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CLUBFOOT THE AVENGER

BEING SOME FURTHER ADVENTURES OF
DESMOND OKEWOOD, OF THE SECRET
SERVICE

by

VALENTINE WILLIAMS

Secret Service Series



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IN AFFECTIONATE MEMORY OF

“G”

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INTRODUCTION

At the risk of straining an old and valued friendship, I have persuaded Major Desmond Okewood and his brother to allow me to set down in narrative form some account of a remarkable series of events that, for reasons sufficiently obvious, have never been fully described.

It is now some eighteen months since Dr. Adolf Grundt, the notorious German Secret Service agent, better known to the British Intelligence Corps as “The Man with the Club Foot,” was last heard of; and there appears to remain no valid grounds why the extraordinary happenings which marked his reappearance in England should not now be related, especially as they were sedulously withheld from the newspapers at the time.

Though Major Desmond Okewood and his brother, Mr. Francis Okewood, played a prominent part in these strange adventures, I have been unable to persuade either of them to tell the story himself. It has therefore fallen to my lot to be the Froissart of this chronicle. I do not fear criticism; for my severest critics have been the brothers themselves. Desmond Okewood, for instance, jibs strongly at what he calls my “incurable love of the dramatic”; while Francis, after reading through my much-censored and revised manuscript, pitched it back at me with the curt remark that

the interesting thing about Secret Service yarns is what you are obliged to leave out.

On this plea, then, that in Secret Service matters the whole truth can seldom be told, I would claim indulgence; and, further, on the score that this narrative has been pieced together from talks, often spasmodic and disjointed, with my two friends in all manner of odd places—the golf links, the tennis court, in the train, the Berkeley grill, the smoke-room of the Senior. Sometimes I questioned; but more often I was a listener when a chance remark, a name read in a newspaper, a face seen in a crowd, started the flow of reminiscence. And so, little by little, I gathered the facts about the reëmergence out of the fire and smoke of the World War of this extraordinary character, who, in his day, wielded only less power in Imperial Germany than the Emperor himself.

In a short span of years immense changes have taken place in Europe. To-day it is a far cry to the times of Dr. Grundt and the “G” Branch of Section Seven of the Prussian Political Police. As head of the ex-Kaiser’s personal Secret Service, “der Stelze,” as the Germans nicknamed him from his crippled foot, was the all-powerful instrument of the anger and suspicion of the capricious and neurotic William II. In Germany his very existence was a mere rumour whispered only in the highest circles; and abroad, except in the innermost ring of the Secret Service, he was quite unknown. In the archives of the French Foreign Office there is, I understand, a dossier dealing with his activities of the time of the Algeciras Conference and, later, on the occasion of King Edward’s meeting with the Czar at Reval.

My friends, the two Okewoods, are reticent on this point; but I make no doubt that they, who originally encompassed the downfall of “der Stelze,” know more about the secret history of his career than any other man living, except the ex-Emperor himself. Perhaps, now that memoirs are the fashion, from the seclusion of the little property he is known to possess in southern Germany, The Man with the Clubfoot may one day give the world some pages from his career. If he tell the truth—and Desmond Okewood says he is the kind of man who glories in the blackest crimes—his revelations should eclipse the memoirs of Sénart or Vidocq.

I have begun, as a story-teller should, at the beginning and set down the extraordinary circumstances of the first case to engage the attention of my two friends on the reappearance of Dr. Grundt in England. The affair of the purple cabriolet, which the newspapers at the time reported as a case of suicide, was actually the fourth link in the horrifying chain of crimes which marked Dr. Grundt’s campaign of vengeance against the British Secret Service. I have made it my point of departure, however, because it was not until after the mysterious deaths of Sir Wetherby Soukes, Colonel Branxe, and Mr. Fawcett Wilbur that Desmond and Francis Okewood, who had already retired from the Secret Service, were called back to the sphere of their former activity.

CLUBFOOT THE AVENGER

CHAPTER I THE PURPLE CABRIOLET

It was a wet night. The rain fell in torrents. The low archway leading into Pump Yard, Saint James's, framed a nocturne of London beneath weeping skies. The street beyond was a shining sheet of wet, the lamps making blurred streaks of yellow on the gleaming surface of the asphalt. Within, on the rough cobbles of the yard, the rain splashed and spurted like a thousand dancing knives.

On either side of the small square cars were drawn up in two long lines, the overflow from the lock-ups of the garage set all round the yard. At the open door of a plum-coloured cabriolet, his oilskins shining black in the pale rays of a gas-lamp above his head, a policeman stood, peering over the shoulder of a man in a raincoat who was busying himself over something inside the car. Behind him a glistening umbrella almost completely obscured the form of another man who was talking in whispers to a gnome-like figure in overalls, a sack flung over his head and shoulders in protection against the persistent rain.

Presently from the direction of the street came the grating of changing gears, the throb of an engine. Blazing head-lights clove the hazy chiaroscuro of the yard and a car, high-splashed with mud, drove slowly in. It stopped, the hand-brake jarred, and, with a jerk, the headlights were extinguished. A young man in a heavy overcoat laboriously disentangled himself from behind the driving-wheel and stepped out from under the sopping hood, stretching his legs and stamping his feet as though stiff with cold.

On catching sight of him, the man with the umbrella fussed up. He disclosed a face that was grey with apprehension.

“Whatever do you think has happened, Major Okewood?” he said in a hoarse whisper. “There’s a dead man in the Lancia there!”

He jerked his head backwards in the direction of the cabriolet.

The newcomer, who was vigorously rubbing his numbed hands together, glanced up quickly. He had a lean, clever face with very keen blue eyes and a small dark moustache. Of medium height, he looked as fit as nails.

“What is it, Fink?” he demanded. “A fit or something?”

Fink, who was foreman of the garage, shook his head impressively.

“It’s a suicide. Leastwise, that’s what the doctor says. Poisoned himself. There’s a bottle on the mat inside the car!”

“Oh!” exclaimed the young man, interested. “Who is it? One of your customers?”

“Never set eyes on him before nor yet the car. He’s a poorly dressed sort of chap. I think he jest crawled in there out of the wet to die!”

“Poor devil!” Okewood remarked. “Who found him?”

“Jake here,” said Fink, indicating the dripping goblin at his side. “He had to open the door of the Lancia to get by, and blessed if he didn’t see a bloke’s boot sticking out from under the rug!”

The gnome, who was one of the washers, eagerly took up the tale.

“It give me a proper turn, I tell yer,” he croaked. “I lifts the rug and there ’e wor, lyin’ acrorst the car! An’ stiff, Mister! Blimey, like a poker, ’e wor! An’ twisted up, too, somethink crool! ’Strewth! ’E might ’a’ bin a ’oop, ’e wor that bent! An’ ’is fyce! Gawd! It wor enough to give a bloke the ’orrors, strite!”

And he wiped his nose abstractedly on the back of his hand.

The young man walked across the yard to the purple car. The doctor had just finished his examination and had stepped back. The torch-lamp on the constable’s belt lit up the interior of the Lancia. Its broad white beam fell upon a figure that was lying half on the floor, half on the seat. The body was bent like a bow. The head was flung so far back that the arched spine scarce touched the broad cushioned seat, and

the body rested on the head and the heels. The arms were stretched stiffly out, the hands half closed.

As the old washer had said, the face was, indeed, terrible. The glazed eyes, half open, were seared with fear, but, in hideous contrast, the mouth was twisted up into a leery, fatuous grin. He was a middle-aged man, inclining to corpulence, with a clean-shaven face and high cheek-bones, very black eyebrows, and jet-black hair cut *en brosse*. He was wearing a long drab overcoat which, hanging open, disclosed beneath it a shabby blue jacket and a pair of old khaki trousers.

“Strychnine!” said the doctor—he held up a small medicine bottle, empty and without a label. “That grin is very characteristic. The *risus sardonicus*, we call it. And the muscles are as hard as a board. He’s been dead for hours, I should say. When did the car come in?”

“Round about five o’clock, George said,” the foreman replied. “A young fellow brought it. Said he’d be back later to fetch it away. My word! He’ll get a nasty jar when he turns up!”

“Have you any idea who the dead man is?” Okewood asked the doctor.

“Some down-and-out!” replied the latter, dusting his knees. “There was a letter in his pocket addressed to the coroner. The usual thing. Walking the streets all day, no money, decided to end it all. And everything removed that could betray his identity. Seeing that he used strychnine he might

be a colleague of mine come to grief. Somehow, for all his rags, he doesn't quite look like a tramp!"

He bent forward into the car again and sniffed audibly.

"It's funny," he said. "There's a curious odour in the car I can't quite place. It certainly isn't strychnine."

Okewood, who had been scanning the body very closely, had already detected the curious penetrating odour that yet hung about the interior of the cabriolet, something sweet, yet faintly chemical withal.

But now heavy footsteps echoed from under the archway.

"It's George back," said Fink, looking up. "He nipped across to the police station."

George, who was one of the mechanics, bareheaded, his hair shining with wet, was accompanied by a well-set-up young man with a trim blond moustache, who wore a black bowler hat and a heavy overcoat. He had about him that curious air, a mixture of extreme self-reliance and rigorous reserve, which marks the plain-clothes man in every land.

"Good-evening, O'Malley!" said Okewood as the young detective came face to face with him.

The newcomer stared sharply at the speaker.

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "If it isn't Major Desmond Okewood! Are you on this job, too, Major? They

told me you had retired!”

“So I have, O’Malley!” Desmond replied. “No more Secret Service for me! I heard that you had gone back to the C.I.D. after you were demobbed from the Intelligence. I’ve only blundered into this by accident. I’ve just come up from Essex in my car. This is where I garage it when I’m in town . . .”

O’Malley plucked open the door of the Lancia and began to examine the dead man. The detective asked a few questions of the doctor, read and took charge of the letter found in the pocket of the deceased, and made some notes in a black book. Then he beckoned to Desmond.

“Anything funny struck you about this chap, Major?” he asked in an undertone.

Desmond looked at O’Malley questioningly.

“Why do you ask that?” he said.

“Because,” O’Malley replied, “for a tramp who has walked the streets all day, it doesn’t strike me that his trousers are very muddy. His boots are dirty, and the bottoms of his trousers are wet. But they’re not *splashed*. Look at mine after walking only across from the station!”

He showed a spray of mud stains above the turn-up of his blue serge trousers.

“And see here!” he added. He bent down and undid the dead man’s overcoat. Beneath it jacket and waistcoat were open

and the unbuttoned shirt showed a glimpse of clean white skin.

“That’s not the skin of a tramp!” the detective declared.

Again Desmond Okewood gave the young man one of his enigmatic looks. Then he turned to the doctor.

“When a man dies of strychnine poisoning,” he said, “death is preceded by the most appalling convulsions, I believe?”

“Quite right!” the doctor assented, blinking through his *pince-nez*.

“One would, therefore, look for some signs of a struggle,” Desmond continued, “especially in a confined space like this. But see for yourself! The body lies stiffly stretched out, the feet on the floor, the top of the head touching the back of the hood, the shoulders all but clear of the seat. Not even the mat on the floor is disturbed.”

“Very singular, I must admit,” observed the doctor.

“The man who found the body says it was covered up with the rug. Isn’t that right, Jake?”

“Quite right, sir,” chanted the washer. “Covered up ’e wor, ’cept for ’is foot as stuck art!”

“It strikes me as odd,” remarked Desmond mildly, “that, in such ghastly convulsions as strychnine poisoning produces, this man had sufficient presence of mind to arrange the rug neatly over himself”—he paused and

looked round his audience—“in such a way as to delay discovery of the body as long as possible!”

“By George!” said O’Malley excitedly—he was young enough to be still enthusiastic—“you mean to say you think he was brought here dead!”

Without replying Desmond turned again to the open door of the car. He took the policeman’s lamp and turned it on the distorted features of the dead man, the jet-black eyebrows and hair.

“Do you see anything on the right ear?” he asked.

“Yes,” O’Malley replied. “Looks like soap or something!”

Desmond nodded.

“It is soap,” he said, “shaving soap,” and opened his hand in the beam of the light. Two or three tiny blond curls and a number of short ends of blond hair lay in the palm.

“I found these down the dead man’s collar,” he explained. “So you see, O’Malley, that your first impression that there is ‘something funny’ about this tramp was perfectly correct!”

But the detective only looked at him in a puzzled way. Desmond pushed him forward to the open door of the car.

“Sniff, man!” he cried.

“Rum sort o’ smell!” said O’Malley, “but I don’t see . . .”

“Hair dye!” exclaimed Desmond.

In a flash the young detective whipped round.

“Then you mean . . .” he began.

“I mean that this dead man is not a tramp, but a person of some social standing; that in life he was not dark and clean-shaven, but fair with a blond moustache or, more probably, a blond beard, and that he did not crawl into this car to die, but was brought here dead in the Lancia. You can assume, if you like, that he shaved himself, dyed his hair, and dressed up as a tramp before taking poison, in order to conceal his identity, but you cannot assume that he killed himself here in this car. Someone brought the body here; therefore there was collusion in his suicide . . . if it *was* suicide . . .”

O’Malley pushed his hat back from his brow and scratched his head.

“Murder, eh?” he remarked, addressing no one in particular.

A light footstep sounded on the cobbles behind the group, and a voice said:

“You’ve got my car back, then?”

CHAPTER II

ENTER MISS VERA SLADE

The two men turned about as a young girl, bareheaded, in a long ermine coat, slipped between them and laid her hand on the door of the Lancia. She was a dainty creature, very fashionably dressed, and little cloth-of-silver shoes peeped out from beneath the fringe of her white satin gown. Before they could stop her, she had pulled the car door wide. She gave one glance inside the cabriolet; then, with a little cry, she reeled back. Desmond Okewood caught her in his arms.

“It’s . . . it’s horrible!” she gasped. “What . . . who is that inside my car?”

A large policeman now lumbered up, panting.

“It’s Miss Vera Slade,” he said to O’Malley, indicating the girl with a fat thumb. “She come into the station this afternoon and reported as how her Lancia had been stolen while she was having her lunch at the Oracle Club in Piccadilly. After you’d left to come here,” he added, turning to O’Malley, “the sergeant on duty noticed that the number of the missing car was the same as that of the Lancia here—the mechanic as fetched you reported the number, you know. So the sergeant sent round to Curzon Street at once to get Miss Slade. And here she is . . .”

“You identify this car as yours, then?” O’Malley asked the girl.

“Of course it’s mine!” she replied with spirit. “I left it outside the Oracle Club whilst I was lunching there to-day. When I came out, it had disappeared. I first thought that Mr. Törnedahl had taken it . . .”

“Mr. Törnedahl?” repeated O’Malley.

“Yes. The man I had lunching with me. Towards the end of lunch he was called away and was absent for some time—for about a quarter of an hour. When he came back to the table, he said he had been called away urgently on business and would I mind if he didn’t wait for coffee. And with that he went off. I had my coffee and wrote a couple of letters, and on going outside found that my car had gone.”

“I suppose this Mr. Törnedahl didn’t say anything about taking your car, did he, Miss?” O’Malley asked.

“Oh, no!” she replied positively.

“Do you know why he left you at lunch?”

“A page came and said a gentleman was asking for him.”

“Who was it, do you know?”

“No!”

“And did you see Mr. Törnedahl again?”

“I didn’t expect to. He was going to Paris this evening on his way back to Sweden.”

“I see. Now about the car. Did the club people notice anybody suspicious hanging round?”

The girl opened her clear eyes and looked at the detective.

“They wouldn’t, you know,” she answered. “The police won’t let you leave a car unattended in Piccadilly, so we park our cars in a side street at the back.”

“Who is this Mr. Törnedahl?”

“He’s a timber merchant, a Swede. I met him abroad.”

“What’s he like in appearance?” Desmond asked suddenly.

“A fair man,” the girl replied, “with very blue eyes and a blond beard, a typical Scandinavian . . .”

The two men exchanged glances.

“When did this car come in?” demanded O’Malley, excitedly, addressing Fink.

George, the mechanic, was thrust forward. About half-past five, was his answer to the detective’s question. A young man in a dark suit had brought it. He seemed to be in a great hurry. He backed the cabriolet into a place in the line and made off hastily, saying he would be back before midnight to fetch the car away. He was a fairish sort of chap, rather

foreign-looking. He had a long scar on his cheek, high up, near the right eye.

“Was he alone?” O’Malley asked.

“Yes!” said George.

But here Jake intervened. Coming back from tea, it appears, he had met the young man passing under the archway. He had seen him join a man outside and go off with him.

“What was this man like?” was O’Malley’s question.

“A biggish sort o’ chap, ’e wor,” replied the washer vaguely, “an’ went with a bit of a limp!”

Anything more precise than this the most persistent cross-examination of the old man failed to elicit.

There was a pause. The rain poured pitilessly down. Mournfully the twelve strokes of midnight were hammered out from the steeple of Saint James’s Church.

Presently Desmond turned to the girl, who was sheltering beneath Fink’s umbrella.

“That dead man in your car,” he said diffidently, “do you recognize him?”

The girl shuddered.

“Why, no!” she said. “How should I?”

“I don’t want to frighten you,” the young man resumed, “but I think you ought to look again.”

He took the policeman’s lamp and opened the car door. With awe-struck eyes the girl approached slowly. She glanced quickly within, then turned away her head.

“He looks so dreadful,” she said. “No, no! I don’t know him!”

“You’re quite sure?” queried the other.

“Absolutely!” said she.

O’Malley was about to speak when he felt a foot firmly press his. Desmond Okewood was looking at him.

“I think we need not detain Miss Slade any longer,” he observed. “If one of your men could get her a taxi . . .”

A taxi was procured and they helped her in.

“I shall hope to see you again in the morning, Miss!” said O’Malley as he closed the door.

When the cab had rattled out of the yard, he turned to Desmond.

“Why did you tread on my foot just now?” he demanded.

“Never force an identification, O’Malley!” Desmond replied with his winning smile.

“I see!” remarked the young detective. “Well, I must be getting back to the station to see about having him”—he jerked his head toward the Lancia—“removed. I want to call in at the Oracle Club on my way, late as it is. Are you coming along with me, Major?”

Desmond Okewood laughed and shook his head.

“Not on your life!” he retorted. “I’m out of the game for good . . .”

Little did he realize when, on those jesting words, they parted, that, on the contrary, within twenty-four hours Desmond Okewood, late of the Secret Service, would have resumed his old career.

He slept that night at the flat in Saint James’s Street, which he had kept on since his marriage as a *pied-à-terre* in town. His wife, with the Okewood son and heir, was in Lancashire on a visit to her father, and Desmond had come up from a brief week-end with his brother, Francis, in Essex, to resume his duties at the War Office.

At five minutes to eight on the following morning the telephone beside his bed rang deafeningly. At eight o’clock, very cross and sleepy, he put his ear to the burbling receiver. At a minute past eight he was sitting bolt upright in bed, alert and eager, listening to a well-known voice that came to him over the wire.

It was the Chief who summoned him. When the head of the Secret Service summons, there is nothing for it but to obey.

About three-quarters of an hour later, accordingly, Desmond Okewood entered the little office, skyed at the top of a lofty building near Whitehall, and once more saw the strong, familiar profile silhouetted against the long window that framed the broad panorama of river bathed in the morning sunshine.

“Mornin’, young fellow!” was the well-remembered greeting. “I’ve got a job o’ work for you!”

“You’ll wreck the home, sir,” protested his visitor. “You know I promised my wife when I married that I’d drop the game entirely.”

The Chief seemed to be absorbed as he vigorously polished his tortoise-shell spectacles.

“Clubfoot’s back!” he said.

And, setting his glasses on his nose, he calmly surveyed the young man’s face.

Clubfoot! Sometimes a mere name will instantly put time to flight and bring one face to face with yesterday. With a pang like the fleeting anguish of an old bad dream there flashed back into Desmond’s mind the image of the forbidding cripple whose path he had twice crossed. The fantastic vicissitudes of that long and perilous chase through war-bound Germany, when he and Francis had so miraculously eluded the long reach of Dr. Grundt to best him in the end; the thrilling duel of brains in which he and Clubfoot had engaged in that breathless treasure hunt in the South Seas—

how visionary, how remote those adventures seemed from this quiet room, perched high above the streets, with the noise of the birds chirping on the roof and the dull bourdon of the traffic drifting with the winter sunshine through the open window!

Clubfoot! The name stirred memories of high adventure in the Silent Corps. For two years the Chief's small and devoted body of helpers, all picked men, had not known the Okewoods who soon after the war had retired from the Service. From time to time Desmond had felt the tug at the heartstrings. Now and then in his room at the War Office, in the stay-at-home billet which the Chief had secured for him, an odd restlessness seized him when an Intelligence report came his way and he read that "X, a reliable agent, reports from Helsingfors," or, "A trustworthy observer forwards a statement from Angora . . ."

But these were vague longings that a round of golf or a brisk game of tennis would dispel. The name of Clubfoot, however, was a definite challenge. He felt his breath come faster, his pulse quicken, as he glanced across the desk at the bold, strong face confronting him with an enigmatical smile playing about the firm, rather grim mouth. He knew then that the Chief had sent for him with a purpose and that, before the interview was at an end, the Service would claim him once more.

"It was written," the Chief resumed, "that you two should meet again. Your brilliant little experiment in practical criminology last night makes it perfectly clear to

me, my dear Okewood, that you are the only man to tackle old Clubfoot in his reincarnation . . .”

Desmond stared at the speaker.

“You don’t mean . . .?” he began, and broke off. “By George!” he exclaimed, striking his open palm with his fist, “one of the men at the garage said something about seeing a big lame man go off with the young man who drove up in the stolen Lancia . . .”

“Listen to me!” said the Chief. “Three days ago a certain Mr. Gustaf Törnedahl, a Swedish merchant . . .”

“Törnedahl?” cried Desmond.

“Wait!” ordered the Chief. “A certain Mr. Törnedahl, who rendered this country various services of a highly confidential nature in the war, came to see me. He was in a mortal funk. He solemnly declared that, since his arrival in London about ten days before, two separate attempts had been made on his life. A man had tried to knife him down at the Docks, and, a few days later, so he assured me, a fellow in a car had deliberately sought to run him down in Jermyn Street.

“He asked for police protection and, because I had reasons for taking his story even more seriously than he did himself, I gave it to him. At seven o’clock yesterday evening the plain-clothes man detailed to shadow him was found drugged, lying halfway down the steps of the Down Street Tube Station, which, as you know, is one of the

loneliest places in London. And shortly after midnight the Yard rings up to tell me that a man, believed to be Törnedahl, with his beard shaved off and his hair dyed black, had been found poisoned in a car in Pump Yard, Saint James's."

"It *was* the little lady's friend, then?" said Desmond.

"It was. He is the fourth victim of the most amazing campaign of vengeance directed against those who rendered our Secret Service notable aid in the war. And in each case—mark well my words, Okewood—a clubfooted or a lame man has lurked in the background, never very clearly seen, never precisely identified. When Sir Wetherby Soukes, the chemist, with whose work in detecting the German invisible inks you are familiar, committed suicide the other day, his callers, on the afternoon in question, included a certain Dr. Simon Nadon, stated to be a French scientist, *who had a clubfoot!*

"Perhaps you read in the newspapers of the unexplained death of Colonel Branxe, who did so well in the counter-espionage. Poor Branxe, you remember, was found on the fifth green at Great Chadfold with a knife in his back. Well, in the sand of an adjacent bunker the police discovered the footprint of a *lame man*—you know, with one footprint turned almost at right angles to the other. And lastly, in the inexplicable affair of Fawcett Wilbur, who looked after our end in Rumania during the German occupation, his companion, when he jumped in front of a train at Charing Cross Station, was a Rumanian doctor *who was a clubfooted man!* But every time, mark you, the shadowy figure of this lame man has simply faded away without leaving a trace."

He broke off, and leaning back in his big chair, scrutinized the keen and resolute face that confronted him across the desk.

“Like all Germans, old Clubfoot is a man of method,” he went on. “He is working upwards, Okewood. To-morrow it may be your turn, or perhaps he’ll have a shot at your brother, Francis; and ultimately it will be me!”

His mouth had grown very grim.

“It won’t do, my boy. We can’t take it lying down. But you realize it’s going to be a dangerous business?”

Desmond Okewood nodded. “No clues, I take it?”

“Nothing essential!”

There was a little twinkle in the young man’s blue eye.

“That settles it!” he remarked. “If we can’t go to him, we’ll have to bring him to us. This is my idea, sir . . .”

For two hours thereafter the Chief’s door was barred to callers and a long list of engagements completely dislocated.

Two evenings later, Vera Slade dined with Desmond Okewood at the corner table of the grill-room of the Nineveh Hotel, which was always reserved for Desmond when he was in town. In a high-necked pale-green gown fresh from Paris the girl looked most attractive. Eyebrows just aslant gave a charming suggestion of archness to her piquant face with its dark eyes, rather wistful mouth, and fine

skin, framed in raven-black hair. Woman-like, her spirits rose to the interest which, as she clearly saw, she had aroused in her host. His pressure of her hand as he greeted her had lasted just long enough to tell her that her appearance was an undoubted success.

He had asked her to dine with him to discuss the latest developments in the mystery of the purple cabriolet. But, as usually happens, it was not until the coffee came that the matter actually arose. Then it was Vera who brought it up.

“Do you know,” she said, “when I told you yesterday I would dine with you, I’d no idea what a celebrity was to entertain me?”

Desmond, who was lighting his cigar, raised his eyebrows.

“Perhaps you haven’t seen yesterday’s *Daily Telegram*?” she said.

Desmond made a wry face.

“I’ve heard enough about it, God knows,” he remarked. “But I haven’t actually seen the paragraph.”

“I have it here,” said Vera, and produced a cutting from her gold and platinum bag.

