will. I quite agree. My girl may know just a little too much—if we are not very careful.”

“Ah! she knows far too much already, Drost, thanks to your ridiculous indiscretions,” growled the dark-eyed man beneath his breath. “They will land you before a military court-martial—if you are not careful!”

“Well, I hardly think so. I’m always most careful—most silent and discreet,” and he grinned evilly.

“True, you are a good Prussian—that I know; but remember that Ella has, unfortunately for us, very many friends, and she may talk—women’s talk, you know. We—you and I—are treading very thin ice. She is, I consider, far too friendly with that young fellow Kennedy. It’s dangerous—distinctly dangerous to us—and I really wonder that you allow it—you, a patriotic Prussian!”

And, drawing heavily at his strong cigar, he paused and examined its white ash.

“Allow it?” echoed the elder man. “How, in the name of Fate, can I prevent it? Suggest some means to end their acquaintanceship, and I am only too ready to hear it.”

The man who spoke, the grey-haired Dutch pastor, father of Ella Drost, the smartly-dressed girl who was seated chatting and laughing merrily with two rather ill-dressed men in the farther corner of the little smoke-dried place, grunted deeply. To the world of London he posed as a Dutchman. He was a man with a curiously triangular face, a big square forehead, with tight-drawn skin and scanty hair, and broad heavy features which tapered down to a narrow chin that ended in a pointed, grey, and rather scraggy beard.

Theodore Drost was about fifty-five, a keen, active man whose countenance, upon critical examination, would have been found to be curiously refined, intelligent, and well preserved. Yet he was shabbily dressed, his long black clerical coat shiny with wear, in contrast with the way in which his daughter—in her fine furs and clothes of the latest mode—was attired. But the father, in all grades of life, is usually shabby, while his daughter—whatever be her profession—looks smart, be it the smartness of Walworth or that of Worth.

As his friend, Ernst Ortmann, had whispered those warning words he had glanced across at her, and noting how gaily she was laughing with her two male friends, a cigarette between her pretty lips, he frowned.

Then he looked over to the man who had thus urged discretion.

The pair were seated at a table, upon which was a red-bordered cloth, whereon stood two half-emptied “bocks” of that light beer so dear to the Teuton palate. They called it “Danish beer,” not to offend English customers.

The girl whose smiles they were watching was distinctly pretty. She was about twenty-two, with a sweet, eminently English-looking face, fair and quite in contrast with the decidedly foreign, beetle-browed features of the two leering loafers with whom she sat laughing.

Theodore Drost, to do him justice, was devoted to his daughter, who, because of her childish aptitude, had become a dancer on the lowest level of the variety stage, a touring company which visited fifth-rate towns. Yet, owing to her discovered talent, she had at last graduated through the hard school of the Lancashire “halls,” to what is known as the “syndicate halls” of London.

From a demure child-dancer at an obscure music-hall in the outer suburbs, she had become a noted revue artiste, a splendid dancer, who commanded the services of her own press-agent, who in turn commanded half-a-dozen lines in most of the London morning papers, both her prestige and increased salary following in consequence. The British public so little suspect the insidious influence of the press-agent in the formation of modern genius. The press-agent has, in the past, made many a mediocre fool into a Birthday Baronet, or a “paid-for Knight,” and more than one has been employed in the service of a Cabinet Minister. Oh what sheep we are, and how easily we are led astray!

On that wintry night, Ella Drost—known to the theatre-going public as Stella Steele, the great revue artiste whose

picture postcards were everywhere—sat in that stuffy, dingy little restaurant in Soho, sipping a glass of its pseudo-Danish lager, and laughing with the two unpresentable men before her.

Outside the unpretentious little place was written up the single word “Restaurant.” Its proprietor a big, full-blooded, fair-bearded son of the Fatherland, had kept it for twenty years, and it had been the evening rendezvous of working-class Germans—waiters, bakers, clerks, coiffeurs, jewellers, and such-like.

Here one could still revel in Teuton delicacies, beer brewed in Hamburg, but declared to be “Danish,” the succulent German liver sausage, the sausage of Frankfort—boiled in pairs of course—the palatable sauerkraut with the black sour bread of the Fatherland to match.

“I wish you could get rid of Kennedy,” said Ortmann, as he again, in confidence, bent across the table towards Ella’s father. “I believe she’s in collusion with him.”

“No,” laughed the elder man, “I can’t believe that. Ella is too good a daughter of the Fatherland.” He was one of Germany’s chief agents in England, and had much money in secret at his command.

Ortmann screwed up his eyes and pursed his lips. He was a shrewd, clever man, and very difficult to deceive.

“Money is at stake, my dear Drost,” he whispered very slowly—“big money. But there is love also. And I believe—nay, I’m sure—that Kennedy loves her.”

“Bah! utterly ridiculous!” cried her father. “I don’t believe that for a single moment. She’s only fooling him, as she has fooled all the others.”

“All right. But I’ve watched. You have not,” was the cold reply.