““Sensational developments are expected,”” she read out, ““in the case of the mysterious stranger who poisoned himself in a Lancia car at Pump Yard, Saint James’s. From the circumstance that Major Desmond Okewood, one of the most successful agents of the British Intelligence in the war, has

been put in charge of the investigation, it is surmised that the mystery has a political as well as a criminal aspect.”

She shook her head prettily at him.

“It’s lucky you didn’t deign to take *me* into your confidence,” she said, “or you would have certainly declared that a woman had given you away!”

“I’m blessed if I know where the devil this infernal rag got hold of the news,” Desmond remarked forlornly. “I haven’t breathed a word to a soul. As a matter of fact, I’m going out to the country this evening to talk things over with my brother Francis . . . I want him to help me in the inquiry. That’s why I asked you if you’d mind dining at seven. My boss carpeted me over this infernal par and properly washed my head. Apparently the Home Office had been on to him. Look at this, issued to yesterday’s evening papers!”

He took out of his pocket a sheet of coarse greenish paper with a printed heading “Press Association.” He handed it to Vera. It was marked “Private and confidential,” and ran as follows:

NOTICE TO EDITORS

The Press Association is asked by the Home Office to make a special request to the newspapers to make no further reference to Major Desmond Okewood’s inquiry into the Pump Yard case.

“But how thrilling!” the girl exclaimed. “Then what the *Daily Telegram* says is right. It *is* a political crime, then? Tell me, has the dead man been identified?”

Through a cloud of blue smoke Desmond smiled at her.

“Once bitten, twice shy!” he said. “I’m afraid I can’t say anything about it, Miss Slade!”

The girl made a little grimace.

“You needn’t be discreet with *me*, Major Okewood,” she said softly. She raised her dark almond-shaped eyes and let them rest for a moment on his face. “Won’t you trust me? Won’t you let me help you?”

Desmond looked at her doubtfully.

“It’s very difficult,” he remarked, pulling on his cigar.

“How were you going to your brother’s to-night?” she asked.

“I was going to catch the nine-ten from Liverpool Street. He lives on the high ground above Brentwood, in Essex.”

Vera leaned across the table. With her soft white arms stretched out before her, she made an appealing picture.

“Why not let me drive you down in the car? Then we three could talk the whole thing over. *Do* let me help!”

“By Jove!” exclaimed Desmond. “That’s rather an idea! But look here, you’ll have to promise to be very discreet about

it!”

“My dear!” she cried joyously, “I’ll be as mute as the silent wife. That’s settled, then? Now I’m going to take a taxi to Curzon Street and change my frock. I’ll be back here with the car in half an hour if you’ll wait for me in the hall.”

The thought of a long drive through the night with such a charming girl as Vera Slade seemed to please Desmond Okewood, for he was smiling happily to himself as he sat in the “Nineveh” lounge awaiting her return.

Within forty minutes the hall porter fetched him out. The purple cabriolet stood throbbing at the door, Vera, in a *chic* little felt *cloche* and a blanket coat, at the wheel. It was a damp, raw night, and in the Mile End Road the tram-lines were so greasy that the girl, without hesitation, turned off into a network of side streets.

“I know my way round here,” she explained. “I used to drive a car in these parts during the war.”

But at last she slowed down, peering out of the open window at her side.

“I think I must have missed the turning just now,” she said. “This doesn’t seem to be right!”

In front of them, through the rain-spotted driving-glass, the blank wall of a *cul-de-sac* was discernible. Vera stopped the car. She was busy with the gears. Suddenly the doors on either side were plucked violently open. Desmond caught a

glimpse of the girl torn bodily out from behind the driving-wheel, then a heavy woollen muffler fell over his face from behind and strong arms pulled him backwards.

A voice whispered in his ear:

“Not a sound, or you’re a dead man!”

But he was unable to speak; indeed, he was almost choking with the thick cloth that invisible hands thrust into his mouth. He felt the sharp rasp of cords on his wrists and ankles; his eyes were blindfolded; he was raised up; for an instant the raw night air struck chill on his cheek, then he was thrown down unceremoniously into another car, which immediately began to move.

For the best part of an hour, so it seemed to him, the journey lasted. The frequent changing of gears and the many stops told him that they were going through traffic. It meant, therefore, that they had returned to London. Then came a halt longer than the rest. He heard the car door open; he was once more lifted and carried upstairs, or so he judged by the laboured breathing of his unseen bearers. He heard a key turn in a lock; he was dropped in a chair. Then the gag was pulled out of his mouth and the bandage removed from his eyes.

Before him, at a low desk, The Man with the Clubfoot was sitting.

CHAPTER III

THE MAN WITH THE CLUBFOOT

The room was lighted only by a green-shaded reading-lamp, which, standing on the desk between Desmond Okewood and Grundt, threw a dim, mysterious light on the saturnine visage of the cripple. The bristling iron-grey hair and low forehead, the hot and fearless eyes under the beetling brows, were in shadow; but a band of yellow-greenish light, falling athwart the face, revealed clearly the heavy clipped moustache, baring the discoloured teeth, and the massive jaw. From the cigar grasped in the great hairy fist clenched, as though in defiance, on the desk, a thin spiral of blue smoke rose aloft. The monstrous right boot was concealed from view.

He had changed but little, Desmond reflected as he looked at him. The gross body was a little fuller, the iron-grey bristles were perhaps more thickly sprinkled with white; but there was nothing in the hostile, challenging attitude of the man that told of the misfortunes that had overcome his race. He was as before the Prussian beast, unchanging, unchangeable, revelling in his strength, glorying in his power, ferocious, relentless, unpardoning.

For a full minute he did not speak. Obviously he gloated over the situation. It was as though he were reluctant to forgo a moment of his malicious enjoyment. His dark and cruel eyes, lighted with a spiteful fire, rested with a look of taunting

interrogation upon the young man, and, when presently he raised his cigar to his mouth, he turned it over between his thick and pursed-up lips like some great beast of prey licking its chops.

At last he broke the silence.

“Lieber Freund,” he said in a soft, purring voice, “this is indeed a pleasure!”

He wagged his head as though in sheer enjoyment of the sight of his *vis-à-vis*, bound hand and foot, sprawling awkwardly in his chair.

“You always were a disconcerting person, lieber Okewood,” he remarked, his little finger flicking the ash of his cigar into a tray. “I had not reached your name on my little list—no, not by a round dozen or so! In fact, you find me in a considerable quandary. To be perfectly frank with you, teurer junger Herr, I have not yet decided how I shall put you to death!”

He placed his cigar between his fleshy lips and drew on it luxuriously.

“For the lad of mettle that I know you to be,” he continued, “you are remarkably taciturn this evening. If I remember rightly, you were more talkative in the past! Perhaps, though, the trifling measure of restraint I have been compelled to lay upon you embarrasses you . . .”

His black-turfed eyebrows bent to a frown and his eyes flashed hotly.

“I am taking no more chances with you, young man!” he said in a voice of dangerous softness.

Desmond Okewood struggled erect. Instantly a young man appeared from behind his chair. He was a typical fair young German, his right cheek scored with a long white duelling scar.

“Let him be, Heinrich!” said Grundt.

“One of your hired assassins, eh, Herr Doktor?” observed Desmond. “I believe you will find it safer in this country to continue to commit murder by proxy . . . at any rate for a time!”

A little flush of anger crept into the cripple’s black-tufted cheeks.

“You’re hardly in a position to be sarcastic at my expense!” he said.

Desmond shrugged his shoulders.

“You’ve made a bad blunder, Herr Doktor,” he said. “I greatly fear that by kidnapping and murdering me you’re going to bring a hornet’s nest about your ears!”

“That may be!” returned Clubfoot grimly. “It is unfortunate that you will not be there to see it!”

While they were talking, Desmond had stolen furtive glances about the room. Furnished unpretentiously enough, it had the look of a dining-room; but the fumed oak

table had been pushed back against the wall and the chairs that went with it aligned in a row on either side of the apartment. The obvious newness of the furniture and the cheap and garish carpet suggested a furnished house or lodgings. The only thing in the room that had any pretence to good taste was a handsome Jacobean oak press with perfectly plain panelled doors that stood against the wall behind Clubfoot's chair.

The house was as silent as the grave. Strain his ear as he would, Desmond could detect no sound, not even of the traffic of the London streets, other than the ticking of a cheap clock on the mantelpiece which showed the time to be five minutes to eleven.

Now Clubfoot noticed the listening look on the young man's face.

"Don't buoy yourself up with false hopes, Okewood!" said he. "My retreat is truly rural. One never hears a sound here after dark, nor, on the other hand, does any noise ever penetrate beyond these walls. I've tested it, and I know! When that poor Mr. Törnedahl had a whiskey-and-soda with me the other afternoon, I was glad to find that, despite the proverb, *these* walls have no ears. With deplorable carelessness I had entirely forgotten that the victims of strychnine poisoning emit the most distressing screams in their convulsions. Heinrich, who is less experienced than I am, was quite upset. Weren't you, Heinrich? You were quite right, mein Junge, I should have used cyanide of potassium. As for you, Okewood," he added in a sudden and surprising access of fury, "I'm going to hang you! As an example to

other spies! There's a nice quiet death for you! Heinrich, will you see to it?"

The young man with the scarred face went out noiselessly. Desmond's eyes were fixed on the clock. The hands were creeping past the hour of eleven.

"At least," he said, "you'll let the girl go free, Grundt?"

Clubfoot laughed stridently. "And leave a Crown witness behind?"

He lifted his head. "Heinrich!" he called.

A trap in the ceiling had opened. Two ends of rope, one furnished with a stout noose, came dangling down. The young German's face appeared in the opening.

"Herr Doktor?"

"Let Karl and Grossmann bring up the young lady to witness the execution!"

"Sehr wohl, Herr Doktor!"

Clubfoot turned to Desmond. "We'll settle the girl later!"

"You . . . you ruffian," exclaimed Desmond. "I believe you've done it before!"

Clubfoot, his big body shaking with silent laughter, did not reply, but stood up. Once again Desmond, despite his desperate plight, marvelled at the prodigious size of the man,

his immensely massive shoulders and his great arms, as sinewy, as disproportionately long, as the arms of some giant orang-outang.

The door opened and Heinrich appeared. Behind him, escorted by two other men, was Vera. Desmond had no time to exchange a word with her, for the three men, on a sign from Grundt, instantly hustled him under the open trap and adjusted the noose about his neck. Now Grundt was speaking; but Desmond did not look at him. His eyes were on the clock.

“To show you that I do not act by proxy,” Clubfoot snarled, “I am going to hang you with my own hands. And when your cursed brother’s turn arrives, I shall tell him, before he dies—and his death shall be terrible, I promise you, because of that bullet he once fired into me—I shall tell him how you dangled, throttling, from that beam above. I owe your country a grudge, you snivelling Englishman, and, bei Gott! I’m going to have my pound of flesh. Every time my vengeance falls, I exult! Donnerwetter! If you had heard Branxe grunt when I gave him the knife! If you had heard how that dog Wilbur screamed when I thrust him before the incoming train! And now, bei Gott! it’s you!”

He grasped the rope. As the long spatulate fingers closed on it, Desmond saw the bony sinews stretch taut among the black thatch on the back of the cripple’s hands. He heard his heavy boot thump on the floor . . .

A voice cried from the doorway:

“Hands up, Grundt!”

Then, with a sudden smash of glass, the room was plunged into darkness. With a deafening explosion a pistol spoke, a woman screamed piercingly, and a door slammed. Then suddenly the room was brightly lighted. The place seemed full of men. Francis Okewood, in motor-cyclist overalls heavily splashed with mud, was at Desmond’s side, swiftly slashing at the ropes that bound him.

“Good old Francis!” murmured Desmond. “I knew you wouldn’t fail me. But, dash it all, you cut it rather fine!”

He looked rapidly round the room. His glance took in Vera, pale and affrighted, and her escort, surrounded by plain-clothes men. But of Clubfoot and of Heinrich there was no sign. Even as he looked, from the Jacobean cupboard, the doors of which stood open, a large, red-faced man hastily scrambled. Desmond knew him of old. It was Detective-Inspector Manderton, of Scotland Yard. Behind him followed O’Malley.

“I’m very much afraid he’s given us the slip,” the Inspector said. “It’s a secret passage leading to the next house with a locked steel door between. Come on, some of you!”

And he hurried out, taking two of his men with him.

“Major Okewood,” Vera cried out suddenly, “won’t you please explain to these men who I am? They want to handcuff me!”

Desmond walked stiffly, for his legs were yet numb from his bonds, to the corner where, between two plain-clothes men, the girl was struggling.

“Vera Sokoloff,” he said, looking sternly at her, “have you forgotten me?”

Slowly the colour drained out of her cheeks, leaving only a little grotesque dab of rouge on either side. Valiantly she sought to meet his eyes.

“What . . . what do you mean?” she faltered. “That is not my name . . .”

“It was your name in 1919 when I knew you as a spy in Helsingfors,” Desmond retorted. “Fortunately my disguise was a good one or you would not have walked so easily into the trap I laid for you. My brother and his men have followed us every step of the way to-night. I could not expect you to know that I sent that notice to the *Daily Telegram* myself . . .”

“You sent it?” cried the girl.

“Certainly, in the hope that Clubfoot would use you to decoy me to him as you lured poor Törnedahl into the trap!”

“It’s not true!” the girl flashed out.

“. . . But,” Desmond continued unperturbed, “I confess I feel rather mortified that you should have thought me so insanely

indiscreet as to take a stranger like yourself into my confidence!”

“This is an abominable outrage!” stormed the girl. “You’re mad, I think, with your talk of . . . of spies. I’m English . . . I have powerful friends . . . I . . .”

Desmond held up his hand.

“You forget,” he said, “that the telephonist at your club is a sharp little cockney. He was much intrigued to hear two days ago a telephone conversation between Miss Vera Slade and a certain post-office call-box in West Kensington beginning and ending with a number. ‘A message for Number One from Twenty Three,’ you said, and you went on to say that Törnedaahl was lunching with you at one o’clock and that Number One should come quickly. The car, you added, was round at the back of the club . . .”

He stopped and looked at her.

“Vera, my dear,” he said, “you were more prudent than that at Helsingfors. You’re losing your grip! The English are not so stupid as they look!”

With a convulsive shudder she covered her face with her hands and fell a-sobbing.

“They threatened me,” she wailed in German. “I could not help myself, Herr Major!”

The door burst open. Manderton appeared, hot and angry.

“Got clean away!” he cried, “and him with a game leg! Damn it, he’s a deep one!” And he plumped into a chair.

“Francis, old son,” remarked Desmond to his brother, “do you know what?”

“I’ll buy it, Des.!” grinned Francis.

“The brothers Okewood,” Desmond announced gravely, “are back on the job!”

CHAPTER IV

THE STRANGE EXPERIENCE OF MISS PATRICIA MAXWELL

Desmond and Francis Okewood faced each other across the table in the snug living-room of Desmond's little service flat in Saint James's. The curtains were drawn, for it was five o'clock of a winter evening; and the tantalus, siphon, and glasses which filled the tray between them suggested that the two brothers were prepared to celebrate, in their peculiar fashion, the rites of the hour. However, a tea-wagon, appropriately decked out, that stood near the window, indicated that a visitor of less masculine tastes was expected.

"Well," remarked Desmond, resuming his train of thought which he had interrupted to light a cigarette, "if old Clubfoot, as you say, has any money, I'd like to know where he gets it from, that's all!"

Francis grunted. "He's got it all right, don't worry," he retorted, "as Patricia Maxwell will tell you in a minute . . ."

"Provided she hasn't forgotten the appointment," said Desmond, looking at the clock.

"She'll be here to the tick," his brother replied, "unless she has altered from what she used to be when I knew her in the States!"

“A friend of Monica’s, didn’t you say she was?”

(Monica was Francis Okewood’s American wife.)

Francis nodded. “They went to the same school in America. We met her again last year in California. That’s why she came to me with this extraordinary story of hers. But here she is, I think!”

Old Batts, the valet of the flats, appeared at the door.

“Miss Maxwell!” he announced.

Patricia Maxwell was of that not uncommon type of American girl who in the daytime looks as though she had stepped out of the current number of a fashion paper, and in the evening as though she would appear in the forthcoming issue. From the crown of her little brown hat to the sole of her neatly shod foot she was absolutely flawless, perfectly coiffed, perfectly dressed, perfectly gloved, perfectly shod. An orphan, her more than comfortable means enabled her, through frequent visits to Europe, to appreciate her country to the full, besides permitting her to admit with impunity her real age which was on the right side of thirty. Her little London house, within a stone’s throw of the Park, was, like herself, a gem of good taste. She knew everybody and liked almost everybody, and everybody liked her.

“So this is the famous brother?” she said when Francis introduced Desmond. “If you only knew how perfectly thrilled I am to meet you two together! But you’ll have to

promise not to laugh at my story, Major Okewood! I dare say it'll seem just silly to *you*!"

"On the contrary, Miss Maxwell," Desmond answered with his rather languid air, "I am honestly quite extraordinarily curious to hear it. Believe me, a yarn that'll interest this brother of mine must be something well out of the ordinary!"

And over the tea-cups in that tranquil room, while outside the cars and taxis purred and hooted up and down the slope of Saint James's Street, she told her story. Long before she had done, Desmond, nursing his knee, his eyes fixed on the speaker's face, had let his cigarette go out as it dangled from his lips.

"I expect your brother has told you," she said, "that I'm a collector of enamels. I guess it's a kind of hobby of mine. Every time a special piece comes up for sale in London or Paris or Vienna, one of the dealers is pretty sure to notify me, and if it's any way possible, I go along and see it.

"Well, the other day a dealer friend of mine called me on the 'phone and told me that a Russian ikon—you know, one of these sacred pictures you see in Russian homes and churches—was to be sold at Blackie's. It was a beautiful piece, he said, with the figures of the Madonna and Child in green-and-blue enamel under a silver sheeting—probably twelfth or thirteenth century work. He thought it would fetch under a hundred pounds and wanted to bid for me. But I like auctions and I said I'd go myself. I went into Blackie's the day before the sale and fell in love with the ikon at once. It was quite small, not above about nine inches by six, I guess, and heavy

for its size, the silver covering cut out so as to show the enamel figures underneath—you know the way it is—black with age.

“Well, yesterday was the day of the sale, and Süsslein, my little dealer, went along with me. The ikon was part of the collection of some Russian Count—I forget the name—one of the *émigrés* from the Russian Revolution who had served with Denikin against the Bolsheviki. We sat there all through the afternoon and by the time the ikon came up the hall was three-quarters empty.

“One of the dealers started the bidding at ten guineas, and between three or four of us we ran it up to seventy-five. Then the others began to drop out, and by the time we’d got to a hundred there were only three of us left—Harris, who buys for Lord Boraston, me, and a funny-looking little runt of a man with a grey chin-beard and spectacles. He wasn’t one of the ordinary dealers, so I sent Süsslein to find out just who he was. When he came back he whispered to me he was a man called Achille Saumergue, who was believed to be a Frenchman. Nobody had ever seen him before.

“At two hundred guineas we topped Harris’s limit, and he passed away, leaving me and old Saumergue to it. He and I kept on quietly tossing the ball to and fro until—I’m cutting this all short, you know—I brought him up all standing with an advance of fifty guineas on his three hundred and fifty. I jumped the price up a bit because Hermann, the auctioneer, who’s an old friend of mine, kept looking at the clock, and I knew the poor man was dying to shut down and go home.

“Then old Saumergue asked if he might telephone—I suppose he’d reached his limit. As he went out, I noticed that Süsslein went after him. He’s pretty slick, and I guessed he meant to pick up what he could outside the telephone box.

“But, my gracious! in two minutes my little friend was back in no end of a way. Why, the man was so white I thought he was ill! He started telling me a long story about old Saumergue buying in the ikon for some Russian family where it was an heirloom, that it was really a rather inferior specimen, and a lot of stuff like that. That’s the line of talk dealers always hand out when they want to shoo you off a piece.

“But it didn’t go any with me, Major Okewood. I wanted that little old ikon, and I meant to have it. But do you think what I wanted mattered? Say, for about five minutes that little Jew never let up knocking that holy picture, saying the price was ridiculous, and how I must be plumb crazy to bid four hundred guineas for a thing that wasn’t worth above forty!

“As Hermann picked up his hammer again, I just waved the dealer aside. That old skate and I went at it once more. Everybody in the place was crowded round us now, sort of in two camps—you know the way it is—and it was so quiet you could almost hear a pin drop, I guess.

“‘May I say four hundred and fifty guineas? It’s a lovely piece,’ Hermann calls out in his soft voice, and the old man nods. He was standing up, very serious, blinking through his spectacles, but I could see his hands shaking with excitement.

“‘Five hundred!’ I said from my place just under the desk—they had given me a Heppelwhite chair from the Zossenberg sale next week to sit in.

“‘And twenty-five!’ says the old man with a kind of gasp.

“‘Fifty?’ asks Hermann, looking at me. I nodded.

“‘Süsslein pulled my sleeve. ‘Let him have the ikon!’ he whispered. ‘It don’t matter any to you, a common old thing like that! For God’s sake, let him have it, Miss Maxwell!’

“‘I shook my head.

“‘Six hundred!’ I said.

“‘Any advance on six hundred?’ asks Hermann, and brings his hammer down pretty sharply. ‘Six hundred guineas I’m bid. For the first time! It’s getting late, and we all want to go home, I’m sure. For the second time . . .’

“‘Seven hundred!’ says the old Frenchman faintly.

“‘All this time Süsslein was whispering in my ear. The man was all worked up. ‘You’ve got to let him have it,’ he kept on saying. ‘Take my advice, Miss Maxwell, and let the thing be. It’ll bring you no luck! Believe me, I know what I’m saying!’ His voice was shaking and his eyes were starting out of his head.

“‘But I meant to have that ikon, though, by this, the price was ’way beyond my figure. The end came quick.

“‘Shall we say eight hundred?’ asks Hermann.

“I nodded. With that the old man turned on his heel and walked straight out of the place. The ikon was mine.

“Süsslein didn’t say any more. He left me there. He seemed a changed man. And I took the ikon home. As I told Süsslein, I had it all planned out where I was going to hang it in the little space between the panels over the desk in my boudoir.

“This morning, before I was up, Süsslein was round at the house. He said he wanted to speak to me urgently. He had come, he told me, on behalf of a client to offer me a thousand pounds for the ikon. I told him I wasn’t selling. He asked me what I would take. I told him I didn’t intend to part with my treasure.

“‘My client,’ he said, ‘is most anxious, for family reasons, to acquire the ikon,’ and he offered me two thousand guineas, and then three.

“By this time I was getting pretty peeved, and I told Süsslein so. ‘If your client can prove to my satisfaction,’ I told him, ‘that this ikon really is an heirloom in his family, it’s a different matter. At present it looks to me as though you and he had realized too late that I had got on to something pretty good. I’m not selling, and you can tell your client so!’ And with that I sent him about his business.

“I had a lot of trouble to get rid of him. Like so many dealers, he seemed to think it was all a question of money. He couldn’t realize that I’d never part with anything that

went so well with the dull green wainscot of my boudoir unless, of course, they could prove to me that the ikon had been stolen or something of that kind.”

“Your dealer pal didn’t tell you the name of his client?” asked Desmond.

“I asked him, of course, but he said he was not at liberty to reveal it. But it didn’t matter any, for, about an hour later, he arrived in person.”

“The client?”

“Sure. A Russian, a certain Dr. Madjaroff. I was sick and tired of the whole thing, so I told the butler to say I was busy. But he said he’d wait till I was disengaged. So, just to get rid of him, I saw him. My dear, he was the most extraordinary-looking person, a vast man with a great bushy black beard and a clubfoot . . .”

There was a crash from the fender. Desmond Okewood had suddenly dropped the knee he had been hugging and overset the fire irons.

“He spoke in French,” Patricia Maxwell went on. “He said that, through a misunderstanding, Monsieur Saumergue, who had been bidding for him at Blackie’s yesterday, had failed to secure the ikon. ‘But,’ he said, ‘I am prepared to pay handsomely for the mistake. I will now write you my cheque for three thousand five hundred guineas!’ And he actually produced a cheque-book and a fountain pen!

“I told him I didn’t want to sell. But do you think he’d take ‘no’ for an answer? Not on your life! ‘Would I name my own figure?’ he said, and when I stood up and repeated that I meant to keep the ikon and that he was wasting his time, he offered me first five thousand guineas and at last, by stages, six thousand five hundred.

“You know, that man rather frightened me. I’m supposed to be a pretty determined sort of person myself, but never in my life have I run up against such a dominating personality as this Dr. Madjaroff. He was so big and hairy with the vitality of some great animal like a buffalo or . . . or a rhinoceros.

“When I turned down his offer of six thousand five hundred guineas, he bent his dark bushy eyebrows at me.

“‘Miss Maxwell,’ he said, ‘I’ve set my heart on that ikon. You’ve got to let me have it.’

“I told him I was sorry, but it was quite impossible.

“‘I’ve offered you thirty, fifty times its value,’ he returned. ‘Believe me, you will be well advised to accept my offer.’

“‘My mind is made up,’ I replied, and rang to show him the interview was at an end. ‘The ikon is not for sale.’

“Do you know, the queerest change came over that old guy! All his hair seemed to bristle and his eyes just burnt like two hot coals. He raised up his stick—he had a crutch-stick that he walked with—as though to strike me, then turned his back on me and hobbled out of the house. My! I tell you I felt relieved to see him go . . .”

Desmond broke in quickly. "I hope you didn't leave the ikon hanging up in your house?" he said. His languid air had given way to a brisk and eager manner. His steely blue eyes searched the girl's face as he spoke.

"Why, no!" said Miss Maxwell. "As a matter of fact, I brought it along to show you!"

So saying she opened her capacious leathern handbag and produced a flat brown paper parcel. Unwrapping it, she drew forth the ikon, which she handed to Desmond.

He bore it quickly to the electric-light bracket by the fireplace and carefully examined it. Once or twice he balanced it in his hand as though appraising the weight.

"Now, why do you suppose," the American asked, "that this Russian is so dead set on getting hold of this old ikon? It's beautiful work and all that, of course, but it's not worth six thousand five hundred guineas or the half or even the quarter of the eight hundred I paid . . ."

But Desmond had turned away and was talking to his brother.

"We want to make sure," he was saying. "Tell him I'll come round at once and see him."

Francis Okewood stepped across to a desk in the corner on which the telephone stood and asked for a number.

"Why," exclaimed Miss Maxwell, "that's Süsslein's number!"

But Francis held up his hand for silence, the telephone receiver to his ear.

“I want to speak to Mr. Süsslein,” he said, and stood listening for a moment.

“I see,” he said presently. “No, I hadn’t heard.”

He hung up the receiver and faced them.

“Süsslein was found dead in his office after lunch!” he said quietly.

“Dead?” exclaimed the American in a shocked voice.

“He had hanged himself,” Francis answered gravely.

“That settles it!” said Desmond, looking up from his study of the ikon. “This means that The Man with the Clubfoot is at his old tricks again!”

CHAPTER V

THE IKON OF SMOLENSK

Since his dramatic reappearance in the affair of the purple cabriolet, Dr. Grundt had passed wholly from Desmond Okewood's ken. The villa, on the outskirts of Harlesden, to which Desmond had been carried, together with the house next door, had been taken furnished in the name of a certain Mr. Blund, which alias covered the identity of a gentleman only too well known to Scotland Yard; but neither he nor Grundt had returned to it. Though the Chief and his young men remained on the constant alert, though the police kept watch at all the ports, there was no sign either of Clubfoot or of his associates.

The Special Branch at Scotland Yard took the view that Grundt had fled the country. It was, indeed, remarkable that, easily identifiable as he was by reason of his monstrous deformed foot, he should have contrived to vanish without trace. In corroboration of the police theory was the circumstance that Clubfoot's campaign of vengeance against the British Secret Service, its agents and helpers, which had already claimed some half a dozen victims, was undoubtedly suspended.

Francis Okewood was disposed to believe that Grundt's narrow escape from justice on the last occasion had

disinclined him from further adventures; but Desmond was sceptical.

“Clubfoot intends to get back on you and me, Francis,” he said, “and if he’s quiescent it means only that he’s planning some fresh deviltry or that he’s short of funds!”

After their startling discovery of Süsslein’s suicide, Desmond asked his brother to escort Miss Maxwell home.

“I’m going to borrow your ikon for an hour or two,” he told the girl, “and, if it won’t shock your sense of propriety, to ask you to put Francis up for the night . . .”

Patricia let her bright brown eyes rest inquiringly on Desmond’s face.

“Why not both of you? There’s plenty of room . . .”

“Maybe I shan’t want a bed at all!” replied the other enigmatically.

“You think something’s going to happen?” she challenged.

“Ever since you bought this ikon, Miss Maxwell,” was Desmond’s impassive reply, “I’ll venture to say there has not been a minute in which your life has not been in danger!”

“Oh, shucks!” she exclaimed. “What about your famous British police? Do you mean to tell me that foreign gunmen like this Madjaroff guy are allowed to run round and scare folks into hanging themselves? I expect, if the truth were

known, Süsslein was in money difficulties, poor little man . .
.”

“This is not a matter for the police, Miss Maxwell,” said Desmond. “If you’d left this ikon hanging up in your boudoir, I’d lay a small shade of odds that you wouldn’t have found it on your return!”

With a glint of strong white teeth Patricia Maxwell laughed outright.

“Now you’re trying to scare me!” she affirmed.

“Not at all,” returned Desmond. He pointed to the desk. “There’s the telephone. Just for the fun of the thing, call up your house and see whether anything has happened in your absence!”

His perfect self-possession and matter-of-factness sobered the girl. She looked at him curiously, then went slowly to the telephone. The two brothers, talking in undertones by the window, caught broken fragments of the conversation. When Patricia Maxwell replaced the receiver and faced them again, her self-assurance seemed somewhat shaken.

“Well?” said Desmond.

“I . . . I guess I don’t rightly understand,” she answered in a puzzled tone. “Some one’s been in and ransacked my boudoir. The butler says a man, claiming to come from the electric-light company, called this afternoon to look at the wall-plugs or something. Barton—that’s the butler—left him alone in the dining-room, which is separated from the

boudoir only by a curtain, while he went to the back hall to answer the telephone. He was at the instrument for two or three minutes, he says, and when he returned he found the boudoir window open, the place upside down, and the man gone. Say, who is this clubfooted man, anyway?"

But, before Desmond could answer, a sharp "pss-t" from Francis called him over to the window. Kneeling at the sill, his brother was peering through the blind.

"I think they're watching the house," he said. "Did you notice if you were followed when you came here, Patricia?"

"I drove in a taxi," the girl answered, "so I can't really say."

On the opposite side of the street a young man was pacing nonchalantly up and down, his face raised to the houses across the way. Even as they watched, they saw him lift his hand. Something white fluttered . . .

"Wait a minute!" said Desmond, and hurried into the adjoining bedroom.

The block of flats, of which he occupied the top floor, stood at the corner of a turning and the windows of the bedroom gave on the side street. Before the shop occupying the opposite corner a man was lounging. For an instant the light from the shop front fell on his face, a pale narrow face with a long white scar running horizontally beneath the right eye.

"Heinrich's at the corner!" announced Desmond, returning to the living-room.

“Clubfoot’s aide, do you mean?” queried Francis.

Desmond nodded. “Which his other name is Kriege. Since he made that lucky get-away with Grundt in the affair of the purple cabriolet we have been looking up his record. He is said to be a first-class linguist and a marvellous hand at disguises. I shouldn’t wonder if he were not Miss Maxwell’s friend, Saumergue.”

He turned to the American.

“Would it bore you frightfully to stay and dine with us?” he asked.

“Why, no!” she replied. “But I thought you two boys were coming home with me!”

“It will be out of the question to leave the house for the present—at any rate, by the front door,” said Desmond, and picked up the telephone.

“I want to speak to Mr. Krilenko,” he said when he got the number he had asked for. “Is that you, Professor? Desmond Okewood speaking. I want you to come round here at once. You can’t? You’re in bed with lumbago? Damn! Well, I’ll just have to come to you, that’s all. Yes, I’ll be along in twenty minutes.”

“It’ll have to be the overhead route,” he said to his brother as he replaced the receiver.

Francis looked anxiously at him.

“Call up the Chief,” he said in an undertone, “and get help. You’re so devilish reckless, Des. What are you up to now?”

“If Miss Maxwell will lend me her holy picture for an hour or so,” his brother retorted, smiling graciously at the American, “I’m going to make a few inquiries. No need to worry the Chief—at least, not yet. Bolt the front door, will you, old boy? And if I were you I shouldn’t answer the bell while I’m away.”

The little lobby between Desmond Okewood’s bedroom and the bathroom was surmounted by a skylight to which a ladder gave access. When not in use the ladder was hoisted out of reach by means of a rope and pulley. Having buttoned the ikon beneath his waistcoat, Desmond lowered the ladder and mounted to the skylight. With a wave of his hand to Francis and Patricia looking up at him from below, he pushed up the skylight and scrambled through, pulling the ladder up after him; they heard the glazed trap slam and he was gone.

With the sure gait of one who treads a familiar path, Desmond made his way across the black leads, a mere shadow dimly seen between the soot-encrusted chimney-pots. The wind blew keen and lusty across the roofs, rattling a loose trap here and there and merrily spinning the chimney-cowls. Above the prowler’s head the sky glowed redly with the reflection of the London lights.

Desmond descended a rusty iron fire-ladder, clambered over a chimney buttress, scaled a railing, and at length halted in front of a low grey door. His hand glided along the stone

cornice below until it came upon what he was seeking. Within the house a bell trilled faintly twice, then thrice. Then the door opened. A grey-haired woman, shielding against the draught a candle in her hands, stood on the narrow stair.

“Why,” she exclaimed, “you’re quite a stranger, sir! It must be fully three years since you last used the overhead route.”

Desmond grinned. “I thought I was out of the profession, Mother Howe,” said he, “but, dash it, I’m beginning to think they’ve brought me back!”

“Won’t you take a little something, Major?” said the woman, backing down the stairs, “just for old times’ sake?”

“I can’t stop!” Desmond answered. “I’m in the deuce of a hurry, Mother Howe, and that’s a fact!”

Two minutes later he stood in Saint James’s Street, waiting at the kerb for the taxi he had summoned from the rank. Sixty yards farther along two dim figures still kept their silent watch beneath the lighted windows of Desmond Okewood’s flat.

Six o’clock was ringing out from the clock-tower of Saint James’s Palace, that authentic witness of the pageantry of four centuries of English history, when Desmond Okewood crept away across the roofs. Francis and Patricia returned to the sitting-room. Francis suggested double-dummy bridge to pass the time of waiting. But Patricia shook her head.

“I’m thinking about poor little Süßlein,” she said. “I wonder why he committed suicide!”

“He’s not the first that Clubfoot has frightened into destroying himself!” said Francis.

“But why? What had Süßlein done?”

“I don’t know. But I imagine he was ordered to get the ikon out of you and he simply couldn’t face the consequences of his failure. Old Clubfoot has a devilish long arm, Patricia!”

“Tell me about this man Clubfoot,” she said.

So Francis gave her, as far as he knew it, the history of the man of power and mystery who, in the heyday of the Hohenzollerns, had wielded an influence second only to that of his Imperial master. He drew for her a picture of the man, ruthless, resourceful, vigilant, with the strength of an ox, the courage of a lion, and the cunning of a rogue elephant.

“If he wants a thing,” said Francis, “he’ll stop at nothing to get it. There’s only one man who has ever got the better of him, and that’s my brother Des. He’s a crazy devil, that brother of mine. He simply can’t live without taking risks. Ever since he left the Secret Service he’s been perfectly miserable. The reappearance of Clubfoot has made another man of him. But I’m haunted by the fear that Clubfoot will get him one day. That’s what makes me so anxious when he goes off suddenly like this.”

Patricia smiled rather incredulously.

“To hear you boys talk,” she remarked, glancing down at her pinky polished nails, “you’d think we were living in Ruritania or one of those exciting places in Booth Tarkington Land. I admit I was a bit taken aback to find that some one had rifled my boudoir; it may have been your clubfoot man, or it may just have been a common sneak-thief. But, for land’s sakes, what can happen to your brother in a city like London?”

The telephone pealed suddenly. The bell jangled noisily through the silent flat. The man and the girl exchanged a glance. There are moments when the sudden clamour of a telephone bell has an oddly frightening effect. Francis went to the instrument.

“Hullo! No, he’s not here. Who wants him? Oh . . .”

His manner became slightly more *empresé*.

“This is Francis Okewood speaking. Very good. Tell the Chief I’ll come right along.”

He rang off and turned to Patricia.

“It’s an urgent call from the office,” he said. “I believe I’ll have to go along at once. It’s a quarter to eight. Des. must be back any minute now. Do you mind being left alone for a little?”

“Of course not! You run right along and don’t mind about me.”

“You’re not frightened . . . or anything?”

“Frightened . . . nothing!” retorted Miss Maxwell with considerable emphasis. “Say, if that old dot-and-carry-one shows up, I’ll vamp him so hard he’ll just beat it back to Deutschland!”

Francis laughed. “Good for you. If you want anything, just ring for Batts, will you? I’ll be back as soon as I can. Bye-bye.”

The front door slammed.

As if struck by a sudden idea, Patricia went to the window and peered beneath the blind. The watcher still lounged on the opposite pavement. She observed him for a full two minutes. Then she saw him turn suddenly and walk swiftly down the street.

“That’s for Francis!” she said to herself.

She took up the cards and began to play Canfield. But she could not keep her mind on the game; her thoughts were busy with the strange and sinister figure who, that very morning, had loomed so large in her dainty drawing-room. She threw down the cards and went to the telephone. She would ring up the house and tell Barton she was dining out.

But now she could get no answer from the exchange. The line remained completely dead. She depressed the hook repeatedly without any result. At last she hung up the receiver, and going to the fire-place, pressed the bell-push in the wall beside it. Then she went back to the telephone.

No sound of life came to her over the wires. The line must be out of order, she thought. But then she remembered that Francis Okewood had used the instrument only a few minutes before. And no one came in response to her ring. A little feeling of fear crept over her like a trickle of ice-water running down her back. Why were both telephone and bell out of order?

Suddenly she heard the sitting-room door behind her open. Ah! the valet at last.

“I rang,” she said, speaking over her shoulder, at the same time depressing the hook of the telephone instrument, “to ask you what is the matter with the telephone. I can’t get a reply from the . . .”

The silence in the room made her turn.

At the table Dr. Madjaroff, her visitor of the morning, stood looking at her.

CHAPTER VI

THE SECRET OF THE IKON

She must have dropped the telephone receiver, for a clatter sounded dully in her ears. The strange and baleful glare of the man at the table held her gaze. The blood seemed to drain away from her heart as she met the cruel menace of those blackly bitter eyes. The bushy dark beard had vanished and the fleshy scarlet lips pressed together in a hard line were clearly visible above the squarely massive chin. But she knew her visitor again immediately. It was as though she recognized the extraordinary air of authority that his presence exhaled without requiring the additional aid to identification that the heavy misshapen boot presented.

She felt as though she must scream. The mute telephone, the unanswered bell, the sudden appearance of this frightening, apelike creature in the room, above all, his forbidding, ominous silence, produced a culminating effect of terror upon her. And, though she wilted before the fixed stare of those burning eyes beneath the bristling black eyebrows, she could not look away.

Suddenly there came an interruption. Two men emerged from the bedroom door and took up their position behind the stranger. One was a narrow-chested youth whose pointed nose and snarling mouth had something of the rodent about them, his sallow cheek slashed by a long white scar. The

other was a gross and burly fellow with a bullet neck, close-cropped hair, and small pig eyes.

“Niemand da?” asked the clubfooted stranger.

“Kein Mensch, Herr Doktor!” replied the youth with the scarred face.

The voices broke the spell that had seemed to bind her. Her eager American vitality came to her aid. She began to study with interest this man of whom Francis Okewood had told her. “Strong as an ox, brave as a lion, cunning as a rogue elephant,” he had called him. And cautious as a cat, she told herself as she watched him peering about the room with quick, suspicious glances, his gaze always returning to the door as though he feared interruption.

He gave a curt order in German to the men behind him, then removed his black wide-awake hat, displaying a glistening mass of iron-grey stubble.

“Miss Maxwell,” he said with a fawning civility that struck chill upon her, “I have come to fetch the ikon!”

This time he spoke in English, harshly, with a thick guttural accent.

She clasped her hands tightly together. They were as cold as ice.

“I—I have not got it,” she faltered.

A deep furrow appeared between the cripple's bushy eyebrows.

"I advise you not to play with me," he said. He took a step forward. The thud of his heavy boot shook the floor. "Where is it?" he cried hoarsely.

"I . . . I left it . . . at home!" stammered the girl.

His great arm shot out. A huge hairy paw, hot and soft, clamped itself with a vice-like grip about her wrist. Of a sudden his face was distorted with fury, so that his heavy sallow cheeks trembled beneath their thatch of loose black hairs. He might have been a huge man-ape chattering with passion as he shook her in that iron grasp.

"You lie! You lie!" he spat at her. "You brought it here to the spy, Okewood. That ikon is here, you understand me? Donnerwetter, are you going to give it up?" With a supreme effort he regained his self-control. But he did not relax his grasp on her hand. "If you refuse, I have the means to make you!"

"Herr Doktor," said a suave voice from the other side of the room, "won't you let go Miss Maxwell's wrist? I'm afraid you're hurting her!"

With a roar Clubfoot swung round. A large automatic was in his hand. His two companions had likewise drawn and covered Desmond Okewood, who, dapper and unruffled as ever, his hat on the back of his head, stood in the bedroom door, a brown paper parcel under his arm. Clubfoot laughed,

a harsh and grating laugh. "Put your hands up, my friend!" he said menacingly.

Desmond wavered. "But I shall drop my little parcel . . ." he began.

"Put 'em up, zum Teufel nochmal!" roared the cripple, his tufted nostrils twitching with rage.

Desmond hesitated for an instant. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Miss Maxwell," he said. "If only Francis had been here . . ."

And, pitching his parcel on the table, he slowly raised his hands above his head.

"Keep him covered, Jungens!" cried Clubfoot and flung himself upon the parcel. "Francis, indeed!" he exclaimed. "He had an important telephone summons just now, didn't he, Miss Maxwell?" And he chuckled noisily.

But the American did not heed him. With a pink flush on her cheeks she was staring fixedly at Desmond.

The young man sought to avoid her gaze. "It's three to one," he muttered, abashed. "I'd no idea they'd be able to get in here! I should never have brought it back if I'd dreamed of . . . this!"

But now, with a shout of joy, Clubfoot had drawn from its paper wrapping the ikon with its blackened silver sheath. With a rapid motion he thrust the little picture into the

capacious pocket of his overcoat. Then he turned to Desmond.

“Lieber junger Herr”—he spoke in German now—“if on this occasion I should neglect to settle the debt which has for so long been outstanding between us, believe me it is because other considerations take precedence. Do not delude yourself, however! When I want you, I have only to stretch out my hand”—he raised his long prehensile arm with clutching fingers—“and crush you like an egg! Heinrich, Max, vorwärts! Miss Maxwell! Ich habe die Ehre!” He broke into English. “It would have been wiser to have accepted my offer of this morning, or, better still, from this poor Süßlein’s point of view, to have listened to reason last night!”

He bowed to the American and, with head erect, stumped out into the hall.

Hardly had the door closed upon him than Patricia Maxwell turned on Desmond.

“You . . . you quitter!” she exclaimed with withering contempt in her voice. “Are you going to let him beat you to it all along the line? Are there no *men* in this town?”

But Desmond held up his hand. He had altogether discarded his rather abashed air. Now his eyes sparkled and a little smile played about his lips.

“Give me five minutes’ grace,” he said, “and I’ll explain everything!”

“There’s nothing to explain!” cried Patricia hotly. “He’s got my ikon, hasn’t he? What’s there to explain about that, I’d like to know!”

But Desmond Okewood had dashed out into the hall. She heard him rattling loudly at the front door. In a moment he was back in the sitting-room.

“They’ve wedged up the front door!” he cried and snatched the telephone receiver.

“The wire’s cut!” said Patricia coldly. “And your man doesn’t answer the bell!”

“Damnation!” exclaimed the young man. “I might have known he’d come here after you! And there’s no time to get out by the roof! To think that he’s walking calmly down Saint James’s Street . . .!”

Again he tore out into the hall. The little flat rang to the din of his frantic assault on the front door. Presently the noise ceased. She heard the voice of Francis outside.

“ . . . Decoyed me away with a bogus message from the Chief,” he was saying, “and Batts is imprisoned in the lift with the cable cut. What’s happened to Patricia?”

He came into the room.

“Thank God, you’re all right!” he exclaimed. “Desmond rushed downstairs like a madman. What’s happened, Patricia?”

She surveyed him coldly. “Nothing, only your clubfooted friend came here to fetch the ikon . . . my ikon. And your brother had the . . . the presence of mind to give it to him!”

“Desmond gave it to him?” Francis Okewood seemed dazed.

She nodded.

Desmond Okewood reappeared, panting. Without speaking he crossed the sitting-room and went into the bedroom.

“Are you sure?” asked Francis.

“Didn’t I see it with my own eyes?” said the girl impatiently. “Without the least show of fight!” she added contemptuously. She gathered her furs around her. “Do you think I could get a taxi?” she asked.

But Francis was staring past her. “Des.!”

There was such unbounded amazement in his exclamation that, involuntarily, the girl turned round. Desmond Okewood stood behind them. And on the table before him lay the ikon. In the doorway of the bedroom appeared a little yellow-faced man muffled up to the eyes in an ulster and scarf.

Desmond’s eyes twinkled. “Let me introduce Professor Krilenko, the celebrated Russian art connoisseur,” he said. “Although he is crippled with lumbago he came roof-climbing with me to-night to help me get the better of old Clubfoot. There’s friendship for you!”

The Professor bowed and groaned piteously, snatching at his back. “What a man!” he said.

Patricia Maxwell stared in silence at the pair. But her eyes were softer.

Desmond turned to the Professor. “Tell them about it!” he said.

Krilenko picked up the ikon. “Fate has placed in your hands, Madame,” he said in fluent English, “one of the most revered treasures of the Russian Church, none other than the miraculous ikon of Our Lady of Smolensk, smuggled out of Russia at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution to save it from desecration at the hands of the Reds. It is probably a thousand years old, but the tradition is that it was painted by the evangelist Luke himself.

“Major Okewood, who knows this man Grundt, doubted whether religious or artistic fervour had anything to do with his determination to acquire the ikon. With a perspicacity which I can only ascribe as astounding, he insisted that there was something about the picture which enhanced its artistic or intrinsic value . . .”

So saying he turned the ikon over on its face. Four screws loosely set held the stout wooden backing of the frame. He removed the screws and lifted out the back. In four slots sunk in the wood four little grey metal tubes were visible. Round one of them a slip of paper was wrapped.

“He suggested that we should remove the back,” the Professor resumed, “if we could do so without damaging the ikon. We scraped the back and at length laid bare the screws. Their presence had been very skilfully concealed first beneath a layer of . . .”

The Russian was evidently, like most experts, a prosy person, but imperiously Patricia stopped him before he could launch out into technicalities.

“What are those little bits of lead?” she asked.

“Radium!” Desmond replied. “Translate the letter, Krilenko!”

He detached the slip of paper that was rolled about one of the cases and handed it to the Professor.

I, Vladimir Lemuroff [Krilenko read out], Professor of Chemistry in the University of Moscow, being in imminent danger of arrest by the Tcheka [“the Extraordinary Commission of the Soviet Government,” Krilenko explained], have in the presence of Bishop Tchergeroff, whose signature is here appended, concealed for safe custody in the blessed ikon of Our Lady of Smolensk the four grammes of radium, the property of the Moscow Chemical Institute, which I took with me in my flight to save them for science from the ruthless vandalism of the wild beasts who are destroying Holy Russia.

(Signed) LEMUROFF

Smolensk, 13/26, July, 1919

“By Jove!” ejaculated Francis. “Four grammes of radium! Let’s see!—the market price stands somewhere about £12,000 a gramme, I think. That makes these four little tubes worth something like £50,000. No wonder old Clubfoot wanted that picture, Des.!”

“But,” remarked Patricia, perplexed, “I *saw* you give the ikon to the man Grundt!”

Desmond laughed. “I had to finesse him,” he said. “Old Clubfoot never lets the grass grow under his feet, and I wanted to gain time to get your ikon into a safe place before he could seize it by force. Directly I found out from Krilenko here that this was one of the famous miraculous ikons, I knew, from my experience of Russia, that thousands of copies must be in existence, for most of the ikons you find in Russian churches and homes are copies of these wonder-working pictures. Krilenko, who has been a perfect trump all through, routed up a Russian pope he knows who remembered that there was a copy of the Madonna of Smolensk in one of the Russian churches in London. It was nice and grimy, as it had hung there for years.

“Krilenko and the priest did the rest. My intention was to hang up the copy in your boudoir for Clubfoot to steal, for I was virtually certain that your house would be broken into to-night. But, when we were scrambling over the roofs just

now, I heard old Grundt's voice coming up through the skylight and I just couldn't resist the chance of bluffing him. My word, I could hardly keep my face straight!"

He glanced humorously at Patricia. She held out her hand.

"I feel just terribly!" she said. "I'm sorry I was so rude! But, oh! what an actor!"

Desmond grinned. "It wasn't bad, was it? Especially the pathetic bit about their being three to one . . ."

They all laughed.

"In the mean time Grundt is off again!" observed Francis ruefully.

"He's a clever devil!" said Desmond with real admiration in his voice. "He simply bunged up the front door and walked out, knowing that one minute's grace would be enough to allow him, lame as he is, to get away in the London crowd. Directly you opened the door I bolted down to the street. But I knew it was too late. We've just got to wait for him to come back . . ."

"He might have shot you!" remarked Francis.

"Not he! Clubfoot knows that you can commit almost any crime in London as long as you act normally. But a shot would have aroused the whole block. Besides, he's a single-minded person. To-day he was after the ikon. Next time it may be you or me. I don't worry about losing his trail, Francis. He's coming back after us . . ."

He chuckled with infinite relish.

“Des.,” said his brother, “tell us the joke!”

“Well,” Desmond replied slowly, “when we were weighting that duplicate ikon, I couldn’t resist slipping in a note for Clubfoot. I was just thinking of his face when he reads it!”

And he chuckled again.

By Patricia Maxwell’s direction the radium, duly tested and found to be genuine, was handed over to the Russian Refugees’ Fund. The ikon of Our Lady of Smolensk went to take the place of the copy in the Russian church, where, night and day, a great candle burns before it in memory of the donor.

As for Clubfoot, the evening traffic of Saint James’s swallowed up him and his companions, and the unremitting vigilance of the Secret Service, assisted by Scotland Yard, threw no light on their whereabouts. But, two days after the encounter in his flat, Desmond Okewood found in his mail a postcard, unsigned, with this epigrammatic message:

A sense of humour is a dangerous thing!

CHAPTER VII

THE UNSEEN MENACE

It was about the time of the adventure of the top flat which I am going to narrate that I became aware of a remarkable change in my friend, Desmond Okewood. We were in the habit of meeting once or twice a week either for lunch or for a game of squash at the Bath Club. Now, Desmond Okewood, as his Christian name suggests, is, on the distaff side, Irish, and from his mother's race he has inherited not only the intuition and reckless courage which have carried him so far in his career, but also that sublime indifference to anything like "nerves" that is one of the outstanding characteristics of the Irish.