From time to time the attractive Ella, on her part, glanced across at her father, who was whispering with his overdressed companion, and, to the keen observer, it would have been apparent that she was only smoking and gossiping with that pair of low-bred foreigners for distinct purposes of her own.

The truth was that, with her woman’s instinct, feminine cleverness and ingenuity, she, being filled with the enthusiasm of affection for her aviator-lover, was playing a fiercely desperate part as a staunch and patriotic daughter of Great Britain.

The hour was late. She had hurried from the theatre in a taxi, the carmine still about her pretty lips, her eyes still darkened beneath, and the greasepaint only roughly rubbed off. The great gold and white theatre near Leicester Square, where, clad in transparencies, she was “leading lady” in that most popular revue “Half a Moment!” had been packed to suffocation, as indeed it was nightly. Officers and men home on leave from the battle-front all made a point of seeing the pretty, sweet-faced Stella Steele, who danced with such artistic movement, and who sang those catchy patriotic songs of hers, the stirring choruses of which even reached the ears of the Bosches in their trenches. And in many a British dug-out in Flanders there was hung a programme of the revue, or a picture postcard of the seductive Stella.

There were, perhaps, other Stella Steeles on the stage, for the name was, after all, not an uncommon one, but this star of the whole Steele family had arisen from the

theatrical firmament since the war. She, the laughing girl who, that night, sat in that obscure, smoke-laden little den of aliens in Soho, was earning annually more than the “pooled” salary of a British Cabinet Minister.

That Stella was a born artiste all agreed—even her agent, that fat cigar-smoking Hebrew cynic who regarded all stage women as mere cattle out of whom he extracted commissions. To-day nobody can earn unusual emoluments in any profession without real merit assisted by a capable agent.

Stella Steele was believed by all to be thoroughly British. Nobody had ever suspected that her real name was Drost, nor that her bespectacled and pious father had been born in Stuttgart, and had afterwards become naturalised as a Dutchman before coming to England. The cigarette-smoking male portion of the khaki-clad crowd who so loudly applauded her every night had no idea that their idol had been born in Berlin. Isaac Temple, the mild-mannered press-agent whom she employed, had always presented her, both to press and public, and sent those artistic photographs of hers to the Sunday illustrated papers, as daughter of a London barrister who had died suddenly, leaving her penniless. Thus had the suspicious connection with Drost been always carefully suppressed, and Ella lived very quietly in her pretty flat in Stamfordham Mansions, situate just off the High Street in Kensington.

Her father—her English mother, whom she had adored, being long ago dead—lived a quiet, secluded life in one of those rather large houses which may be found on the south side of the Thames between Putney and Richmond. Pastor

Drost had, it was believed by the Dutch colony in London, been a missionary for some years in Sumatra, and, on more than one occasion, he had lectured upon the native life of that island. Therefore he had many friends among Dutch merchants and others, who all regarded him as a perfectly honest and even pious, if rather eccentric, man.

At times he wore big round horn-rimmed glasses which grossly magnified his eyes, giving him a strange goggled appearance. The world, however, never knew that Pastor Drost's only daughter was that versatile dancer who, dressed in next-to-nothing, nightly charmed those huge enthusiastic audiences in the popular revue, "Half a Moment!"

Until three months after the outbreak of war Ella had regarded her father's idiosyncrasies with some amusement, dismissing them as the outcome of a mind absorbed in chemical experiment, for though none save herself was aware of it, the long attic beneath the roof of her father's house—the door of which Theodore Drost always kept securely locked—was fitted as a great chemical laboratory, where he, as a professor of chemistry, was constantly experimenting.

After the outbreak of war, by reason of a conversation she one day overheard between her father and his mysterious visitor, Ernst Ortmann, her suspicions had become aroused. Strange suspicions they indeed were. But in order to obtain confirmation of them, she had become more attached to her father, and had visited him far more frequently than before, busying herself in his domestic

affairs, and sometimes assisting the old widow, Mrs Pennington, who acted as his single servant.

Two years prior to the war, happening upon that house, which was to be sold cheap, Ella had purchased it, ready furnished as it was, and given it as a present to her father as a place in which he might spend his old age in comfort. But until that night when she had overheard the curious conversation—which she had afterwards disclosed in confidence to her lover, Lieutenant Seymour Kennedy, Flight-Commander of the Naval Air Service—she had never dreamed that her father, the good and pious Dutchman who had once been a missionary, was an enemy alien, whose plans were maturing in order to assist a great and desperate conspiracy organised by the secret service of the German Fatherland.

On a certain well-remembered November evening she had revealed to Kennedy the truth, and they had both made a firm compact with each other. The plotter was her father, it was true. But she was a daughter of Great Britain, and it was for her to combat any wily and evil plot which might be formed against the land which had given birth to her adored mother.

She loved Seymour Kennedy. A hundred men had smiled upon her, bent over her little hand, written to her, sent her flowers and presents, and declared to her their undying affection. It is ever so. The popular actress always attracts both fools and fortunes. But Ella, level-headed girl as she was, loved only Seymour, and had accepted the real, whole-hearted and honest kisses which he had imprinted upon her lips. Seymour Kennedy was a gentleman before being an