It was, therefore, with considerable surprise that, about this time, I became aware that my old friend was looking decidedly under par. His face had a drawn look that I did not like, and his eyes were haggard. I should probably have set it down to a succession of late nights had not old Erasmus Wilkes, the psychoanalyst, who was lunching at our table at the Club one morning, drawn me aside in the smoke-room afterwards and put the matter in an entirely different light.

"You're a friend of Desmond Okewood's, aren't you?" he asked me, and went on: "Then get him to tell you what's on his mind. I'm not prying, young fellow, but I have some

experience of these cases. If your pal doesn't confide in some one . . .”

He shrugged his shoulders and was about to turn away when I caught him by the sleeve.

“We're old friends, Desmond and I,” I said; “but there are some confidences one has to wait for. And Okewood's a reserved beggar. It might help things, Doctor, if you'd give me a hint as to what is the matter, with him. He'll never say a word unless I give him a lead.”

Old Wilkes looked at me thoughtfully. “It's fear,” he said.

I burst out laughing. “Rot!” I exclaimed. “You've made a bloomer there, Doctor. Fear! Why, Desmond Okewood doesn't know the meaning of the word!”

Wilkes shook his head dubiously. “He looks like a man who goes in fear of his life,” he answered gravely. “He's got the wind up about something. You ask him and you'll see that I'm right!”

“I'll ask him like a shot,” I retorted, “but I bet you're wrong!”

And, in due course, I did ask Desmond Okewood. But he, as I expected, laughed my question off and protested that he had never felt better in his life. But old Wilkes was right, and it was Francis Okewood, as he afterwards told me, in whom Desmond ultimately confided.

It happened in this way. Francis had had to make a quick trip to America on business connected with some property of his American wife, and Desmond had gone down in his car to meet his brother at Southampton. Storms in the Atlantic had delayed the arrival of the liner, and after they had cleared the baggage through the customs, it was close on midnight before they took the road to drive to Desmond's bungalow in Surrey. Yet, belated as they were, Francis was quite unable to prevail upon his brother to exceed a modest twenty miles an hour, which, as they dropped down a deep slope into the sunken road that led past the front gate of Desmond's bungalow, fell to somewhere about ten.

Before them the road, like a profound black trench, wound its way down into the dark night. The bright headlights of the car showed the high hedges on either side and, above them, the tall trees that bordered the road swaying and tossing with the violence of the storm. The driving-glass was a blur of wet; the side curtains flapped and banged and strained to the fury of the gale, and again and again a smother of icy rain beat on the face of Desmond at the wheel and of his brother at his side.

"Push her along, Des., for the love o' Mike!" urged Francis for about the sixth time that night. "This is worse than the Atlantic. And I want to go to bed."

"Awkward bit of road, this," was Desmond's answer as, heedless of his brother's remarks, he changed down to second.

“But, good Lord, what are you going to meet at three o’clock in the morning? Open her up and let’s get home!”

“We haven’t far to go now,” Desmond replied shortly, and so, without further speech, they came at length to their destination.

At the front door Desmond handed his brother the latchkey and took the car round to the back of the house. Francis crossed the wide hall and went into the dining-room, where a pleasant fire glowed redly on the silver and crockery that decked the table.

Without waiting to remove his heavy ulster, Francis Okewood switched on the lights and, going to the sideboard, mixed two stiff whiskey-and-sodas. He still had his hand on the siphon when there came an exclamation from the door, and the room was plunged into darkness.

“Here . . .” he began in expostulation. There was a click at the window, followed by a grinding noise. Then the lights went up again.

Desmond, a curiously tense expression on his face, stood in the doorway.

“Sorry, old man,” he said awkwardly. “I noticed that the shutter wasn’t closed. We . . . we don’t turn the lights up here as a rule unless the shutter is down . . .”

Francis Okewood turned his eyes to the French window, which, as he knew, opened on the croquet lawn at the back. It was now concealed by a close-fitting steel shutter that

reached to the floor. He raised his eyebrows and looked at his brother as though about to speak. But there was close communion between these two. In all the years they had spent together in the Secret Service their one invariable rule was that if no explanation were vouchsafed, none was asked for. So Francis held his peace.

“You must be starved,” said Desmond. “Sit down and have some supper. You’ve got a drink? Good. There’s a hot-pot here . . .” and he struck an electric plug in the wall, connected with a chafing-dish on the table.

They ate in silence. The sympathy between the two brothers was not of the kind that requires expression in words. When they had done, Desmond pushed a box of cigars over to Francis and made up the fire. Then only Francis spoke.

“And Clubfoot?” he said.

Desmond, his feet stretched out on the fender, appeared to study the end of his cigar. Scrutinizing his features between his half-closed eyes, Francis noticed for the first time how worn his brother looked. The lines on his face and an air of restlessness, most unusual in him, were unfailing symptoms of prolonged strain.

“Vanished into the Ewigkeit. Since the affair of the Russian ikon he has not been seen. The Chief thinks he has left the country. In fact, two days ago the old man went off to Holland on a clue . . .”

“Went in person, eh? It must be a good one . . .”

Desmond shook his head wearily. “Clubfoot’s still here, I think,” he said. “He’s lying low, that’s all. Waiting . . .”

“For what?”

“To get you, me, the Chief . . .” He shrugged his shoulders, drew on his cigar. “He’ll never quit while breath is in him, Francis. We beat him in Germany, brought him to the ground, the man of might and mystery, as they used to call him. When he reappeared so mysteriously in the Pacific, I spoilt his little game, and since he started this campaign of vengeance against us, we have pretty well held our own. But though we have the honours he means to win the rubber. Let him try . . .” He sprang to his feet. “It’s this cursed uncertainty that . . . that wears one down.”

“Sit down, Des.,” said Francis gently. “I’m going to break the rules and ask you a question. Why did you bring us up from Southampton to-night like an old woman driving a governess cart? That six-cylinder of yours used to do better than twenty . . .!”

Desmond frowned moodily. “I’m . . . I’m ashamed of myself,” he replied. “I’m windy, Francis—have been ever since they put a steel cable across the sunken road outside the gate here.”

“Ah!” said Francis.

“That bus of mine will touch sixty when I open her out. By the mercy of God on this particular evening, a black

night like this with no moon, I had slowed down to tighten up the wind-screen. The glass suddenly shattered, but I had time to duck. There was a steel rope spanned at the height of my head from hedge to hedge . . .”

“I see. Any clue as to who put it there?”

“Not a trace. The Chief was wild when I told him. But it gave me the jumps. I stopped Marjorie driving her two-seater and sent her off with the boy to her father’s. She didn’t want to go, poor girl, but, by George, I couldn’t stand the strain of looking after her as well as myself. And I know that if this doesn’t finish quickly, she’ll come back. You know what a loyal pal she is!”

Francis nodded. “And that contraption of yours at the window?”

Desmond heaved himself out of his chair. “Come here. I want to show you something.”

He led the way across to the sideboard which stood against the wall opposite the shuttered window.

“Six nights ago,” he said, “I was mixing myself a drink here just as you did to-night. Suddenly there was a shiver of glass from the window behind me, and something struck the woodwork not an inch from my head. After that I had steel shutters fitted to all the windows. Look! You can see the slug!”

Projecting from the polished oak of the Jacobean buffet was a grey, irregular mass of metal.

“Air-gun, eh?” commented Francis. “And a devilish heavy one, too, Des.!” He clapped his brother affectionately on the shoulder. “Well,” he remarked, “there are two of us now. I shall have to try what trailing my coat-tails in front of old Clubfoot will do . . .”

“The only consoling thing about it,” said his brother, “is that it shows that old Clubfoot is afraid to come out in the open.”

Francis rubbed the bridge of his nose meditatively. “I wonder! He may be planning something fresh and wants to get you out of the way. Has any attempt been made on the Chief?”

“No!”

Francis Okewood shook his head. “Bad, bad! Clubfoot has got him out of the country, Des., and he’ll strike at once!”

They had not long to wait.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TOP FLAT

At eight o'clock, not many hours after they had gone to bed, Desmond appeared in his brother's room.

"You've got to get dressed at once," he announced. "We're off to London!"

"Oh, I say!" protested Francis, rubbing sleepy eyes.

"One of the confidential typists at the Air Ministry has been murdered . . ."

"But what . . . why . . .?"

"I know nothing about it except that Alec Bannington, the Chief of the Air Staff, has been on to me on the telephone in the most fearful state. I promised to go up and see him at once. You're coming, too. Don't stop to bathe or shave, but come!"

There was no twenty miles an hour about Desmond Okewood's driving that morning. The rain had stopped, the wind had dried the sandy Surrey roads, and well within the hour they had reached Onslow Square, where the private house of Air-Marshal Sir Alexander Bannington was situated.

He received them in a small book-lined room on the ground floor, a florid, well-fed dapper man, whose shining, good-natured face was ill-suited to the look of care it now wore.

“Ah, Okewood!” he cried. “Thank God, you’re here. This your brother? How de do, how de do?” Then he clasped his red hands together in a gesture of anguish, which at another time would have been grotesque. “The most shockin’ affair! Miss Bardale, my confidential typist, was found dead—murdered—in her flat this morning. It’s a ghastly business, ghastly, and, what is more, unless you can do something it means ruin for me!”

“Perhaps you wouldn’t mind telling us the whole story from the beginning, sir,” said Desmond. “It would help,” he added, “if you would omit nothing!”

Francis cocked a shrewdly admiring eye at his brother.

The large man sighed heavily. “I see you have already grasped that it is a confidential matter,” he remarked.

“A State secret of the utmost importance is, in fact, at stake. As Chief of the Air Staff it has recently been my duty to draw up for submission to the Cabinet a comprehensive scheme for the aerial defence of the Empire. For this purpose I have attended many meetings with the First Sea Lord and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, as well as more than one sitting of the Cabinet. Upon the notes I made on these discussions I based my report. I finished it in the rough yesterday afternoon . . .”

“And gave it to your typist to make a fair copy? Is that it?”
Desmond interposed.

“Exactly.”

“At the office?”

“I gave it to her at the Ministry at six o’clock yesterday evening. She was to take it home, type it out after dinner, and let me have it back this morning. You will say, gentlemen, that I was criminally careless in thus letting a vitally important document out of the office. But I thought . . . I never imagined . . .”

“It might be better, sir,” Desmond remarked soothingly, “if we got at the facts first . . .”

“Quite so, quite so,” agreed Bannington. “Well, first thing this morning the resident clerk at the Ministry rang me up to say he had heard from the police that Miss Bardale had been murdered and her flat ransacked . . .”

“And your report?”

“Gone!”

Desmond nodded. Then he asked: “How was the murder discovered?”

“By Miss Bardale’s daily servant when she arrived at the apartment about half-past six this morning. Miss Bardale occupies a small flat consisting of a sitting-room, bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen on the top floor of a house in

Crewdwell Street, off Baker Street. It appears that last night she went out to dinner with a young man, a certain Captain Reginald Hollingway, who brought her back to the flat shortly after eight o'clock. When Miss Bardale's servant, a certain Mrs. Crump, entered the flat this morning, she found Miss Bardale lying dead in the sitting-room and all the rooms in the wildest confusion . . ."

"How had she been killed?"

"Strangled. There are deep finger-marks on her throat. There had obviously been a desperate struggle, for the carpet is disarranged, the remains of a vase lie scattered about the floor, and a clock had been knocked off the table. This clock, by the way, furnishes an important clue, for it had stopped at sixteen minutes past eight, showing at what time the murder was committed."

"And your report, you say, is not to be found?"

Bannington shook his head dismally.

"From what the police tell me, Miss Bardale was actually engaged in typing it out when she was attacked. The body was discovered lying beside her typewriter in the sitting-room. She had apparently reached the third page, for a sheet of paper bearing that number—just that and nothing else—was still in the typewriter. But the rest was gone."

"You mean"—Francis Okewood spoke for the first time—"that the assassin simply snatched your

manuscript and as much of it as Miss Bardale had copied out from where it lay beside the typewriter?"

"I suppose so, yes!" sighed the large man.

"Then why was the flat ransacked?"

It was Desmond's turn to glance his appreciation at his brother.

"By George!" the Air Marshal exclaimed, "I never thought of that. Then Hollingway must have made hay in the rooms just to mislead us . . ."

"Hollingway?" ejaculated the two brothers simultaneously.

"I was coming to him. Captain Hollingway, gentlemen, is undoubtedly the murderer. He is a young man of good family with an excellent war record, but since demobilization has done no work. He is an exhibition dancer at night-clubs, and is in grave money difficulties, so the police inform me."

"Is he under arrest?" asked Desmond.

Bannington nodded. "The porter at Crewdwell Street saw him leave the building in a state of profound agitation about twenty-five minutes past eight or shortly after the murder was committed. The police arrested him at his rooms this morning. The report, of course, had disappeared. With a clear start of twelve hours he had naturally passed it on. Ah!"

With a despairing exclamation the fat man dashed his fist into the palm of his hand and began to pace the room.

“There was some party, then, who had an interest in obtaining possession of this report?” asked Desmond.

Sir Alexander Bannington stopped in his stride and turned round. “Yes,” he said. “But in the present state of international politics it is hardly safe even to mention the name of the Power in question.” He leant forward and whispered something in Desmond’s ear.

“Ah! . . . yes!” was that young man’s brief comment.

The large man extended two shaking hands towards his visitors. “You must get this report back for me. If it’s a question of money you can draw on me up to any reasonable amount. Hollingway must be made to talk. The police will give you every facility: I have arranged that. I shall be here all day. I am not going to the Ministry. I can’t face them. Let me know to-day . . . soon . . . how you get on . . .”

Desmond and his brother had risen to their feet.

“One question before we leave you, sir,” said Desmond. “Are you quite satisfied that Miss Bardale was trustworthy?”

“Enid Bardale,” the Air Marshal replied in a voice that shook with emotion, “gave her life for her trust. She was a splendid girl and absolutely invaluable to me in my work. I trusted her as I would trust my own daughter. As a matter of fact, she was a relative of my dead wife. She may have been indiscreet in the matter of her friendship with this scoundrel

Hollingway; but there was no question of collusion between them in this affair.”

They left him bowed over his desk, his face sunk in his plump, red hands.

The girl’s body lay on its side on the black carpet of the little sitting-room, the face an agonized mask in a frame of clustering brown hair. The sight was not pleasant, and they did not let their glance dwell on it, for, after all, their immediate business was not with the murdered woman. They looked long enough, however, to notice the deep bluish-black marks on the throat, indicative of a ferocious grip.

The flat, skyed at the top of a big mansion which had been converted into apartments, was tiny. The hall led into the small sitting-room, very gay with its primrose-yellow distempered walls and orange lamp-shades, with bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen beyond. Detective-Inspector Farandol, of Scotland Yard, who opened the door in answer to their ring, showed them the rooms. One of the most reliable and experienced officers of the older school of detectives, both Desmond and Francis had come across him more than once in the course of their work in the Secret Service. He was a self-opinionated person with a profound contempt for amateurs.

“Fourth floor,” remarked the Inspector. “Nothing above and nothing below, for this is the only flat in the building. The other floors are let off as offices, and after 6 P.M. the rest of

the house is empty except for the porter who lives in the basement. No wonder no sounds of the struggle were heard.”

That a most violent and desperate struggle had gone forward was abundantly evident from the state of the sitting-room, which, as Farandol was careful to point out, was exactly as the police had discovered it. The black carpet was rucked up, and athwart it, in a mess of crushed petals and broken glass, the remains of a vase of daffodils was scattered. A string of crystal beads which the dead girl had been wearing had broken, and the beads, together with a number of hairpins, strewn the floor. The telltale clock, of which Bannington had spoken, had been retrieved and now stood upon the table beside the typewriter—a small French travelling-clock in a leather case. The glass was broken. They noticed that, as Bannington had said, the hands pointed at sixteen minutes past eight.

Farandol tapped the clock. “This is what is going to hang Master Hollingway,” he remarked.

“Humph,” commented Desmond. “That won’t bring us what we’re looking for, Inspector. I suppose you know what I mean?”

Farandol nodded impressively. “Aye. But he’s got rid of it by now, mark my words. He’s one of your deep ones is Master Hollingway. He thought he’d draw a red herring across the scent. Look at this room and the bedroom beyond! He’s even upset the flour-bins in the kitchen!”

The rooms were, indeed, in a state of remarkable confusion. In the sitting-room the sloping top of a little mahogany escritoire had been burst open and every drawer pulled out. The doors of the oaken buffet stood wide, and its contents, crockery and table linen, were in part spilled out on the carpet. In the bedroom a high-boy had been rifled and garments of all kinds flung about the room. The very bed had been pulled out from the wall, the bedclothes rolled up in a ball and the mattress dragged on one side.

“And all the time,” Farandol resumed, “this precious document was lying there beside the typewriter! All this”—he waved a contemptuous hand at the disordered room—“play-acting is meant to bolster up his story about the footstep on the back stair . . .”

“He’s made a statement, then?” queried Desmond. “I suppose he denies everything?”

“He’s the innocent babe all right, same as they all are at the first go-off,” observed Farandol, fingering his waxed moustache. “Briefly, his story is that he met Miss Bardale in Soho for dinner at a quarter to seven. They had arranged to dine early because of this work that the lady had to do. Hollingway brought her back shortly after eight, and, he says, escorted her upstairs as far as the door of her flat because she was feeling nervous. On the previous evening—according to what this Hollingway says she told him—she had heard a heavy step outside her kitchen on the back stairs . . .”

“Half a minute,” Desmond interrupted; “is there a back entrance? I didn’t notice it . . .”

Without replying, the detective walked through the bathroom into the kitchen and there lifted a chintz curtain, disclosing a door. He turned the handle and showed a series of iron staircases leading down.

“It’s really a fire-escape,” he remarked, “but apparently Miss Bardale used it as a tradesman’s entrance to the flat.”

It was chilly outside and they soon re-entered the flat where Farandol resumed his story.

“Hollingway left her at the door of the flat, he says. He declares he did not go in. He remained talking to the girl for about ten minutes at the top of the staircase outside her flat, and then went down while she went indoors. Webb, the porter, who is on duty all day long in the hall below—he’s an old man with a game leg and can’t get about much—saw them come in soon after eight and saw Hollingway leave alone about twenty minutes later. He knows Hollingway well, and states that he was struck by the change in the young man’s manner. He was pale and upset-like and made no reply when Webb bade him good-night. As far as the police is concerned, Major Okewood, the case is as clear as daylight; but it doesn’t bring you any nearer what you’re after; I quite realize that.”

With an abstracted air Desmond, who was poking about amid the confusion of the sitting-room, nodded.

“Does Hollingway attempt to account for his agitation?” Francis said to Farandol.

“Oh, rather!” The detective replied. “He’s got it all pat. Says he was in love with the girl, has been for years, and last night, when he again asked her to marry him, she turned him down good and hard, told him that a professional dancer was no good to her as a husband and all the rest of it. He tells it all very well,” the Inspector added, musingly. He picked up his hat and gloves. “They’ll be coming along presently to take the body to the mortuary,” he said. “I’m leaving one of my men to stand by. I shall be at the Yard all the morning if I can be of any assistance, gentlemen . . .”

“Right!” Desmond replied. “I’ll probably be telephoning you, Inspector. I should rather like to have a word with this porter fellow, what’s his name—ah, yes, Webb. Send him up, would you?”

Farandol laughed. “He’s a proper thickhead,” he observed. “That dense, you couldn’t hammer a tenpenny nail into his skull without blunting it. I’ll send him up!”

“Pompous ass!” commented Francis as the Inspector shut the front door behind him.

Then he swung round sharply. Desmond had called to him in a tense voice. His brother stood behind him holding a torn envelope in his hand. He thrust it, and with it a folded letter, at Francis.

“Look at that!” he exclaimed.

The envelope was addressed, in what seemed to be a woman’s hand, to Miss Enid Bardale, Flat 7, 31, Crewdwell Street, W.I. The letter, written from an address at Saint John’s Wood, and signed “Your affectionate Mother, M. Bardale,” was to remind “Dearest E.” that she was expected to dinner on the following Saturday at seven-thirty.

“I don’t see . . .” Francis began.

“The postmark, man, the postmark!” cried Desmond.

Francis turned to the envelope again. The postmark was unusually clear. It read:



“Yesterday’s date!” said Francis.

“I found that letter in the drawer of the typewriting table. It was posted at Saint John’s Wood before six o’clock yesterday evening,” Desmond exclaimed emphatically.

“It was, therefore, delivered here by the last post. Now what time is the last delivery in London?”

“Nine o’clock . . .” began Francis. Then broke off. “By George, Des.,” he said slowly. “I take my hat off to you. You can give us all points. Of course, this letter knocks the bottom out of old Farandol’s theory. The girl was alone in the flat, therefore to take this letter from the postman she must

have been alive at 9 P.M., therefore the murder did not take place while Hollingway was here, that is to say, before eight-twenty. Unless Hollingway came back . . .”

“That,” said his brother, “Webb, the porter, must tell us. Here he is, I think!”

Webb was a forlorn-looking old man with a shining bald pate and a haggard face intersected with blue veins.

“Come in, Webb,” said Desmond, advancing to the front hall to meet him. “I want you to answer one or two questions. What time did Captain Hollingway leave here last night?”

“Captain ’Ollingway?” queried the old man.

“Yes, the gentleman that brought Miss Bardale home.”

The old man appeared to think. “It wor about twenty-five minutes past h’eight, Mister!”

“How do you know the time so exactly?” demanded Desmond.

Old Webb cast him a sly look. “’Cos for why from where I sets in the front ’all I kin ’ear the clock on Saint Jude’s strike. The quarter ’adn’t long gorn and the ’arf ’adn’t struck w’en the Capting come out. ‘Wish you good-night, Capting,’ I sez . . .”

“But why should you have noted the time so carefully?” Desmond broke in impatiently.

Old Webb's rheumy eyes puckered up as a cunning grin slowly broke out over his face.

"I was a-waitin' for my supper-beer," he replied. "The gal brings it every night at 'arf-past h'eight!"

Desmond smiled. "I see!" he said.

"Were you on duty in the hall all the evening?" he asked.

"I wor, sir, till midnight, w'en I locks up, same as allus!"

"And you never left the hall?"

"No, sir!"

"Did Captain Hollingway come back?"

"No, sir!"

"You're sure?"

"There worn't nobody come the whole dratted evenin' arter 'im, only the pos'man!"

"Oh, the postman came eh? At what time?"

"Round about nine o'clock or a bit arter!"

"Do you take the letters up or does he?"

"'E do! I can't get around much along o' my bad leg!"

"Do you know if there were any letters for Miss Bardale?"

“I dunno nothink about that!”

“Did the postman say anything?”

“’E wor put out ’cos, ’e said, there wor but the one letter and ’e ’ad to carry it to the very top!”

“To Miss Bardale’s, you mean?”

The old man shot his questioner a crafty glance. “’E didn’t say nuthin’ about *’er*!”

“How long was he up there?”

“Not above a minute or so, Mister. ’E’s a spry one for the stairs, is our postman!”

Desmond made a movement of impatience.

“Did you tell Inspector Farandol about the postman calling?”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“’Cos ’e never arst me!”

“And now, old boy,” said Desmond to his brother when, with some difficulty, they had got rid of the ancient janitor, “let’s look at the facts. We’ve advanced things by half an hour. Hollingway is eliminated; the postman is eliminated, for we know that he was in the building only for a minute or two altogether. No one crossed the front hall downstairs after the

postman's departure, and at midnight the front door was shut. We therefore come back to our only other indication . . .”

“The heavy footstep that Miss Bardale heard on the back stairs on the previous evening?”

“Just so. I was wondering whether that point had struck you. We cannot assume that the murderer was hidden in the flat waiting for Miss Bardale's arrival. He evidently followed the couple back from dinner, for he was sufficiently acquainted with their movements to make this rather able attempt to fix the guilt on Hollingway. You have seen the front staircase: there is nowhere to hide even a cat. And the floors below are untenanted after six o'clock. We return, therefore, to the back stairs.

“Back doors are usually kept locked. Not only is the back door in this flat, tenanted by a girl living alone, open, but the key is missing. There are no marks of violence on the lock outside: consequently, if the murderer entered by that way, he must have used a key; therefore he must be familiar with his surroundings.

“Did Miss Bardale open in person the last letter she was destined to receive in this life, or did the murderer, his ghastly job accomplished, do so? I think that Miss Bardale opened it, for I found it placed on the top of a neat pile of correspondence in the drawer of her typewriting table, where she was obviously accustomed to keep her letters. Therefore, at nine o'clock, or thereabouts, she was alive. When was she murdered? I will tell you . . .”

So saying, he lifted from the table the little travelling-clock in its case of morocco leather, lifted it out of the case, a dainty thing of glass and gilding, and handed it to Francis.

In the panel at the top was a small metal knob.

“This is not the original case of the clock,” said Desmond. “You see, it is a little too large for it. The new case does not contain the spring usually found to actuate the knob of the repeater . . .”

“The repeater?” exclaimed Francis. “The repeater, Des.?”

And he pressed the knob. There was a little whirr and a clear bell chimed nine times, then, on another note, the clock struck thrice.

“Nine-forty-five,” said Desmond, “showing conclusively that Miss Bardale was murdered, not between eight and eight twenty, but between nine-forty-five and ten o’clock. That case, concealing the repeater mechanism, escaped the notice of the murderer who set the hands back, as it escaped Farandol’s. Neither, of course, was looking for anything of the kind. What we have got to do now is to find out who was on the back stairs outside Miss Bardale’s flat between nine-thirty and ten last night, and, maybe, the night before as well. Whoever it was, he came from this or one of the neighbouring houses . . .”

“How do you know that?”

“If you will look out from the back door you will see that this house and the houses on either side are all furnished with

these fire-staircases descending to a common well or court. Since we know that the murderer did not enter from the front, he must have come in from the back, either from this house or from one of the adjacent houses. Will you go off and explore the possibilities of this house and its neighbours? I'm staying on here for a bit. I'll take a small bet that the murderer can't be far off . . .”

“I'll go,” said Francis, grabbing his hat; “but you'll lose your money. He's over the hills and far away with Bannington's report by this time, whoever he is!”

“I wonder!” said Desmond enigmatically.

CHAPTER IX

THE FOOTSTEP IN THE DARK

At ten minutes to eight that evening there came the rattle of nails on the glass panels of the door of Flat 7. Desmond opened and Francis darted in. He caught his brother's arm.

"Clubfoot!" he gasped.

Swiftly Desmond laid his finger on his lips. He turned and closed the door leading from the hall into the little sitting-room.

"One of Farandol's men is inside," he explained. "I've been staving him off all the afternoon, as I'm particularly anxious, for the moment, to keep the police out of this—at any rate, until I've heard your story!"

Francis nodded understandingly. "For a week," he said, "a lame man, a foreigner with a misshapen foot, has been a patient in the nursing-home which occupies the second, third, and fourth floors of the house next door to this. He calls himself Dr. Deinwitz, a Czecho-Slovak lawyer, and was brought here by his son, a fair young man with a scar on his face. The son represented that his father was suffering from acute neurasthenia and was in need of absolute rest and quiet. He made it a stipulation that his father's presence should be kept a secret, otherwise, he said, he would be

pestered to death by visitors. In order to be quiet, the son insisted that his father should have a room at the back on the top floor.”

Desmond opened and clenched his hand. “Is he still there?” he asked tensely.

Francis shook his head despondently. “He went out for the first time to-day to go to the City on business. He has kept his room on, but I doubt—”

“He’s kept his room on?” Desmond almost shouted. “Then all is not lost. Wait here a second!”

He darted away, and presently Francis heard him telephoning in one of the inner rooms.

“You’ve no idea what a day I’ve had,” said Francis when his brother came back. “Professional secrecy is a tremendously effective cover against indiscreet inquiries. Young Deinwitz, in whom, of course, I recognized Clubfoot’s aide, Heinrich, seems to have subtly conveyed to the fellow who runs this nursing-home that his father was on the verge of lunacy. Naturally the matron and all of them shut up like oysters when I came barging in with direct questions at the front door. I had to get a letter of introduction from a pal of mine in Harley Street before I finally got into the place. I flatter myself I was rather good as a nerve specialist from Sheffield with a rich patient to ‘place’ . . .”

Desmond laughed happily. “Disguise, eh?”

“Only cheek pads and a toupet! But what are you looking so cheerful about? Old Clubfoot has given us the slip properly this time . . .”

Desmond slipped his arm in his brother's. “Come inside and meet Sergeant Rushbrooke,” he said.

Francis found that the girl's body had been taken away, but otherwise no attempt had been made to repair the disorder of the rooms. In an armchair in the sitting-room was a fresh-faced, blue-eyed young man whom Desmond introduced as Sergeant Rushbrooke.

A bell pealed through the flat.

“Bannington!” announced Desmond, and hurried to the front door.

“I got your telephone message,” said the Air Marshal, coming into the sitting-room. “Have you any news for me, Okewood? My God, this suspense is awful!”

He held out two trembling hands towards the young man. Desmond was fumbling in the inside pocket of his coat. He drew forth a thick wad of blue foolscap, folded twice across, which he handed to his visitor.

Bannington snatched at it and, with an eagerness that was almost painful to behold, unfolded it, scrutinized it.

“By the Lord! You've saved me!” he gasped and dropped limply into a chair. “How can I ever thank you, Okewood? Man alive, it's a miracle! Tell me all about it!”

“Des.!” exclaimed Francis.

Sergeant Rushbrooke opened wide his blue eyes. “You didn’t say anything about this to me, sir,” he observed in rather a ruffled tone.

“You won’t be kept in suspense much longer, Sergeant,” said Desmond, and glanced at his watch.

He turned to the Air Marshal. “This was the way of it, sir,” he said. “Last night Miss Bardale was seated there at her typewriter typing out your report with her back to the bedroom door. The time was somewhere about ten o’clock. Suddenly from behind her she hears a noise in the kitchen. Her first thought is not for herself, but for her duty to you. She snatches up her papers—your original and the two pages of the fair copy she had made—and puts them in a place of safety before she turns to meet her murderer. When she sees his face, she attempts to flee back into the sitting-room. But, before she can escape, he is on her, choking out her life with his great hairy hands.

“Then follows the frantic search to find what he had committed murder to discover, a search frantic, yet methodical in its way, room by room, as you may see. It was the circumstance that he had prolonged the search to the very kitchen that made me think he had possibly not achieved his object. So I took up the hunt where he had left off and . . .”

He produced from a drawer in the table a filmy mass of pink edged with lace.

“She had rolled your papers up in her nightdress and put it back under the pillow. I found it wedged between the bed and the wall!”

Sir Alexander Bannington blew his nose violently. “But who was the murderer?” he asked.

Again Desmond consulted his watch. “I may be able to answer that question later,” he said. “For the moment the sooner you get that report in a place of safety the better, sir.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you,” replied Bannington. “Are you and your brother coming along?”

Desmond shook his head. “My work isn’t finished yet! But Francis will escort you back to the Air Ministry . . .”

“No need, I assure you,” said Bannington. “I have my car outside.”

“Believe me,” Desmond urged, “it would be better for you to have an escort!”

Francis drew his brother aside. “It’s no use trying to get me out of the way, Des.,” he told him. “You’ve got something up your sleeve. Now, haven’t you?”

He was smiling, but his brother remained serious.

“The important thing,” Desmond said, “is to get that report away quickly. Bannington has no idea of the danger he runs. When you’ve seen his memorandum into the safe, come back

here by all means. If I'm not here I'll be at the Yard. I may have some news for you . . .”

Desmond leaned forward and whispered in his brother's ear.

Francis started. Then he said: “But I can't leave you to face it alone!”

“I shan't be alone,” Desmond answered. “Sergeant Rushbrooke is here to keep me company, and I have asked the Yard to send me down half a dozen men. Farandol was not there when I telephoned just now, but his substitute promised to send at once. They should be here by this. If you should meet them below, send the man in charge up to me, will you?”

“Well, Okewood, are you ready?” Bannington came out of the hall with his hat on his head. He held out his hand to Desmond.

“If ever I can show my gratitude for what you have done for me this night,” he said with deep feeling, “believe me I will!”

“It's all in the day's work,” said Desmond as he accompanied them to the door. “Good-bye.”

“*Au revoir!*” corrected Francis smilingly as he followed the Air Marshal out.

For full five minutes after they had gone, Desmond remained standing in the hall, sunk in his thoughts. He was interrupted by Sergeant Rushbrooke.

“Beg pardon, sir!” said the plain-clothes man, “but I believe there’s some one on the stairs outside!”

Like a flash Desmond’s hand shot out at the electric-light switch at the door of the sitting-room. There was a click and the room was plunged in darkness. Desmond pulled out an automatic.

“Have your gun ready!” he whispered to the detective. “Keep very quiet, but be prepared to shoot!”

The flat was in complete darkness. Before them, as they crouched behind the table, they saw the dim outline of the bedroom door. Beyond, where the kitchen lay, was blackness.

Very faintly, from the obscurity before them, a key rattled. Presently the cold night air softly brushed their faces. At the end of the flat against a background of silver moonlight a huge figure bulked immensely. A door closed softly and darkness fell again.

A heavy limping sound approached them; a step and a stump, a step and a stump, muted but audible. They could hear the floor boards straining as beneath some immense weight.

And now that uncouth shape loomed gigantic in the doorway of the sitting-room. Its breadth seemed to stretch from jamb to jamb. Some movement must have betrayed their presence, for there came the rasp of a harsh ejaculation. Then the room was flooded with light and Desmond’s voice rang out: “If you move I’ll shoot!”

It was Grundt, bareheaded, in the clothes of rusty black he always affected, his right hand, plumed with black hair on the back, grasping his rubber-shod crutch-stick. He had made a half-turn in the doorway, and now twisted his head round to stare at his challenger, his burning eyes blazing defiance, his cruel, fleshy lips pursed up in a contemptuous sneer.

“You can put your hands up, Herr Doktor!” said Desmond.
“Quickly, please, or there might be an accident! And you can drop your stick!”

The giant cripple faced his aggressors squarely. He hesitated for an instant, then, with an almost imperceptible shrug of his shoulders, he slowly raised his hands, his stick rattling to the floor.

“Sergeant, would you mind . . .?” Desmond remarked in a colloquial tone.

Sergeant Rushbrooke crossed to the doorway and, with a dexterity born of long experience, ran his fingers lightly over the big man’s pockets, not forgetting, you may be sure, the inside breast pocket, where your professional gunman mostly carries his weapon, or the armholes of the waistcoat, very handy for concealing a knife.

“He’s not armed, sir,” he reported.

Desmond smiled sardonically. “You’re getting careless, Grundt! A few years ago you would not have been taken off your guard like this!”

But Grundt said no word.

“Your psychological powers are failing, too, my dear Doctor,” Desmond continued. “A woman’s wit defeated you. Celibacy has its drawbacks. If you had been a married man, now, you would have known that women have as great a predilection for curious hiding-places as a magpie!”

For the first time Clubfoot spoke. “You again!” he said in a voice thick with anger. “Always you!” His dark eyes were hot with passion and they saw the veins swell knot-like at his temples. “You are beginning to incommode me, Okewood. I must advise you to be careful!”

Desmond laughed. “If I hadn’t been careful during the last few weeks, I shouldn’t be here to-day,” he said. “You know that well enough, Grundt. However, you’re not going to do any more harm. Sergeant Rushbrooke!”

“Sir?”

“Go down and see if those police I asked for are there. Explain to the man in charge that it is essential that no one should leave this house or the houses on either side for the present, and ask him to be good enough to step up here to me. When you have done that, take a man with you and go to the nursing-home next door and inquire whether young Mr. Deinwitz is there. If he is, invite him to accompany you to Scotland Yard. If he won’t come, kidnap him! Understand?”

“Sir!” said the Sergeant who had learnt discipline in the Brigade of Guards. He seemed to hesitate. “Will *you* be all right, sir?” he asked.

“Don’t you worry about me,” Desmond smiled. “Dr. Grundt and I are old friends! We shall enjoy a tête-à-tête!”

On that Rushbrooke clattered off and Desmond turned to Clubfoot again. Grundt seemed to have regained all his saturnine good-humour.

“You’ll hang for this job, my friend!” Desmond observed pleasantly.

Grundt bared his strong yellow teeth in a smile and made a little bow. “You have, of course, all necessary evidence against me. Your English justice, if I remember rightly, is exacting on this point.”

Unwittingly Desmond flashed an inquiring glance at him.

The cripple was quick to notice it and chuckled. “My dear Okewood,” he remarked suavely, “you are too deliciously naïve. Lieber Freund, do you really imagine you will ever secure the conviction of a poor neurastheniac for murder simply because, on the night after the tragedy, attracted by the light and the sound of voices, he penetrated the scene of the crime?”

“The key, man, the key!” Desmond broke in.

“The key of my back door opens the back door of this flat,” was the rejoinder. A large key dropped on the carpet at Desmond’s feet. “Try it and see!”

But now an interruption came. There was a ring at the front door. Three men in plain clothes appeared.

“From Mr. Farandol, sir,” said the foremost of the trio, a short, thick-set fellow with a dark moustache. “The Inspector was called away to a big case at Colchester. Our orders are to take the party to the Yard. We’ve a car below if you’d care to come with us.”

Desmond gave a sigh of relief. “By George!” he said, “I certainly will!” The perspiration glittered on his forehead. “I shan’t feel happy till you’ve got him safe under lock and key. Will you handcuff our friend? I’m taking no chances!”

The spokesman of the plain-clothes men, who gave his name as Sergeant Mackay, produced a pair of handcuffs and clasped them about Grundt’s hairy wrists. Clubfoot’s face was an impassive mask; but his eyes glinted dangerously.

They took him out of the flat and descended the stairs in a little procession.

A closed limousine stood at the door. They made Grundt get inside, and the sergeant shared the back seat with him; Desmond and one plain-clothes man sat opposite and the other man got up beside the driver.

It was a raw wet night. Baker Street was a nocturne of black and yellow. The car drove very fast, so fast, indeed, that Desmond drew the sergeant’s attention to it.

“Tap on the glass, sir,” said Mackay, “and tell the driver to slow down a bit.”

Desmond turned half round. At that moment a damp cloth was clapped on to his face. He sprang up in a desperate effort to evade it, for on the instant his nostrils had detected the sickly odour of chloroform. His head struck the roof of the car a violent blow; the pressure on his nose and mouth increased: he strove to breathe and felt that sickening, cloying sweetness drawn up into his lungs. He tried to cry out as his senses slipped away; he sought to struggle as a numbing warmth stole over his limbs. The car seemed full of faces and eyes that stared . . . especially one face, grey and bloated with cruel, fleshy lips that grinned and grinned . . .

There was a click as Grundt's handcuffs fell apart. The big cripple chuckled and tapped Sergeant Mackay on the knee.

"And the other?" he asked softly.

"The one that came down just now? Heinrich settled him. The key of the office below came in very useful, Herr Doktor! The body is lying there now!"

Clubfoot purred his appreciation.

"Gut gemacht, Max, mein Junger!" he said.

The car sped on through the dripping night.

CHAPTER X

IN WHICH DESMOND OKEWOOD FINDS CLUBFOOT IN STRANGE COMPANY

“You’ve got this spy, Okewood, under lock and key, Herr Doktor?”

The room was sparsely lighted by a single reading-lamp with a green shade, and its sickly rays seemed to heighten the pallor of the speaker’s face. He was a round-shouldered man whose high cheek-bones and slanting eyes betrayed his Mongol blood even as his snuffling German jargon revealed his race. He had a rabbit mouth, the upper lip drawn up over long yellow teeth, and the weakness of his chin was in part hidden by a ragged fringe of reddish beard. He sat at the desk, his whole body atwilt with some nervous tic as he gnawed restlessly at his fingers. In the burly apelike figure that confronted him, with the relentless eyes beneath their tufted brows, the cruel, savage mouth and the heavy jowl, any one closely acquainted with the dark ways of international espionage would have recognized the redoubtable Dr. Grundt, better known as The Man with the Clubfoot.

Slowly Grundt opened and shut his great hairy hand.

“I’ve got him—*there*, Mandelstamm!” he said in a voice that purred with exultation. “We are old, we are exiled; but we

are not a back number yet. In this last affair of Sir Alexander Bannington's report in which, I confess, my customary good fortune failed me, this cursed Okewood had odds of three to one on his side. He thought he had me cornered; but now he, not old Clubfoot, sits in the trap."

He chuckled savagely with a sound that was almost a snarl.

"I think," he added, "that our young friend will not altogether relish his prospects when he awakes from his long sleep!"

"You drugged him, hein?" asked the Jew. There was something vulpine in the way he lifted his long aquiline nose.

Clubfoot guffawed. "The neatest trick! Max, whose performance as a Scotland Yard detective was erstklassig—kolossal!—gave him a whiff of chloroform just to keep him quiet! And this poor Okewood believed he was taking me off to Scotland Yard! Donnerwetter!"

He slapped his great thigh and laughed uproariously. His companion's mouth twitched upwards at the corners displaying another inch or two of dripping, yellow fangs. It was like a fox's grin if such a phenomenon of natural history can be imagined.

"The Soviets find that spies, like meat, don't keep!" he softly lisped. "Why didn't you kill him, Herr Doktor?"

"Perhaps," Grundt answered slowly, "because I have other uses in view for our enterprising young friend!"

Mandelstamm leant forward swiftly. “Also doch!” he ejaculated.

“What Clubfoot promises he accomplishes,” said Grundt, raising his voice menacingly.

“Of course, of course,” hastily agreed *Tavarish* Mandelstamm, and slyly added: “Only you didn’t secure the Bannington report, did you, Herr Doktor?”

The blood slowly mounted in the other’s swarthy face.

“A mere miscalculation, my friend! It was a trifling matter, anyhow, and I have never been able to interest myself in bagatelles. But this commission of yours . . .” He glanced over his shoulder and lowered his voice. “Do you realize the task you’ve set me? Nein, nicht wahr? Would it surprise you to learn that within the past week the Foreign Office has changed its codes? While the new ones are being revised they are employing, for Most Secret despatches, code 3A of the Secret Service. You didn’t know that, did you? Come closer! Hitherto, the working of code 3A has been known to three persons only—to the Chief of the British Secret Service, to his confidential ciphering clerk, and”—he dropped his voice to a whisper—“to Major Desmond Okewood! . . .”

“Ach nein!” exclaimed the Russian admiringly, cracking his knuckles. “With that draft treaty in our hands . . .”

“*P-sst!*” warned Grundt, pointing at the door.

A broad-shouldered man with a heavy dark moustache stood on the threshold of the room.

“What is it, Max?” asked Grundt.

“The Englishman is coming round, Herr Doktor!”

Clubfoot looked at his watch. “Midnight!” he said. “You did your work thoroughly, Max!”

“One does what one can, Herr Doktor!”

“You and Heinrich will take it in turns to guard the Englishman throughout the night. You can give him food. But watch him, he’s slippery. If he escapes . . .” He broke off and glared at the other. “Go now and remember what I say!”

Grundt turned to the Russian. “The Constantinople courier is expected to leave Calais for Dover by the afternoon boat. Everything is prepared. If all goes well he should be here soon after dark. Sleep well, Mandelstamm! The draft treaty will be in your hands by to-night!”

Limping heavily with his huge misshapen foot, he hobbled briskly from the room.

Desmond Okewood was emerging painfully from a long, incoherent dream. He found his eyes fixed on an electric bulb caged in steel bars, and set in the ceiling high above his head. As he gazed, the light seemed to come and go, to appear and vanish again . . .

And then, with a jerk, he was fully conscious. With a pang the memory of the night came rushing back. The shame of his position almost overwhelmed him. To think that he, Desmond Okewood, had been deceived by the common crooks' trick of dressing up confederates as detectives!

He looked about him. He was lying on a couch in a bare and lofty room. Heavy oaken shutters, secured with bars of iron solidly padlocked, excluded every vestige of daylight. He had no idea where he was or what the time of day might be. When he looked for his watch, he found that his pockets had been emptied.

The house was wrapped in silence. Not a sound came to him from without. He tried to review the situation. His position was desperate. Clubfoot would not spare him. This time he was doomed beyond hope of escape. A train of odd incidents from his long battle of wits with the master spy came crowding into his aching head . . .

Still drowsy from the drug, he must have dropped off to sleep, for when next he opened his eyes it was to find some one shaking his arm. A fair-haired youth stood beside the couch, his rather crafty face barred by a long white scar. Desmond recognized Heinrich, Clubfoot's acolyte in many an exploit.

On the table stood a tray decked for a meal.

"Anything you want you can have," said Heinrich, "as long as it doesn't require cutting with a knife. I've brought you some minced chicken and a whiskey-and-soda . . ."

“Where am I?” asked Desmond.

“My instructions,” retorted the youth with military precision, “are to feed you. Nothing more. I shall return in half an hour for the tray . . .”

“Can’t I have a wash?” demanded Desmond.

The youth pointed to an oaken cabinet in the corner. “You will find all you require there!” he said. Then he left the room.

Hot water stood ready in a brass jug. After he had washed and eaten, Desmond felt his strength returning. When Heinrich came to fetch the tray, he brought a cup of coffee and a box of cigarettes.

“Quite a prison de luxe!” remarked Desmond brightly.

“My orders are to make you comfortable!” was the non-committal reply.

Each time the door opened, Desmond noticed that a light burnt in the corridor. He assumed, therefore, that it must be evening. Consequently he must have slept almost the round of the clock. The hours dragged interminably on. He paced up and down the room, smoking cigarettes, busy with his thoughts. What had become of Clubfoot? What was he waiting for? Why didn’t he come in and finish it?

Slowly the numbing silence of the house, the absence of any indication of time, the artificial light, began to get on Desmond Okewood’s nerves. This restriction on his

liberty was intolerable. He looked about for a bell. There was none. He went to the door—it was solid oak with no lock apparent on the inside—and began to hammer it with his fists and feet. He pounded until he was tired. No one came.

He had fallen to striding up and down the room again when suddenly the door opened. Heinrich came in.

“Dr. Grundt is asking for you. Will you come with me?” he said.

“Gladly,” retorted Desmond. “I’m particularly anxious to have a word with the Herr Doktor!”

“Don’t trouble to try to escape,” observed the young man blandly as he held the door for his prisoner. “Doors and windows are barred and the house is closely guarded. You’d only get hurt!”

The warning was spoken sincerely and carried conviction. Desmond felt his heart sink.

It could not yet be morning, Desmond decided, as he followed his escort down a broad corridor with windows shuttered and barred like that of his room. They descended a flight of steps to a small tiled hall, lighted, like corridor and staircase, by artificial light. From a door that stood ajar came the murmur of voices. Heinrich ushered his prisoner into a long low-ceilinged room.

Four men were seated at the end of an oval table, their faces indistinctly seen through a thin haze of blue tobacco smoke that drifted in the close air.

Grundt presided at the head of the board, a round-shouldered, red-bearded Jew on his right, a grossly plebeian-looking man with a face the colour of suet, thin greyish hair plastered across a shining bald pate, and a great paunch, sprawling in the chair on his left. Next to him was a middle-aged man with a stiff grey beard and a stiff face who sat bolt upright, his hands folded in his lap.

“Be seated, Major,” said Clubfoot cordially, and pointed to a chair next to the Jew. “Mr. Blund, the cigars are with you!”

The full, deep voice was courteous, even genial, and a jovial smile played about the full lips. Desmond took the proffered chair, but waved aside the box of Partagas which the fat man pushed in his direction. He felt his hands growing cold. By bitter experience he knew that Clubfoot was never so dangerous as in these moments of expansion.

“The fortune of war!” Grundt resumed. “You played your cards admirably . . . up to a point, lieber Okewood! I have always said you were an opponent worthy of my steel. Perhaps, in this instance, you were just a trifle . . . shall we say over-confident? . . .”

Desmond, who had been taking stock of his surroundings, pulled himself resolutely together. The bland self-assurance of Grundt, he noticed, was far from being shared by his companions. The Jew was a mass of nerves, rapaciously tearing at his yellow, deeply bitten finger-nails, the little pig eyes of the fat man were restless with apprehension, and there was an air of tension about the very rigidity of the enigmatical greybeard across the table.

“You and your rather unsavoury accomplices are playing a dangerous game, Herr Doktor,” he said as bravely as he might. “The riff-raff of international espionage”—he paused and gazed with cool deliberation first at the Jew at his side and then at Greybeard—“live from hand to mouth, as we all know, and cannot be over-scrupulous. But I must say I wonder what an Englishman”—he stared pointedly at the fat man as he spoke—“is doing in your ill-favoured company!”

The fat man struggled up in his chair with malice depicted in every feature of his leaden-hued face.

“You keep a civil tongue in your ’ead, d’jeer?” he spluttered.

But Clubfoot laid a hairy paw on his sleeve. “Let us make allowances for Major Okewood’s natural chagrin,” he counselled. “Believe me, he is full of common sense. He will presently recognize the value of being polite and . . . and obliging with us . . . otherwise”—he paused and looked amiably round the board—“otherwise we shall have to teach him manners, eh, Tarock?”

“A gord round the head, with some hardt knots, tvisted with a baionette vould be a good lesson to him,” muttered the grey-bearded man.

“Don’t be hasty, Tarock,” said Grundt gently.

“*Not* Tarock, of Cracow?” exclaimed Desmond. “Why, now, isn’t that interesting? I’ve heard of you so often, and we’ve never met. Let’s see, you commanded a company once in the

Deutschmeister Regiment in Vienna, didn't you? And were cashiered for stealing the company money . . .?"

Greybeard moved uneasily in his seat.

"What a pity that the white-slave traffic laws interfered with your new career at Cracow!" Desmond resumed impassively. "So many of your colleagues regard them as the most unfair restriction of trade! Dear, dear! Was it five or seven years Zuchthaus they gave you?"

"Herr!" thundered Tarock, springing to his feet.

The fox-grin had again appeared about the thin lips of Mr. Mandelstamm. Clubfoot, too, appeared to be enjoying the scene.

"Personally, I always admired your versatility as a spy," Desmond went on, leaning back out of reach of Tarock's threatening fist, "though the Austrians didn't. They sacked you for double-crossing, didn't they, Tarock? And the Russians followed suit a year later. You were too dirty even for the Okhrana to touch . . ."

"Kreuzsakrament!" roared Greybeard, "I'll have your life for that!"

His chair overturned with a crash. Everybody had sprung to his feet, talking at the same time. Suddenly the door of the room burst open and three men came tumbling in. Two of them were grappling with a third, who, though gagged and bound and bleeding, was plunging wildly and uttering stifled shouts of rage.

CHAPTER XI

THE CONSTANTINOPLE COURIER

An ear-splitting report sent them all reeling back. The air stank with the fumes of burnt cordite. Then Clubfoot's voice went booming through the room. A great automatic was smoking in his hand.

"The next shot will go through your head, Bewlay," he roared at the prisoner who, on the report of the pistol, had momentarily ceased struggling. "Stand back there, Tarock," he thundered. "I'll have no brawling here. Sit down, all of you! Heinrich!"

The young German appeared in the doorway.

"Take Major Okewood on one side, and, if he attempts to escape, shoot him! Max, you look after Bewlay! Have you got the bags? Bring them in!"

The dominating personality of the man was extraordinary. Complete silence fell upon the room. The men at the table resumed their seats. Heinrich led Desmond into a corner while Max unceremoniously pitched the other prisoner on to a window-seat, where he lay motionless. He looked like an Englishman, young and of athletic build, with close-cropped fair hair, now stiff with matted blood from a great cut across the head.

A man staggered into the room, his arms piled high with white and green canvas bags sealed with red wax. With a sickening heart Desmond recognized them. They were the valises of the King's Messenger. "Bewlay," Grundt had called this fresh prisoner. Desmond remembered the name now. Paul Bewlay was the Constantinople courier.

The bags were tumbled in a heap on the table. With scissors and knives Grundt and his companions busied themselves with cutting the strings that bound them. Soon the table was heaped high with a litter of letters, documents, newspapers, and packages.

Presently Clubfoot looked up from the work. "You've searched him, Max?"

"Jawohl, Herr Doktor!"

The man took from his pocket a red bandana handkerchief, heavily weighted down, and handed it to Tarock. The Austrian spilled out a mixed assortment of objects, a watch and chain, a gold cigarette-case, a pencil, and a little silver brooch—the Silver Greyhound, the messenger's badge.

"You've looked in the lining of his clothes, Max?"

"Ja, Herr Doktor. There is nothing there!"

The opening of the packages revealed some curious things. There was an old brass lamp, a pair of Jodhpore breeches, a couple of Samarcand rugs, and some boxes of Turkish Delight, enjoying, in strange promiscuity, the hospitality of

the diplomatic valise. In the way of odd commissions, a King's Messenger is as useful as the village carrier.

The rummaging went on. Then Desmond heard Mandelstamm's reedy lisp.

"Your customary good fortune has failed you again, Herr Doktor!"

"Unsinn!" came the angry retort. "It must be here. He has been under observation every step of the way. Patience, my friend! We shall find it!"

The work was resumed in silence until at length Mandelstamm left the table.

"It's useless!" he cried, his voice shrill with vexation. "You're wasting our time, Herr Doktor!"

Tarock, too, had left his seat and was whispering to Blund, the fat Englishman, in a corner. Grundt remained alone at the table. His bulging brows were furrowed in thought. Then, as though struck by a sudden idea, he picked up one of the round boxes of Turkish Delight, raised the lid and shook the contents out upon the table. A second, a third, and a fourth box he treated in the same manner, and then, with a whoop of joy, he plunged his hand into the sticky pile of sweetmeats before him. When he withdrew his hand he held a number of sheets of white flimsy paper between finger and thumb. Dusting the fine sugar off them, he held them up for all to see.

“Herr Mandelstamm,” he said cuttingly, “perhaps this will teach you that Dr. Grundt does not promise what he cannot fulfil!”

But a ringing voice from the window-seat broke in upon his words. “You damned scoundrel!”

The King’s Messenger was standing erect. The soiled scarf that had gagged him had slipped aside. He was bound round with rope like a mummy in its wrappings, and his face was almost irre recognizable with the smother of dried blood that had welled from the wound in his head. But he stood up and shouted his defiance into the room as though he, and not Clubfoot, were the master there.

Grundt looked up slowly. “Max,” he said, without raising his voice, “take him away and get rid of him. He is of no further use to us,” he explained to the men at the table, while Max fell upon his victim.

With alacrity Tarock scrambled to his feet, drawing something from his hip pocket.

“I’ll attend to him!” he said in a voice hoarse with pleasurable excitement. And he hurried from the room behind Max and his prisoner.

As he passed, Desmond, covered by Heinrich’s automatic, saw that the Austrian carried in his hand a long Norwegian knife.

Mandelstamm extended talon-like fingers towards the paper in Clubfoot’s hand.

“L-l-let me s-s-see.” He stuttered with excitement.

“It’s in code,” said Grundt.

And all eyes turned to Desmond.

Grundt heaved himself up and, grasping his rubber-shod stick, hobbled awkwardly across the room to where Heinrich guarded the prisoner. The cripple waved the guard back.

“Okewood,” he said, “you are clever enough to know when you are beaten. I am well aware that your motto has ever been, ‘While there’s life there’s hope!’ but let me assure you that in this instance you can derive very little solace from that saying. The position of this house is so remote, its precincts are so well guarded, that, even if your friends were to discover your hiding-place—which is most unlikely—and were in hot cry hither, I should have ample leisure to devise and carry out even the most lingering form of death for you.” He paused and scrutinized the young man’s face. “I offer you your life on one condition.”

Desmond remained silent.

“Does it interest you?”

A long-drawn-out, gurgling scream, high-pitched and shrill with the extremity of agony, suddenly broke the brooding stillness of the house. It was followed by a little muffled cry from the room. From behind a typewriter placed on a desk in the corner a young girl had risen hesitatingly, one hand clutching her cheek, terror in her eyes. Desmond had not noticed her before.

“Xenia!” Mandelstamm cried harshly.

Listlessly the girl sank back into her seat.

Desmond looked straight into Clubfoot’s eyes. “What was that? Who screamed?” he asked, knowing full well the answer to his question.

“I think it must have been Bewlay,” calmly replied Grundt; and asked again: “Does my proposition interest you?”

Desmond shrugged his shoulders.

“Believe me, lieber Okewood,” Clubfoot resumed persuasively, “murder in cold blood is not one of my hobbies. One has to kill at times, but it is always a messy business unless one has the resources of a well-stocked laboratory at one’s back. Listen to me. I have here a message in your Secret Service code number 3A. If you will decipher it for us, you shall go free. We are willing to give you any reasonable guarantee of your life . . .”

“And if I tell you that I know nothing of this code?”

“That would not be true, my friend! Besides yourself, there are only two persons who, before the Foreign Office adopted it, were acquainted with its cipher . . . your revered Chief (a remarkable man, my dear Okewood, and a credit to our profession!) and his confidential clerk, by name Collins, I believe, who lives at Hatfield. Am I correct? No, no, my friend, you won’t try to deceive me. Old Clubfoot knows too much!”

“And if I reject your offer?”

Again that terrible scream rang out, suddenly checked this time and dying away in a strangling gurgle.

With an expressive movement of eyes and head Grundt indicated the upper regions of the house, now plunged once more into silence, as much as to say: “You wouldn’t drive us to *that*?”

Desmond Okewood put out his hand. “Let’s see the despatch!” he said brusquely.

But Clubfoot held up a deprecating paw. “No, no, my friend, not so fast,” he laughed. “You might tear it or . . . or drop it in the fire. I’ve been at a deal of trouble to get it.” He raised his voice. “Fräulein Xenia!”

The girl came slowly over from her corner. She was a slender, graceful creature, with slim hands and feet, glossy hair of jet-black brushed smoothly down to conceal her ears, and the clear, wide-open eyes of a child. As she stood before the big cripple waiting to hear his bidding, she let her black eyes rest for a moment on Desmond’s face. They were honest eyes, dark and appealing. Somehow he drew comfort from them.

Grundt handed her the despatch. “Sit down over there at the machine and make me one copy of this. Be very careful and check the ciphers carefully! Verstehen Sie?”

“Ich verstehe, Herr Doktor!” she answered in a low voice, pleasant of timbre, but lifeless and toneless.

As she crossed the room the door opened. Tarock had returned. He was red in the face and out of breath, and there was an air of stealthy guilt about him that chilled Desmond to the very marrow. He could not save now, but only avenge poor Bewlay. If his own hour were near, as he had a shrewd suspicion it was, he meant, so he promised himself, to risk all, if needs be, to send the Cracow *souteneur* to precede him at the Judgment Seat.

The brisk rattle of the typewriter fell upon the quietness of the room. How matter-of-fact it sounded! They might have been in a lawyer's office, not in this house of twilight death, whence time and the daylight were excluded.

The girl had finished her typing. Her black head was bowed over her table. She was revising the long list of numbers. In a minute, Desmond told himself, he must make up his mind how to act.

Now she had crossed the room: now she was giving the despatch and the copy to Clubfoot. Was Bewlay really dead? Or would he scream again? . . .

Clubfoot was speaking: “. . . Which is it to be?”

Desmond cleared his throat. All his senses were alert now. Those dreadful cries had stung him into action. He must gain time—time. By this the Chief and Francis, his brother, than whom there were no greater masters of their craft alive, would be busy with plans for his rescue. But they must have time to get on his track, unless he were too securely hidden away for them ever to find him . . . time, time . . .

“Give me the despatch!” Desmond exclaimed suddenly. Silently, his suspicious eyes searching the other’s face, Clubfoot handed over the typewritten sheets. Desmond studied them. Then, with a shake of the head: “I can’t decipher it like this,” he said. “Have you any dictionaries here?”

A glimmer of triumph shot into Grundt’s face. “What dictionary do you want?” he asked.

“Peereboom’s English-Dutch Dictionary, the edition of 1898,” Desmond answered promptly.

“I’ll send for it. It’ll be in your hands within the hour!” Clubfoot retorted and clapped him, almost affectionately, on the shoulder.

Then they took Desmond back to his room. In the corridor on the first floor they passed the body of the courier, lying, still swathed in his bonds, lifeless, in a welter of blood.

CHAPTER XII

XENIA

Dictionary codes are familiar in the Secret Service as furnishing a cipher which, without the key, defies detection. By asking for a dictionary at random, without reference to the cipher before him, Desmond had hoped to gain a respite of several hours; for he had reckoned that the little-known and out-of-date work which he had requested would not easily be forthcoming. Clubfoot's glib promise that the book would be on hand within the hour dashed his hopes considerably, and he reentered his prison seriously revolving in his head his chances of escape.

Of chances, properly speaking, he had none. He had no knowledge of the geography of the house or its location; he had no arms; he had no accomplices. But the murder of Paul Bewlay had made him reckless. The sight of the body of that defenseless man, done to death in his bonds, filled his soul with rage. He must try to fight his way out. But how?

He heard the door grate. Heinrich was there with a tray.

"I've brought your dinner!" he said. His tone was infinitely more genial than before.

Desmond stared at him blankly. “The mince you served me for lunch was cold,” he grumbled presently. “What have you got there? Poached eggs? Hmph! And how am I going to eat eggs without salt or pepper? Good God, if I’m going to work for you, can’t I be decently served?”

“Herr, Herr,” stammered Heinrich, “the cruet is outside. A little minute and I bring it!”

Desmond grunted and turned away. But not so that he could not keep the door under observation. In a moment Heinrich was back with the cruet.

“So, Herr!” he remarked and dumped it down on the table.

But the Herr was still not satisfied. “You’ve brought me tea to drink!” he protested. “Do you take me for a teetotaller or what? Where’s Grundt? Send for Grundt . . .”

“Herr, Herr,” wailed Heinrich in an agony of apprehension, “anything he wished for, the Herr was to have, said the Herr Doktor! What can I get you, Herr?”

“That’s better!” said Desmond. “You can get me a large whiskey-and-soda. And not too much soda, d’you hear? . . .”

Obediently Heinrich galloped from the room. The moment his back was turned Desmond was at the cruet. He whipped out the pepper castor, rapidly screwed the top off, and tiptoed swiftly to the door.

“A dirty trick!” he murmured to himself. “A dirty Apache trick! Okewood, I’m ashamed of you!”

Then the door swung back. On the threshold stood Heinrich beaming, a brimming club tumbler in his hand. Suddenly, with a shrill gasp of agony, the youth snatched at his eyes and the glass shattered on the floor. Desmond flung the empty pepper-pot away and dashed through the door.

Running on the points of his toes he bolted along the corridor making in the direction of the staircase. Just as he reached it, he heard a heavy step mounting the stairs and the shining bald pate of Mr. Blund, the Englishman, appeared on a level with the landing.

The collision was as violent as it was inevitable. By the force of the impact Mr. Blund was flung back against the stair-rail. But he had thrown his arms about Desmond and now clung to him like grim death, screeching in a voice wheezy with fear and excitement: “’Elp! ’Elp! ’E’s escaping!”

With a savage twist Desmond wrenched himself loose. But there is a dogged strain in even the worst Englishman, and Mr. Blund came at him again. With open hand Desmond struck upwards at the other’s double chin that sagged in heavy folds to the thick neck. The violence of the blow, half slap, half push, threw the fat man off his balance. He reeled away, slipped on the polished boards, and, with a hoarse cry, toppled backwards over the banisters into the well of the staircase, and, with a horrid, soft thud, landed on the tiles of the hall.

But the other gave him not a thought. From the corridor behind him resounded the angry bellowing of Heinrich. Without considering where he was going,

Desmond plunged down the staircase and came to the hall where, loose, like a sack of bottles, the sprawling hulk of what had once been Mr. Blund was lying.

Somewhere in the distance a door banged. A curtain hung across one side of the hall. In a flash Desmond parted it. Facing him he found the front door with an immense lock and no vestige of a key. He tried the door. It was locked!

Behind him now all the house was in an uproar. A hubbub of angry voices came from the upper floors and heavy footsteps thundered above him. Stealthily he peered out from behind the curtain and came face to face with Mandelstamm.

The Jew was standing there listening, his head half inclined to the stairway. He was not two feet away, a magnificent mark, and, to simplify matters, he turned his head precisely at the right moment to bring the point of his jaw in contact with Desmond's fist as, without hesitation, the young man drove at him. Mandelstamm collapsed instantly in a sitting position, then flopped over, grunted once, and lay still.

Clubfoot's stentorian voice went booming through the house, shouting orders. Save for Blund and Mandelstamm, the whole of the party seemed to have been collected on one of the upper floors. Now they all came trooping noisily down.

The little hall with the locked door behind him was, Desmond realized, a cul-de-sac, a veritable death-trap. Three doors faced him across the hall. With one stride the young

man was across the Jew's body and, choosing the middle door at random, opened it swiftly and slipped through.

He found himself in the room where, less than an hour before, he had confronted Clubfoot and his confederates. Seated at the oval table in the centre was the girl they had called Mademoiselle Xenia.

Loud exclamations from the hall, showing that the party had discovered their casualties, warned Desmond of the urgent danger of his position. There was a key on the inside of the door. He turned it and slipped it in his pocket.

"I heard the fat Englishman cry out"—the girl was speaking in her dull, listless voice—"I wondered if you were free. But there is no escape from *him*. Why, oh, why, did you come here?"

A hand pounded noisily on the door.

"Xenia, Xenia!" came in Tarock's gruff voice.

Desmond turned swiftly to the girl. "Will you help me?" he said.

With wonder in her mournful black eyes she nodded.

"Is there no way out of this room except by the door?" he asked.

She shook her head.

“The windows?”

“They are shuttered and barred with steel!”

“Then help me to barricade the door!”

Already some one outside was hurling his weight against it. But the oaken panels were solid and held well. With great difficulty Desmond and the girl dragged a tall black cupboard across the room and stood it before the door, subsequently reënforcing the barricade with a steel filing-cabinet, the heavy mahogany table laid on its side, and an intricate zareba of chairs.

Something cold was laid in Desmond’s hand. It was a Browning pistol.

“It has seven shots,” said Xenia. “I used to think I might use it one day, but . . .” She shrugged her shoulders and relapsed into her habitual mournful silence.

“By George!” exclaimed Desmond. “This puts new heart into the defence. The name of Tarock, of Cracow, is written on one of these bullets, did you know that, Mademoiselle Xenia?”

For the first time the girl became animated. A little warmth stole into her olive cheeks and her dark eyes brightened.

“Kill him!” she said passionately. “Kill him for me! Deliver me from this man and I will kiss your feet! Kill him slowly, make him suffer as he has made me and my family suffer! . . .”

“We’ll do what we can!” said Desmond cheerfully. The cold caress of the automatic had raised his spirits a hundred per cent.

A desperate assault was being delivered on the door. It groaned and creaked and the barricade before it rocked and swayed.

“This won’t do!” said Desmond, frowning his forehead. With an anxious glance at the door, he crossed to the window. The steel bars were deep-sunk in the face of the shutter and padlocked in the centre.

“A shot would burst that lock!” remarked the young man, fingering his gun.

“Useless!” replied the girl. “The window is barred outside. There is no escape!”

And then the light went out.

“Ah!” said Desmond. “Clubfoot would think of that.”

The room was pitch-dark.

“Xenia,” he called softly, “where are you?”

“Here,” said her soft voice in his ear. And her hand was gently laid on his arm.

“You must try to be brave,” he encouraged her. “I think they’re going to rush us! The door will go in a minute!”

Already a broad chink of light showed that, though the lock yet held, the upper part of the door was yielding to the savage battering.

“I am not frightened,” Xenia made answer—and her voice was quite steady—“I shall be glad to die! You will make it easy for me. It is long since I knew a man without fear!”

She placed her hand, small and warm and soft, in his.

“My mother, my little sister, my two brothers, they are all in the prisons of the Tcheka,” she said. “I am hostage for them. Tarock was the commissary who denounced them. He brought me here as his secretary. For almost a year now I have been in his power. So you see I am happy to die . . .”

Then the door gave. There was a crash as the topmost pile of chairs hurtled to the ground. A broad beam of light clove the darkness about the barricade.

“Okewood”—the challenge came in Clubfoot’s deep voice —“the game’s up! Come out quietly before you’re hurt!”

Desmond’s hand squeezed hard the little hand that lay in his palm. “Courage!” he whispered. “And listen! Do you hear anything outside?”

Above the hubbub in the hall outside there fell upon their ears the distant throb of a car.

Then he raised his voice. “Grundt,” he cried out distinctly, “Grundt, you can go to hell!”

A bearded face with dangerous, bloodshot eyes appeared in the chink between door and jamb. Desmond shot so swiftly that the roar of the report, Tarock's sharp exclamation, and the thud of the body sounded almost as one.

"Herr Gott!" bellowed Clubfoot. There was a loud explosion and a bullet "whooshed" above the heads of the man and girl. The door was forced wider and the barricade was split in twain.

Desmond pressed the girl to her knees. "Keep your head down!" he whispered, and fired again. The yellow flame from his pistol lit up the darkened room. The odour of burnt powder hung on the stale air. A volley of shots from without answered him.

But now loud knocking resounded from the outer hall. Instantly the light beyond the door went out. There was the scuffle of feet and Clubfoot's voice crying aloud: "Turn on the light again. The front door is solid. If we go, we'll take the Englishman with us. Ah, you miserable hounds! you . . .!"

For one brief, terrible instant a brilliant orange glare lighted the dark gap between the barricade and the door. Then there came the deafening roar of an explosion immediately followed by the sound of splintering wood and the tinkle of broken glass. The whole house seemed to shudder and settle down again. Then came a moment of absolute silence, and in the stillness the girl heard a stealthy clip-clop, clip-clop across the tiles of the hall.

And then came shouts and the sound of the crunching and smashing of wood under heavy blows. A voice without cried twice: “Desmond! Desmond!”

In the darkness the girl sought the companion at her side. “Hark!” she whispered. “We are saved!”

There was no reply. She stretched out her hand, groping in the place where Desmond Okewood had stood. But he was no longer there. Outside resounded the trampling of heavy feet, and with a sudden crash the barricade before the door was flung down. A beam of white light from an electric torch clove the darkness. In its ray Xenia saw Desmond Okewood lying motionless at her feet.

CHAPTER XIII

IN WHICH CHECK PROVES TO BE CHECKMATE

When Desmond came to his senses he was propped up in a limousine that was slowly threading a broad street crowded with trams and other traffic. The Chief was at his side and, on the opposite seat, Francis with the girl whose pale face, dark eyes, and glossy black hair were vaguely familiar.

With a bewildered expression the young man looked from one face to the other.

“Where am I?”

“You’re in the Mile End Road, old man, going home,” said his brother, patting him on the knee.

“And Clubfoot?”

“Escaped down the river by launch!”

Desmond took the girl’s hand. “I remember it all now,” he said. “It was this brave girl that saved us. She gave me the automatic with which I was able to keep them off until you came. Without that gun . . .”

“I shouldn’t talk any more now if I were you,” the Chief counselled.

“I’m all right,” said Desmond, “except that my head is buzzing like a beehive. What happened to me exactly?”

“You were hit by a ricochet off your precious barricade,” his brother replied. “Actually it only grazed your temple, but it put you down for the count . . .”

Desmond was silent for a moment. “Escaped by launch, did he?” he remarked presently. “Francis, where *was* this house to which they took me?”

“Down on the Thames flats, between Rainham and Purfleet,” said his brother; “about as lonely a spot as they could find.”

“But how on earth did you locate me?”

“Okewood,” interposed the Chief with finality, “you are talking too much. That story, like yours, will have to keep!”

Actually it only kept until the following day, when Desmond, his head romantically bound up in a bandage, entertained the Chief and Francis to lunch at his chambers.

“For our providential arrival,” remarked the Chief, neatly spearing the cherry in his cocktail as they stood round the fire, “you can thank this brother of yours! Two nights ago you vanished off the face of the earth. We had no description of the man who kidnapped you beyond that of old Clubfoot; we had no particulars at all of the car, no inkling of the route you took. And how do you think Francis here grappled with *that* situation? Tell him yourself, man!” The Chief chuckled and drained his glass.

“Well,” said Francis slowly, “it was a long shot, for I reckoned the odds at about a hundred to one on Clubfoot murdering you right off. But I thought there was a chance he might hold you to ransom or something of the sort; in that case he would have to have a secure retreat to which he could convey you. That retreat, I figured to myself, must be within a reasonable distance of London, for Clubfoot’s business is here. So, within an hour of your disappearance, I arranged for an inquiry to be sent by telephone or telegram to every house and estate agent within a radius of fifty miles of London as to whether a house had recently been let to any one answering Clubfoot’s description. I offered a reward of five hundred pounds for the information.

“By noon I had my answer. They rang up from Marlow and Wadding’s, the big West-End agents, to say that one of their clerks had an important statement to make. In due course the man arrived. He had gone down one day last week to inspect on behalf of a client a property close to the river some miles from Purfleet, a place called Rushdene Grange. When he reached the house, he found that it showed evident signs of occupation, for smoke was rising from the chimneys, though all the windows were shuttered.

“He supposed that the house had been placed in the hands of more than one agent for disposal and had been let without the knowledge of his firm. He was standing at the front door when a car came up the drive. A big lame man, answering in every particular to the description of our friend Grundt, got out. He told the clerk very gruffly that the place was let and vanished into the house.

“From inquiries my informant made locally he ascertained that the house had been let furnished to a man named Fitzroy, which, the police tell me, is one of the various aliases of Schmetterding, alias Blund, an old friend of ours, Des., for, if you remember, it was he who took that place at Harlesden for Grundt in the affair of the purple cabriolet. When we picked up the poor gentleman with his neck so picturesquely broken at the foot of the staircase at Rushdene Grange, Manderton recognized him at once. He’s an Englishman of German extraction, with a fine list of convictions against him at the Yard.”

Francis looked at his brother and smiled. “A little rough with him, weren’t you, Des.?”

“He came butting in when I was trying to escape,” replied Desmond, “so I landed him a punch, and he went backwards over the stairs.”

“And there was Tarock on his face in the hall with a bullet in his temple . . .”

“Dead?”

“As dead as a door-nail!” Francis replied.

“I’m glad I nailed him,” Desmond remarked, and added, addressing the Chief, “Tarock, of Cracow, you know, sir!”

The big man nodded. “He’s no loss,” he remarked. “He’d lived too long, anyway.”

“From what my house agent friend told me,” Francis resumed, “we guessed that the house would be a regular fortress. So I took a charge of guncotton with the cutting-out party the Chief let me organize and blew the lock off the front door. How Clubfoot escaped being killed by the explosion I don’t know. When we got in, we found the nest empty except for that choice specimen, Mandelstamm, who was spitting teeth into the basin in the bath-room out of the most beautiful mouth you ever saw. Whew, Des., you must have fetched him a clip!”

“He walked into my fist,” his brother retorted, grinning. “But what about Grundt?”

“I’m afraid he got away through my fault. The shooting inside the house rather rattled me . . . on account of you, you know . . . and I blew the lock before our men had got into their stations at the back. Clubfoot must have escaped through the basement and got down to the river, for we discovered afterwards that an electric launch he used to keep up a creek had disappeared. I presume he took Max and Heinrich with him. They left poor Bewlay where they killed him upstairs.”

“He died well,” said Desmond, giving him his epitaph. He turned to the Chief. “And this treaty, sir? Clubfoot has got away with it, I suppose?”

“He has!” replied the big man grimly.

“He was under the impression that it was coded in 3A,” Desmond went on. “It wasn’t, you know, though I didn’t

disabuse his mind, of course. It was in no code *I* had ever seen before.”

“Or will ever see again. The only two keys in existence, one in Constantinople and the other in London, were destroyed by my orders within twenty-four hours of the courier being kidnapped. The F.O., you see, changed their minds about 3A and used a special cipher. Do you know that the Bolsheviks offered twenty-five thousand pounds for a copy of that treaty *en clair*? The Secretary of State has been in a perfect agony of mind about it, for the party who negotiated this document, with certain influential Turks behind the scenes at the Porte, was not an official emissary. And if Parliament had got wind of the affair at this stage . . .” He broke off and whistled.

“Chief,” said Desmond, “we must do something for this girl Xenia. Her people are all in prison in Russia, and now that Tarock is dead . . .”

“That’s already seen to,” replied the big man. “Mademoiselle Xenia is being cared for by some friends of mine, and in a little while, when she has got over this shock, I think I ought to be able to utilize her knowledge of Russian at one of our report centres in the Baltic States. In any case, I mean to remove her as soon as possible out of Clubfoot’s reach.”

“He’s vanished into thin air, I suppose?” Desmond remarked.

“A perfect Vidocq!” the Chief observed. “But never fear: he’ll be after us again, if only to pay us back for checkmating him this time!” And he grinned with great contentment.

“And what’s our next move to be, sir?” asked Desmond.

“You and that brother of yours,” replied the Chief, “will, each and severally, equip yourselves with a bag of golf-clubs and report to-morrow morning at a course not too far removed from London and devote yourselves, until further orders, to reducing your respective handicaps.”

“But Clubfoot . . .” the two young men broke out.

“Clubfoot will keep. But you’ll not beat him with your nerves frayed out at the ends. You two get out into the fresh air and forget all about him. And in the mean time . . .”

“Luncheon is served,” announced Desmond’s man.

“As good an occupation as any,” observed the Chief, “in the intervals between the rounds!”

CHAPTER XIV

THE GIRL AT THE HEXAGON

That the Okewoods obeyed the Chief's instructions to the letter I can testify, for I happened to be drinking my after-luncheon in the lounge of the hotel at Broadstairs when they arrived with suitcases and golf-bags. Desmond was wearing a bandage about his head, and, after we had exchanged greetings, I asked him what he had been doing to himself.

"I got a crack on the head from a ball playing racquets at Queen's," unblushingly replied this master of improvisation, "and so I've decided to revert to golf. We think it's less dangerous, don't we, Francis?"

"Sure," rejoined his brother, who likes to flavour his speech at times with certain exoticisms acquired from his American wife, "but a heap less exciting, eh, old man?"

At this time, naturally, I had no idea of the hidden meaning of these seemingly innocent remarks. There was certainly nothing to suggest their secret significance in the blandly smiling countenances of the two brothers. That is the Okewood pair all over. Their team-work is wonderful. They always remind me of two acrobats on a trapeze: one is invariably there when he is required to catch or support the other. I can imagine no more devastating combination than these two quiet but supremely competent young men on any

mission requiring a blend of excessive tact and sublime audacity.

“Are you down here for long?” Desmond asked me.

I told him I expected to stay for a month.

“Splendid!” he retorted. “That means there’ll always be a partner for Francis or me when we’re sick of playing against each other.”

“It means nothing of the sort,” I replied, indignant at such shameless opportunism. “I’ve come down here to finish a book. I’m not in the War Office, you know: I have to work for *my* living.”

““The Industrious Apprentice Rebukes His Idle Companion,”” quoted Francis. “He’s being smug, Des. Let’s sit on his head!”

The conversation degenerated into a most undignified wrestling match, which ended, after I had been nearly smothered by a cushion, by my consenting, as a rare and notable exception, to accompany them forthwith to the North Foreland for a three-ball match before tea.

Looking back, I find it hard to realize that my light-hearted and amusing companions on that blustery February afternoon were living under a grave and terrible menace. Even now I can scarcely bring myself to believe that Desmond, as debonair, as bright and as sparkling as ever, had only just emerged from such nerve-racking experiences as the affair of the purple cabriolet and the case of the Constantinople

courier. Now that I come to think of it, I remarked that his nervous air which had attracted the attention of old Erasmus Wilkes had completely vanished. I can well believe Francis when he says that the one thing his brother cannot stand is inaction and that danger is his best tonic.

In the upshot it proved that my two friends could get on very well without me. For the best part of four weeks I was left in peace with my writing, and very often I did not see the Okewoods until the evening when we usually assembled in the bar for a cocktail before dinner. If I had not been so absorbed in my book, I should probably have noticed that Desmond appeared to benefit very little by his change. As it was, it was not until my bulky parcel of manuscript had been posted off to London and I accompanied them to the golf-course for a round before lunch that I observed how quiet and abstracted Desmond had become.

I chaffed him mildly on his low spirits; but he did not, as usual, take up the challenge and my jokes fell flat. He was playing very badly on this morning and, usually a strong and accurate driver, was slicing and pulling his balls all over the place.

We were on the tee near the Captain Digby public-house when a telegraph boy appeared from nowhere, as telegraph boys do, and thrust a telegram into my hand. Absent-mindedly I opened it and read:

Dine with me at Hexagon Saturday night eight P.M.—
Chief.

At a glance I realized that the message was not for me and, looking at the envelope, saw that it was addressed to “Major Desmond Okewood.” With a word of apology I handed the telegram to my friend. The change in his face, as he read it, was extraordinary. A long sigh, almost a groan, of relief burst from his lips and his whole face lighted up. He showed the message to Francis, who grinned cheerfully and said “Good.”

“Come on,” cried Desmond, suddenly addressing me. “It’s your honour. I lay you a new ball I take this hole off you.”

Needless to say, for my thoughts were anywhere but on the game, I fozzled my drive. But Desmond who, as I have said, had been playing disgracefully, hit a perfect ball, and, from that moment on, recovered his form. He was in the wildest spirits, and to see him one would have said that the telegram which had wrought this astonishing change in him had brought him news of a great inheritance rather than a banal invitation to dinner at that rather disreputable West-End haunt, the Hexagon.

But even if he had known to what perilous enterprise that invitation was the prelude, I believe he would have shown himself no less heartened. Danger, as Francis says, was ever the best pick-me-up for Desmond Okewood.

“Okewood,” said the Chief quietly, “the girl has just come in. Don’t look up for a moment! She’s taken the table next to the door: in black she is: you can’t mistake her, she’s so deathly pale!”

The Chief fell to studying his plate with every appearance of absorption, while Desmond Okewood, from behind the cover of the wine-list, glanced casually across the roaring evening life of the Hexagon Buffet.

He saw the girl at once. Her extreme pallor, as the Chief had been quick to note, was her most distinctive feature. She wore her hair, which was raven-black, piled high in the Spanish fashion with a tall, white ivory comb, richly carved, at the back. She had retained her fur coat and against its shaggy blackness one white shoulder gleamed milkily.

She was obviously a familiar visitor at the Hexagon Buffet, for the head waiter greeted her with a friendly smile as he fussed the table to rights. She ordered her dinner composedly and without hesitation, as one accustomed to fend for herself. In her whole comportment there was an air of dignity, of reserve, which clearly imposed itself on the *maitre d'hôtel*, accustomed as he was to the rather promiscuous familiarity of the other unaccompanied ladies who frequented the Buffet. Her orders given, the girl dropped her eyes to her plate and remained seemingly lost in thought, her long lashes resting like black crescents upon her dead-white cheeks.

“Not quite the style of the Hexagon, eh?” remarked Desmond.

“They get all sorts here now!” retorted his companion. “The old Hexagon is quite the rage again, I’m told!”

Fashion, always capricious, is never more fickle than in the distribution of her favours among those who cater for the *monde ou l'on s'amuse*. For no apparent reason a grill-room, a bar, a night-club, or the like will suddenly receive from the hand of the goddess the patent that confers fame. It lives its little hour; for a spell it resounds to laughter and music, the popping of corks, and the scurry of waiters, while the shareholders bask in the warmth of unwonted prosperity like a cat in the sun. Then as mysteriously, but also as suddenly as success, decline sets in: the nightly line of private cars and taxis outside the brilliantly lighted portico dwindles: the gold lace on the porter's cap begins to tarnish; and ultimately provincials, to whose ears the fame of the resort has only tardily come, find themselves facing fellow provincials across a vista of empty tables.

Sometimes the wheel turns full circle and popularity comes back. So it had gone with the Hexagon Buffet. Time was, in the days of the "Crutch and Toothpick Brigade," when it had rivalled "Jimmie's" as the haunt of the *jeunesse dorée* in their skin-tight clothes, their opera-capes, and their covert-coats. Then oblivion had slowly claimed it and, in the years between, the riff-raff of the West End had gathered nightly at the long bar with the battered brass rail where once the chappies had stood and chaffed "Maudie" and "May" over a "B. and S."

But now, in the fullness of time, prosperity had returned to the "old Hex." The fine proportions of its big central room left ample space for a dancing-floor between the long bar at one end and the railed-off enclosure at the other where one dined or supped. A jazz band of

negroes and an expatriated mixer who, when America knew not Volstead, had enjoyed continental fame, showed that the Hexagon had adapted itself to the spirit of the age.

Custom flowed back. It was as though the trainers and the jockeys and the bookmakers, the fighting-men and their managers, their impresarii and tame journalists, had suddenly remembered the old Hexagon. At their heels came the wealthy patrons of sport, the older men at first, drawn by memories fast fading of wild nights in the eighties, then the young “knuts,” and with them, to dance a little and eat devilled bones after the theatre, chorus ladies, revue girls, and females, unattached or attached, of varying ages and social standing.

But mingling with this heterogeneous crowd were old frequenters of the Hexagon in its evil days, mysterious “financiers,” confidence trick men with their touts and runners, slim Latins, with hair like blue satin and the gait of a panther, from the dancing-clubs, and benevolent-looking old ladies, a little too freshly complexioned and a little too bejewelled, who take an interest in any girl that is young and pretty. In brief, the Hexagon was preëminently a resort where the head of a Secret Service organization, to say nothing of one of his principal lieutenants, might expect to make fruitful observations.

It was Saturday night and the Hexagon was roaring full. On the dancing-floor, crowded with gliding couples, the red-coated blacks were syncopating themselves into an epileptic frenzy; at the long bar, whence resounded the rattle of the cocktail-shakers, the white-coated attendants were opening

oysters as though their lives depended on it; while at the far end of the room, waiters darted incessantly between the thronged tables.

Through the long violet curtains that screened the Buffet from the outer lobby new arrivals kept appearing, men and women, old and young, in evening dress and in tweeds, in ermine-collared opera-cloaks and in tailor-mades. And from the merry, noisy, busy, jostling assembly rose, as persistently as the swathes of blue tobacco smoke that drifted aloft on the overheated air, a confused Babel of voices as incessant as the hum of a threshing-floor or the pounding of the sea.

“Her name,” said the Chief suddenly, as though he divined his companion’s thoughts, “or at any rate the name by which she chooses to be known, is Madeleine McKenzie. She has been coming here now for a week or more. Nobody knows much about her. Ah!”

He nudged Desmond’s elbow. Two youths, very sleek and impeccably attired in evening dress, had sat down at the girl’s table. One of them, a fair-haired, clean-looking boy, was slightly merry with wine.

“And now”—unexpectedly the Chief’s voice had become grave—“watch!”

His tone quickened Desmond’s whole attention. Ever since the Chief had asked him to dine at the Hexagon on this particular Saturday night, he had been cudgelling his brains to discover with what motive his senior officer had

wished to entertain him at this amusing but very bohemian night-resort. Over their Clover Club cocktails at the bar and on various pretexts during dinner itself, Desmond had sought in vain to probe the depths of his host's thoughts. Now came this summons to watchfulness, stirring in the young man that hunger for adventure which had carried him to such heights of success in the Secret Service.

The girl had finished her dinner and was taking her coffee when a woman with a basket of flowers approached the table. Desmond had remarked the flower-seller during the evening, a rather sinister-looking person in black with neat lace apron and cuffs, plying her wares at the bar and among the diners. She stopped in front of the girl and her two companions and, resting her basket on her hip, took from it a little nosegay and laid it silently upon the girl's plate. The girl smiled and pinned the flowers to the lapel of her fur coat.

"Did you see the flowers?" said the Chief.

"Of course," replied Desmond.

"I mean, did you notice what flowers they were?"

Desmond glanced across the room. "They seem to be a white carnation with some sort of blue flowers—cornflowers, probably—set round it!"

"I see!" mused the other. "Then I think we can be moving, Okewood!"

"And leave the charming and mysterious Madeleine here?" queried Desmond.

“No,” replied the older man, signing to a waiter, “she’s going too!”

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when the girl rose up from her table by the door, gathering her heavy coat about her. It was quite obvious that the young men were seeking to detain her. But laughingly she put them off.

“Not to-night!” they heard her say as a sudden lull came in the music. “I shall see you here again!”

Then, without looking to left or right, she hurried from the room.

CHAPTER XV

THE DECOY

“My dear Okewood,” opened the Chief when, half an hour later, he faced Desmond across the fireside in his library, “you find me grappling with what is probably the most perplexing problem I have ever tackled. For the past four weeks, since your very ugly adventure with our old friend Clubfoot in the affair of the Constantinople courier, I have kept you and your brother deliberately away from the Service . . . against your own wish, I know . . . frankly because you are too valuable to be sacrificed to Dr. Grundt’s personal spite!”

At the mention of the name of his old enemy, Desmond Okewood sat up eagerly in his chair.

“Is Clubfoot up to his tricks again?” he asked quickly.

The Chief shrugged his shoulders. “I used to have the reputation of being a man who knew his own mind,” he replied.

Desmond looked at the beaklike nose and the massive jaw appraisingly. The Chief was worshipped in the Service for his quickness of decision.

“But when I tell you, in answer to your question, that one day I think he is and the next day I think he isn’t, you will realize how badly they’ve got me bothered. It’s not a long story, Okewood, and you may as well hear it because, I tell you honestly, the thing’s got too big for one man to handle alone; I ought to give the whole of my attention to it, but I can’t; I’m too busy. If I did, I should have to neglect other more important affairs, and that is precisely what this campaign of deviltry is meant to achieve.” The Chief drew meditatively on his cigar. “You knew Finucane, I think?”

“Who was lately in Brussels for you?”

The Chief nodded.

“Rather. But why ‘knew’?”

“He’s vanished, Okewood!”

“Kidnapped or . . .?”

“Murdered, almost certainly. It’s more than a week since it happened. He knew too much!”

Desmond nodded his assent. Brussels, the half-way house to everywhere in Europe, is the report centre for the espionage services of every great European Power. The Secret Service agent who can make good in Brussels has little left to learn about the game.

“Yesterday a week ago Finucane crossed over from Brussels to see me,” the Chief resumed. “Between ourselves, Finucane has been tightening up our report centres in

industrial Germany. You know Finucane, Okewood: no Vere de Vere about him, but a devilish clever fellow and a damned judgmatical briber. His reports on the German situation have been admirable, and the Prime Minister was delighted. Finucane came over to get his head patted and also to submit certain plans for the development of our arrangements in Germany.

“Finucane got in from Brussels on Friday evening by the train that reaches Victoria at nine-twenty-five. He was to see me on the following morning. He engaged a room at the Nineveh, changed into evening dress, and went off to get a bite to eat and see life at the Hexagon. At five minutes to midnight he left the Hexagon alone and apparently perfectly sober. He never reached his hotel and has neither been seen nor heard of since!”

Desmond whistled. “Did he have the goods on him?”

The Chief laughed dryly. “Not Finucane! He carried it all under his hat!”

“And you’ve got no trace of him, no clue?”

Somewhere in the house an electric bell trilled. The Chief looked at his watch.

“As far as we know the last person to speak to Finucane before he disappeared was Madeleine McKenzie,” he said. “By a fortunate coincidence there happened to be present at the Hexagon that night a young detective from Vine Street named Rimmer, who was keeping observation on a gang of

West-End crooks. This bright young man remembers Finucane perfectly. Apparently Finucane spoke to the girl and, sitting down at her table, ordered a bottle of champagne. The McKenzie girl left first and Finucane remained to finish the bottle. Just before midnight he paid the bill and went away. The curious thing is that, while Finucane and the girl were drinking together at the table, the flower-woman approached, just as she did to-night, and gave the girl a bunch of flowers. And, again, just as we saw this evening, on receiving the nosegay the girl promptly left the place . . .”

“A signal, eh?” queried Desmond.

“Obviously,” said the Chief. “But what does it portend?”

The door opened. Watkyn, the Chief’s butler, a massively built ex-petty officer, with a pair of shoulders like an ox, was there.

“Captain Elliott!” he announced.

“Perhaps Elliott can tell us!” remarked the great man as the butler ushered into the library that selfsame youth whom, slightly merry with wine, they had seen but half an hour ago at Madeleine McKenzie’s table at the Hexagon.

The Chief wasted no time on introductions.

“Well?” was his greeting.

“We carried out your instructions to the letter, sir,” said the youth. “She’s a very ladylike, attractive girl, not a bit the sort of skirt you meet knockin’ about places like

the ‘old Hex.’ I pressed her very hard to let me drive her home, and I really thought I was getting on with her pretty well. But all of a sudden she kind of dried up and said she had to go . . .”

“When was that?” snapped the Chief.

“How do you mean, ‘when’?”

“At what stage of your conversation, with the lady did this change come over her?” said the Chief testily.

“Oh! after she was given some flowers by old Bessie!”

The Chief nodded grimly. “Well, and then?”

“We followed her taxi. She went home to Duchess Street. I left Robin to keep watch and follow her if she should leave the house.”

Again the Chief nodded. “Thank you, Peter,” he remarked, more gently this time. “That’ll be all for to-night. You can pick Robin up on your way home and send him to bed. And hark’ee, the pair of you steer clear of the Hexagon until further orders, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” replied the young man. “Good-night, sir.”

“Good-night, Peter.”

After the door had closed on him the Chief turned to Desmond.

“We took a statement from the girl. Her story absolutely tallies with Rimmer’s. She had a touch of neuralgia, she says, and went home early that night. She lives in furnished rooms in a most respectable house near the Langham Hotel, and if she is what she seems to be, she certainly does not ply her trade there. And yet what is the mystery of these flowers?”

“Was she asked about them?”

The Chief shook his head. “I was afraid of raising her suspicions. If it is a code a question like that would make them change it. But three times this week I’ve despatched some of my people to the Hexagon to get into conversation with the girl, different types each time, and I’ve got only negative results. The first man I sent posed as a rich Colonial newly landed in London, exactly the sort of fish that the West-End crooks and their decoys are always trying to land. She let him buy her a drink; Bessie, the flower-woman, came across in due course and gave her a bunch of white carnations, and presently she made an excuse to join a party at another table. But—note this well!—she did not leave the place until closing time, when she took a taxi home alone.

“Two nights later I sent another fellow along. His orders were to sit in the girl’s line of vision, but on no account to address her first. Nothing happened. She made no advances to him; nobody else spoke to her, and she received no flowers. She stayed until closing time and again drove away to Duchess Street by herself.

“To-night, by my instructions, young Elliott took her on. As when Finucane was with her, she received, as you saw, a

nosegay, not of white flowers only as my Colonial got, but of white flowers mingled with blue. Forthwith she drops young Peter and his friend and goes home. Strange, isn't it?"

"It is, indeed," observed his companion. "It would help us enormously if we knew what flowers she was given the night that Finucane disappeared!"

"I agree. But Rimmer didn't notice. We could have cross-examined old Bessie; but if this is a code, she's certainly in it too; and I will *not* scare them off it until I see more clearly . . ." He paused and, ticking each point off on his fingers, resumed presently: "If it's a code, this is what I make of it. General instructions to the girl: sit around at the 'Hex.' every night, make no advances, but only receive them. A white flower means, 'Drop the fellow; he does not interest us, but stand by'; a white and a blue say: 'The fellow does not interest us; you can go home.'"

"By Jove!" commented Desmond, enthusiasm in his voice, "this is getting jolly interesting, sir!"

"Yes," agreed the Chief. "But where does it take us? Up against a blank wall. And meanwhile Finucane's disappearance remains a mystery, and the *morale* of my staff is being ruined! This negative result business leads nowhere. I want something positive to show whether Madeleine McKenzie is or is not at the bottom of this baffling affair."

"What about old Bessie? Who gives *her* her orders?"

“We’ve drawn blank there, too! My men are in the crowd at the ‘Hex.’ every night to watch the old strap. Fellows often buy flowers from her for ladies at the ‘Hex.,’ but, as far as my young men have been able to see, no one has sent any flowers to Madeleine!”

Desmond was silent for a moment. “In that case,” he said presently, “there is only one way of finding out whether the young woman is being used as a decoy; that is, to send her some one prominent, a really big fish, and let her employers know, if possible, that he’s coming. We shadow our decoy and see where he leads us!”

The Chief chuckled delightedly. “What I like about you, Okewood,” he said, “is that your instincts are so unerring. You have hit precisely upon my plan. Listen! There is at present working for me in Germany a gentleman who is commonly known in this office as Murchison of Munich, you have never met him, for he is a recent acquisition, a banker by profession and a first-rate economist with a natural ability for Intelligence work. For the last eight weeks he has been in southern Germany carrying out an investigation into the transfer of German wealth abroad. I flatter myself that we have been able to cover up his tracks so successfully that, in his capacity as secret agent, he is actually known by sight to myself alone. Do you follow me?”

Desmond nodded.

“Now,” the Chief continued, “the important thing about his mission, from the standpoint of our present dilemma, is that the big German industrialists have lately become aware of

the presence of one of my fellows in the inner ring of their councils without, however, being able to identify him. I am virtually certain that the kidnapping of Finucane (to whom Murchison—did I tell you?—has been reporting) was intended as a warning to me that they are on the alert. A word to a certain ‘double-cross’ of my acquaintance giving away the identity of Murchison of Munich, and a hint dropped in the same quarter that, on a certain evening, the party in question is to be found at the Hexagon, will infallibly bring Clubfoot into the open again . . .”

“Clubfoot? Why Clubfoot?”

“Because,” said the Chief gravely, “our crippled friend, Dr. Grundt, the redoubtable master spy of Imperial Germany, has transferred his allegiance to the German industrialist ring, which, as you know, is the heart and soul of the great conspiracy to restore the fortunes of Germany as a militarist monarchy. Grundt to-day is the instrument of the coal and steel bosses, the real masters of modern Germany . . .”

“He has been working for them ever since his reappearance, do you think?”

“Undoubtedly. Now, see here again. If, when Murchison appears at the Hexagon, Madeleine McKenzie is used as the decoy, we shall have acquired the certainty that it was she who lured Finucane away. And if subsequent developments don’t lead us back to old Clubfoot, damn it, I’ll eat my hat!”

“But supposing your surmise does not prove correct,” Desmond objected, “you’ll have given away one of your best men!”

The Chief smiled and shook his head. “No, I shan’t! Murchison of Munich is going to stay quietly where he is in South Germany . . .”

The eyes of the two men met.

“Bear in mind,” added the Chief, “that nobody has ever seen Murchison of Munich except myself!”

There was a significant pause.

“And I do so hate painting my face!” remarked Desmond irrelevantly.

The Chief laughed. “I knew I could count on you, Okewood. Very little disguise will be necessary if you will consent to sacrifice your moustache. All I ask you to do is to dine at the Hexagon at eight o’clock to-morrow evening in the guise of Mr. Murchison of Munich. You can leave the rest to me. And if, in the course of the evening, you should recognize that brother of yours—well, don’t! Now as to this question of your make-up . . .”

CHAPTER XVI

THE HOUSE IN PIMLICO

At five minutes to eight on the following evening, Desmond Okewood took his seat at the table which had been reserved for Mr. Murchison at the Hexagon. Next to the door, two tables away, the McKenzie girl was seated, eating her dinner with the air of quiet simplicity that Desmond had already remarked in her. She was again in black, but the Spanish comb was gone, and she now, wore a smart little black hat whose curving brim and sweeping black aigrette emphasized the rather wistful piquancy of her features. Desmond fancied he could detect about her a vague air of excitement, of expectancy. At any rate, there was a faint glow of colour, in her pale cheeks.

Desmond Okewood was feeling particularly pleased with himself. I, who had known him all his life, came in with a party and passed him by without recognizing him, as he told me gleefully afterwards. And yet, as the Chief had said, very little disguise had proved necessary. With grease-paint and powder Desmond had blocked the healthy tan out of his face, a touch of rouge on the cheek-bones had altered the set of his features, and a subtle change had been wrought in the expression of his eyes by the simple process of shaving off the outer corner of the eye-brows and correcting their line with a black pencil. The sacrifice of his moustache and the addition of a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles had sufficed to

achieve the Chief's object, which was to render Desmond's general appearance both nondescript and negligible.

Suddenly the young man felt a little tingle of excitement. Bessie, the flower-woman, whom he had noticed offering her wares among the serried ranks of loungers at the long bar, was crossing the room. A man at a table on the edge of the dancing-floor bought a bunch of violets for the girl with him. A nasty-looking old woman, Desmond decided, as Bessie approached, with small eyes, dull and lifeless, and thin lips set in a fixed, unmeaning smile.

She passed him by and stopped at the McKenzie girl's table. From her basket rested on the white damask she took a cluster of deep red carnations and laid them silently, with her eternal smirk, beside the girl's plate. No word was exchanged between them; with a grateful smile at the woman the girl pinned the flowers in the front of her dress and Bessie passed on.

Desmond waited. Excitement had dulled the edge of his appetite, and he made a pretext of eating while he narrowly watched the girl. Once or twice he caught her glancing archly at him from under her heavy black lashes, and now, as he looked at her, she let her dark eyes rest invitingly on his.

He beckoned to the waiter.

"Ask the lady in black by the door whether I may offer her a glass of champagne," he said.

The man nodded understandingly, and the next moment Desmond was facing Madeleine McKenzie across the table.

Her complete self-possession was the first thing that struck him, for she was obviously quite young. She was not coy about the informality of their meeting, and she received his introductory banalities about the crowd and the band and the food with an air of amused indifference which piqued him.

She made him talk about himself, parrying with skill all his efforts to draw her out. Little by little, so sure and sympathetic was her touch, Desmond found himself entering into the spirit of his part, talking of the life of Munich, the Opera, the little *théâtres intimes*, the huge, noisy *brasseries*.

“You are used to a life of excitement, then?” she said.

It was Desmond’s cue. Swiftly he took it.

“Indeed I am,” he answered. “I’ve been only a few hours in London, and I’m sick of it already. Does any one ever have a good time here?”

The girl flashed a glance at him from under her long lashes. “If you know where to look for it,” she said softly.

“I bet you know your way around,” Desmond replied.

She shrugged her shoulders prettily. “My ideas of a good time might not agree with yours,” she countered.

“What are your ideas of a good time?” he asked.

She sighed. “Gambling!” she answered, “if I could afford it.”

Desmond grew alert on the instant. Was this the secret of Finucane’s disappearance, cleaned out in a *tripot* and ashamed to show his face again?

“Now you’re talking,” he said. He lowered his voice. “Tell me, do you know where there’s a game?”

She scrutinized his face, turned up to hers. “If I thought you were to be trusted . . .” she began.

He shrugged his shoulders. “If you think I’m a police spy! However, I dare say I can find my own way to the roulibouli!”

“Now I’ve offended you,” she said, and laid her hand on his arm. “Are you really keen?”

“Keen? Gambling’s the only sort of excitement worth while, and I’ve tried most sorts. The shaded lights, the green cloth, the click of the ball, the scrape of the rakes—the night should have four and twenty hours if I had my way!”

“Come closer!” said the girl. “Leave me here and drive to the clock outside Victoria Station at the entrance to the Vauxhall Bridge Road. Wait for me there. I mustn’t be seen leaving with you. The police watch the Hexagon!”

The crucial moment had arrived. Desmond glanced quickly round the room. There was no sign of Francis or any of the

Chief's men. Well, his orders were to go through with the adventure. He paid the bill and left the girl at her table. Half an hour later, as he waited in front of the clock-tower at Victoria, a taxi drew up and a white hand tapped softly on the glass.

The girl stopped the cab in front of one of those tall, gloomy houses that face the river in Grosvenor Road. Behind them, over an arch of lights, the trams thumped across Vauxhall Bridge; before them, beyond a wilderness of warehouses and wharves, the glow of South London shone luridly in the night sky.

The house was dark and, save for the taxi quietly chugging at the door, the street was deserted. The girl jumped out first and, a latchkey in her hand, was already at the front door as Desmond alighted. For an instant he hesitated. What had happened to Francis and the others? Had the Chief failed him? Should he go on? His orders left him no choice. He had to play his part and leave the rest to the Chief. He felt in his jacket pocket for the reassuring chill of his automatic as he turned to pay the cab.

"How much?" he asked the driver, an apple-cheeked greybeard.

"Something's gone wrong, Des.," replied the man in a low voice, the voice of Francis Okewood. "The Chief's people were to have followed us. Back out of this while you can!"

"Psst!"

From the top of the steps the girl was signalling to Desmond to make haste.

“Have you change for a ten-shilling note?” Desmond said aloud to his brother, and added in an undertone: “I’m going to see it through. But get help quickly!”

And with that he followed the girl into the house.

They crossed the hall, a dingy place in which a gas-jet in a stained-glass lamp burned dimly. The girl stopped at a door at the end and, producing another key, unlocked it. They entered another lobby, very spick and span with its white paint and red Wilton pile carpet and brilliantly lighted. The murmur of voices came from swing-doors that led off it and the air was heavy with the fragrant aroma of cigars.

At the end of the lobby, with their backs to the entrance door, a man and a girl stood. The man had his arms about the woman and his face was buried in the aureole of her golden hair. Desmond heard a sharp exclamation from Madeleine.

“Paul!” she cried sharply.

The couple sprang apart. Like a fury Madeleine turned on the woman.

“What are you doing with my husband?” she demanded, and advanced menacingly towards her, her eyes blazing with anger and her thin hands shaking. “He’s mine, you . . . you painted slut!”

The woman gave a cry of terror and bolted through the door into the adjacent room. Madeleine would have followed her, but the man stepped between them and seized the girl by the wrists. He was a big, showy fellow, in the forties, in evening dress, very well groomed, with sleek dark hair and a dark moustache.

“Stop that, d’you hear?” he commanded. He spoke with a marked foreign accent.

Furiously the girl wrenched herself free, “I’m sick of it all!” she cried. “Sick of being trifled with. Do you understand? Haven’t I lowered myself to the dirt for you? Haven’t I acted the part of a common prostitute to help you, and this is all the reward I get? . . .”

The man looked apprehensively at Desmond.

“Come, come,” he said to Madeleine in a voice that was intended to be persuasive; “don’t make a scene in front of our friend here! It was—ha, ha—only a joke of mine—to make you jealous, little woman . . .”

“Lies, lies, always lies!” the girl burst in. “But I’m through with you now. Do you understand? You’re welcome to your Lotties and your Nancys and your painted French women! I do no more dirty work for you after this!”

The man bit his moustache. His eyes were very evil. He controlled himself with an effort.

“Dirty work?” he said. “What a horrid word, Mado! Come, now, take your cloak off! I’m sure our friend wants a game . .

.”

But the girl would not be pacified. “Horrid word, is it? Then what became of the other I brought here for you?”

The man’s face darkened horribly. “That’s enough. Do you hear?” he cried, and clapped his hand over the girl’s mouth. But, with a fierce effort wrenching herself free: “Go, go!” she cried to Desmond. “For the love of God, get out of this house! If you don’t . . .”

But her voice died away on a stifled scream. Two men in evening dress had suddenly appeared, and, lifting her bodily up, bore her struggling away up a stair that curved upward from the end of the hall. Desmond, springing instinctively forward to her aid, found his way blocked by Paul. Behind him, in the doorway leading off the vestibule, against a background of dim green light, sullen and forbidding faces now scowled. And a burly, thick-set man in a dinner coat, with a broken nose, had quietly posted himself between Desmond and the door.

“Miss McKenzie,” said Paul suavely, “is subject to these *crises de nerfs*. I must apologize for the disturbance, Mr. . . . Mr. . . .”

“Murchison!” said Desmond abstractedly.

He was wondering whether he had alarmed himself unnecessarily. It was not the first time he had been in a London gaming-hell, and the curious muted hush beneath the green-shaded lamps of the room off the lobby was as familiar

to him as the dim figures he could descry about the table watching with painful intensity the measured movements of the banker as he drew the cards from the shoe. Perhaps the scene he had just witnessed was merely one of the habitual encounters between a bully and his victims.

Yet the girl's warning had obviously been sincere. Who was "the other" of whom she had spoken? Finucane? . . .

"My name is Geyer," the man Paul was saying. "Felix, take the gentleman's coat."

So saying, with a gesture of odious familiarity, he clapped his arm about the young man. Before Desmond realized what he was up to, Paul had drawn from the other's jacket pocket the automatic pistol.

"You don't mind?" he said. "It's a rule of the house!" And he handed it to the man he had called Felix.

With a sinking heart, for now he knew he had the worst to fear, Desmond silently followed his mentor through the swing-doors.

An air of expectancy rested over the card-room. The atmosphere was warm and so thick with the fumes of tobacco that at first Desmond was conscious only of a sea of white faces turned towards the door. The throng about the table parted to make way for him as Paul Geyer led him up to the table.

“A new member of our circle, my friends,” Geyer’s voice trumpeted triumphantly through the room; “a desperate gambler who loves the green cloth!”

He stood between Desmond and the table, his hands very white in the pool of light shed by the low-hung, shaded lamps. He stepped aside.

Desmond found himself facing The Man with the Clubfoot.

Grundt was holding the bank. His great hairy hands were spread out on the table, one resting on the *sabot*, the other with its knotted fingers sprawling over swathes of shining playing-cards. His vast torso was leant back in his chair and his red and fleshy lips drew noisily on a glowing cigar held securely between his strong, yellow teeth. Beneath their shaggy, tufted brows his dark eyes flamed defiance, insolence, triumph; indeed, there was an indescribable air of arrogance about his whole attitude and demeanour.

Desmond’s first thought was Francis. How long would he be in procuring assistance? Help could not arrive yet awhile, for it was not half an hour since they had parted. Was not the immediate question rather how long could Desmond hold Clubfoot off?

And then, with a sudden thrill of hope, he remembered his disguise. Grundt would, he knew, murder Desmond Okewood out of hand. But might not Murchison of Munich gain a brief respite? Yet would the disguise, summary as it was, stand the test of those keen and terrible eyes that even now were searching his face?

There was no light in the room, Desmond reflected with satisfaction, other than the shaded table-lamps; and, for the present, the features of Murchison, fully described and circulated through the medium of the Chief's "double-cross," were uppermost in Clubfoot's mind. But—and with a pang the realization came to Desmond—the voice was the great betrayer. If he must speak—and he could not remain dumb without arousing suspicion—disguise his voice as he would, Grundt must inevitably recognize it.

But now Grundt was addressing him. "Herr Murchison, hein? Es freut mich sehr! A gambler, was?"

He grunted and puffed meditatively at his cigar. "Gambling is a very pleasant pursuit," he continued amiably. Then his voice grew grim: "But it has its drawbacks, Herr Murchison. The loser pays!"

With an effort he straightened himself up in his chair, shook the ash from his cigar into a tray, and leaned across the table.

"Who's been leaking to you?" he demanded.

Herr Murchison's hands were shaking violently. His pallid features seemed to be distraught with sheer fright. Through his large goggles he blinked feebly, idiotically, at his questioner.

"My friend," said Grundt, placing one black-thatched hand palm downwards on the green cloth, "your activities in South Germany are inconvenient to me. With your English gold you have been corrupting my wretched compatriots,

plundered and pillaged by the rapacious French, your allies . . .” His fingers clawed up a card. “I shall crush your organization, you and your helpers and your helpers’ helpers . . . like that!” The gleaming millboard wilted in his powerful grasp. “Where are your headquarters?” he rapped out, snarling, and added over his shoulder: “Meinhardt, take a note of his answers!”

Herr Murchison cast a panic-stricken glance round the silent, forbidding circle of attentive faces.

“Answer me, you dog!” thundered Clubfoot. “I’ve plenty of means at my disposal to banish coyness! Come on! Out with it! I’m not going to waste my time tearing it out of you piecemeal! Are you going to make a clean breast of it? Yes or no!”

Herr Murchison extended two trembling hands. “Give me time!” he murmured weakly. “I will tell you what I can!”

A light of sudden vigilance appeared in Clubfoot’s eyes. The man’s whole manner changed on the instant. He seemed to bristle. “Time?” he repeated as though to himself. “Paul,” he called, “come here!”

Paul Geyer crossed the room and stood behind Grundt’s chair. Clubfoot whispered something in his ear. Without leaving his place, Geyer gave a muttered order to a man at his side, who noiselessly left the room.

Grundt took out his watch and laid it on the table before him. “I have exactly five minutes to spare,” he

said. “In that time I propose to turn you inside out, my friend, or, by God, we’ll see what the old-fashioned methods of cross-examination will do!”

He moistened his lips with his tongue, like some great beast of prey licking its chops.

“I’m waiting!” he said.

Shaking in every limb, Herr Murchison opened his lips to speak. “My headquarters are . . . Munich!” he said in a strained voice.

“Turn your head to the right!” shouted Grundt suddenly. “Turn your head, I say! Meinhardt, Felix! Thrust him down under the lamp!”

Strong arms forced Herr Murchison brutally forward until his chest rested on the cloth. His spectacles fell off. The bright light streamed full in his face.

“Desmond Okewood, bei Gott!” roared Grundt. “You poor fool, did you think you could hoodwink me? Don’t you know that a man can never disguise his ears? Himmelkreuzsakrament, you and I have a long account to settle, and this time”—his voice shook with concentrated fury—“I’m going to see that it’s paid!”

Then came a hoarse shout from without: “The police!” and the sounds of a violent scuffle. Immediately the room was a mass of scrambling, jostling figures. The light went out almost simultaneously . . . at the very moment that Clubfoot clawed a great automatic from his pocket. In the clammy,

noisy darkness Desmond flung himself across the table straight at the throat of that sinister gigantic figure facing him.

His opponent struggled fiercely, but the chair impeded him. Desmond hung on grimly, determined that, this time, his old enemy should not escape him. Then the light went up and Desmond found himself looking into the mocking face of Paul Geyer. Two uniformed constables pounced upon him, and Desmond relaxed his grip.

“I’ll have the law on you,” gasped Geyer, tugging at his torn collar. “Though I do keep a table, that’s no justification for half murdering me! Take his name and address, Inspector!”

Touching his cap, the Inspector drew Desmond Okewood aside. “You’ll be Major Okewood, I’m thinking,” he said. “Your brother has been like a wild man about you!”

“Where is he?” asked Desmond.

“There’s a passage under the road to a wharf beside the river,” the Inspector answered. “It connects with the house here by a trap in the back hall. There’s a lame man escaped that way . . .”

“A lame man?” queried Desmond in dismay.

“Aye! Mr. Okewood went after him with a couple of my chaps!”

He was interrupted by the appearance of Francis himself, breathless and dishevelled. Only his taximan's uniform remained to recall his disguise of the night.

"He's away!" he gasped, answering his brother's unspoken question. "Vanished into the night! The men are beating the place for him, but those blasted wharves are a regular rabbit warren, and it's as dark as be-damned outside. Who's your fat friend?"

He indicated Geyer, who, violently protesting, was being led away by his captors.

"When the light went out," said Desmond, "Clubfoot changed places with him. He knew this fellow only risked a fine for keeping a gambling-den. It was my own fault. I over-acted and put the old man on his guard. Where's the girl?"

"Disappeared. We'll get her at Duchess Street, I shouldn't wonder!"

"What's the bag here? Do you know?"

Francis made a grimace. "Nothing very great, I'm afraid. Some vague foreigners and a brace of bruisers. None of Clubfoot's gang, at any rate. They must have smelt a rat, for as we were picking the lock a fellow unexpectedly opened the front door and gave the alarm!"

"I know," said Desmond. "Clubfoot got suspicious when I asked him to give me time, and sent this chap out to see if

there were any police around. By the way, what happened to the Chief's crowd?"

Francis raised his eyes to heaven. "Somebody will be sacrificed for this night's work. Their car burst a tyre in Victoria Street and they lost sight of my taxi. The arrangement was, you see, that they were to follow the girl and not you. Instead of ringing up headquarters to report, they went careering all over Belgravia, and when I rang up the Chief on leaving you they hadn't turned up. So we simply asked the nearest police divisional headquarters to raid this place as a gambling-hell. It seemed the quickest way of getting assistance!"

They were silent for a moment. Then Desmond said: "I must say I should like to have known how those flower signals were worked."

"We pinched old Bessie to-night," his brother replied, "and she spilled the beans. A confederate, instructed by Grundt, tipped her off the colour by means of a handkerchief as he stood at the bar—red, blue and white, or white. As to the meaning of the various colours, I think the Chief's diagnosis was correct. Clubfoot apparently had found out that Finucane was an habitu  of the 'Hex.' in the old days and laid this plot to trap him. Poor Finucane! The girl got the signal of red carnations for him, too!"

A week later a tug off Charing Cross Pier fished up in its screw the dead body of Finucane, bound hand and foot, with a bullet through the head. The Hexagon Buffet knew the

McKenzie girl no more. Nor did she ever return to Duchess Street. As an old offender, Paul Geyer was given a month's imprisonment for keeping a gaming-house, and, as an alien—he was Russian-born—recommended for deportation. In respect of the death of Finucane no charge was brought against him, for want of evidence.

Meanwhile The Man with the Clubfoot remained at large.

CHAPTER XVII

THE MEETING

If, as the textbooks tell us, a successful retirement be the greatest test of strategy, then, indeed, Clubfoot can lay claim to be one of the most skilful of generals in the never-ending guerilla warfare that is the daily life of the Secret Service. No man can ensure himself against the surprises of fate; but in one respect Dr. Grundt's foresight was never found wanting, and that was in the provision of a safe and inconspicuous line of retreat. Nothing is more devastating to the *moral* of troops of pursuit than the knowledge that their enemy, after each successful raid, is able to retire in safety into ambush to select his own time for the next sortie.

My two friends frankly recognized the affair at the house in Pimlico as a serious reverse. Not only had Clubfoot made away with one of the Chief's most expert and trusted agents, but he had also eluded the trap laid for him and arranged matters so as to leave in the hands of his pursuers not a single accomplice against whom anything more serious than a simple misdemeanour could be proved. In itself the check was bad enough, but its results were even more grave. The long list of unexplained crimes was beginning to sap at the *moral* of the Service: there were resignations among the weaker vessels whom crises of this nature invariably expose; and even the Chief, most dogged

and equable of mortals, who had his own private reasons for anxiety, began to look worried.

It therefore redounds the more to his credit that at this juncture, some three weeks after Clubfoot's escape by river from the house of Pimlico, the Chief should have taken a decision that, it is safe to predict, in any walk of life other than the Secret Service, would have been denounced as sheer lunatic foolhardiness.

Once more Grundt had vanished away into the Ewigkeit. It was as though the vast bulk of the master spy had dissolved into thin air. One clue, and one clue only—and that nothing better than a report based on more than doubtful authority—was forthcoming pointing to his presence in Germany. A “double-cross”—one of those versatile gentlemen who carry on espionage for both sides—sent word that a friend of his had seen a burly lame man whose appearance answered the description of Clubfoot lunching at a small café on one of the islands in the Havel, the river outside Berlin. No corroboration was obtainable and nothing more was heard directly of the redoubtable German until one morning the Chief found in his mail a letter from Dr. Grundt, posted in the West Central postal district of London, asking for an interview.

This the Chief decided immediately to grant. By the rules of the game he knew that the meeting would be privileged. In according it he was aware that he undertook to allow his visitor to come and go unmolested. Such encounters are not uncommon in the Secret Service. The “double-crosses” form, as it were, an invisible bridge between the most inveterate

adversaries and, within the limit of strange unwritten moral laws in this most immoral of avocations, there are pacts and understandings that not infrequently are laid down at meetings no whit less bizarre than the memorable interview between Clubfoot and the Chief.

With characteristic consideration the big man sent for my two friends and informed them of Dr. Grundt's request.

"It's . . . it's incredible, sir," said Desmond Okewood.

"He wouldn't have the nerve," his brother Francis put in.

"Clubfoot would," grimly observed the Chief, and pitched a letter on the desk in front of them. "Read it for yourself!"

Strange and devious are the ways of the Secret Service. Old hands at the game, neither Desmond nor Francis Okewood had been astonished on being bidden, severally and secretly, to report at the office of Jacob Melchizedech, commission agent, Shaftsbury Avenue, to find the Chief installed in one of the three modest rooms which Mr. Melchizedech's place of business comprised.

Bizarre folk often have the pressing need to unbosom themselves to those who pull the strings behind the façade of public affairs. But the social record of some of these mysterious gentlemen and ladies is not always one to inspire unquestioning confidence. So, in the first instance, a non-committal identity and a non-committal address are but an elementary safeguard against blackmail and the kindred

practices of the “double-cross.” Seldom did the Chief, known to few only by sight and to fewer still by name, face the casual visitor save under the cloak of an unrevealing identity and an accommodation address.

Desmond picked up the letter and read it, while his brother looked over his shoulder.

Dr. Grundt [the bold, upright handwriting set forth] presents his compliments to his colleague, the Director of the British Secret Service, and requests the favour of a personal interview at a time and place most convenient to the latter. A reply by return in the Agony Column of *The Times* would oblige.

“Well, I’m damned!” Desmond exploded violently. “You’re surely not going to receive the fellow, sir?”

“Mr. Melchizedech on my behalf,” the Chief retorted with a twinkle in his eye, “will be pleased to hear anything our friend wishes to lay before me!”

“We’ll be three to one, anyhow!” muttered Francis Okewood.

The Chief shook his head. “No, we shan’t,” he announced decisively. “You two will be in the farther room . . .”

“But, Chief,” Desmond broke in vehemently, “the man will be armed. He’s dangerous: he stops at nothing . . .”

The big man shrugged his broad shoulders.

“I always meet an adversary halfway,” he said. “And I would remind you that Grundt and I have never yet come face to face. I am inordinately interested, I must confess, in this cripple who, when he directed the ex-Kaiser’s personal secret service, exercised such power over his Imperial master that he was the most dreaded man in Germany. You and your brother have told me so much about his dominating personality. I like encountering dominating personalities!” he added reflectively.

Desmond and Francis Okewood exchanged a glance full of meaning. For months the figure of the gigantic cripple had haunted their thoughts. So deeply had their long duel with The Man with the Clubfoot impressed his figure on their brain that in their mind’s eye they could see him now, a simian silhouette with his vast girth, his immensely long arms, his leering, savage eyes beneath the shaggy brows—above all, his inevitable undisguisable trade-mark, the monstrous deformed foot.

“I know you would meet anything or anybody with your bare fists, sir,” Desmond pleaded, “but Clubfoot is beyond the pale. He has the profoundest contempt for our English notions of fair play and, though you may agree to this idea of his of an armistice meeting, on *his* side you can bet your bottom dollar it’s a plant! He’s a treacherous devil, and the only way to treat him is to fall on him the moment he appears, tie him up, and lodge him as quickly and as securely as possible in the nearest jail.”

“Well,” said the Chief slowly, “there may be something in what you say. But in all my career I’ve

never yet refused to meet an enemy who wrote and asked, fair and square, for an interview. I shall see Grundt!”

“But, sir,” urged Desmond, “look at the list of his victims since he started his campaign of vengeance against the Service—Branxe, Wetherby Soukes, Fawcett Wilbur, Törnedahl, Miss Bardale, Bewlay, Finucane! The man’s a wolf, a mad dog! He ought to be shot at sight!”

The Chief’s strong face had grown very stern. “I agree. But I want *my* sight of him. Don’t worry, Okewood. I’ve got my tally against our clubfooted friend. He’ll get no change out of me . . .”

He looked at his watch. “Half-past six. He’ll be here any moment now! Away with the pair of you into the back room. If you’ll remove the map of the tube railways hanging on the partition wall you’ll find a trap which, provided you don’t turn up the light, will—ahem!—facilitate both seeing and hearing!”

“Sir, once more . . .” said Desmond.

The Chief shook his head.

“And I haven’t even got a gun!” muttered the young man forlornly as he accompanied his brother from the room.

A “buzzer” whizzed raspingly through Mr. Melchizedech’s office. Composedly the Chief rose from his chair and, crossing the outer room, opened the front door. An enormous man in a black wide-awake hat with a

heavy caped ulster faced him. The visitor leaned heavily upon a crutch-handled stick.

“Mr. Melchizedech?” he wheezed, for the stairs had temporarily robbed him of his breath.

“That’s my name,” replied the Chief. “Please come in.”

He stood back to let the stranger pass, then led the way into the inner office.

“Won’t you take off your things?” he said, and, pointing to a chair, remained standing.

With slow, deliberate movements the visitor slid the ulster from his shoulders and cast it with his hat on a couch. Then he turned and faced the other, and, for a full minute, the two men measured each other in silence. They were something of the same type, both of big build, both masterly and virile, with iron determination shown in the proud jut of the nose, the massive cast of the jaw.

There was, however, a marked difference in their regard. The Englishman was suave, self-possessed, restrained, and his manner, though watchful and even suspicious, was placid and polite. But in his every trait the other, his visitor, was restless and provocative. The baleful glare in his dark and burning eyes was in itself a challenge, and his movements had something of the menacing deliberation of a wild beast. There was an indescribable air of primeval savagery about him with his bulging tufted brows, his enormous deep chest, his long and powerful arms,

his short thick legs, as he confronted the other across the desk.

Presently his eyes left the Chief's face as, with insolent deliberation, he let his gaze sweep slowly round the room. It took in the desk with its dusty bundles of papers, the safe in the wall behind, the office calendar, the clock, the hat-stand, and the filing-cabinet, before coming to rest again upon the impassive mask confronting him.

With a comprehensive wave of his stick he indicated their surroundings.

"Na," he croaked, "as between colleagues was there really any necessity for this elaborate setting?" Shrewdly he watched the other's face.

"My instructions from the gentleman to whom you wrote," replied the Chief evenly, "are to hear what you wish to say. I was to add that, in according you this interview, my Chief in no way binds his liberty of future action, notably with regard to the punishment he proposes to inflict upon you."

Anger flashed swiftly into the hard, dark eyes.

"Punishment?" he exclaimed; then dropped chuckling into a chair. "Bold words!" he added. "So ist's aber recht! As between man and man!"

Impressively he laid one hairy palm downwards upon the desk.

"You have had ample warning of my power," he said. "I have decimated your Service, Herr Kollege; its

moral is profoundly shaken; and, after the series of sanguinary reverses you have sustained at my hands, I can only suppose that a form of puerile *amour-propre* prevents you from recognizing the futility of continuing the struggle. So I have come to you, frankly and openly, as is our German way, to lay my cards upon the table.”

Not by so much as the flutter of an eyelid did the Chief interrupt the flow of this harangue. He listened quietly, composedly, his keen grey eyes fixed on his visitor’s face.

“My work here is almost done,” the other resumed. “For many years I have lived my life intensely, working early and late, contriving, combining, braving danger and defeating intrigues, for the greater glory of my people. But the world is changing—was ich sage! has changed, Herr Kollege, and the hour has almost struck for old Clubfoot, as they call me, to take his retirement. One last mission remains to be fulfilled and then old Clubfoot retires to his vineyard in Suabia, and politics will know no more the greatest man in our profession since Fouché!”

He seemed to swell up as he uttered his boast and his deep voice thrilled warmly to the fire of his egotism. Then his mood changed. With a crash he brought his fist down upon the desk.

“This Bliss mission must not go through, Herr Kollege,” he commanded.

For the first time a new light crept into the steady grey eyes that watched him so closely from across the table. The

expression was involuntary and vanished almost as soon as it appeared. But, mere flicker though it was, it did not escape Grundt.

“I surprise you, I see,” the cripple remarked softly. “Nothing is withheld from me, lieber Herr. Shall I tell you about Mr. Alexander Bliss, senior partner of Haversack and Mayer, brokers to the British Government, and his mission to . . .”

An instinctive gesture from the other interrupted him.

“Discretion above all things,” Grundt acquiesced. “To the capital of a certain State contiguous to Russia, shall we say? You are doubtless aware that its new-found liberty has brought this ambitious Staatchen to the verge of financial disaster. A brand-new, spick-and-span army, costly missions abroad, banquets to fête the promise of to-morrow (but never the achievement of to-day), injudicious speculation in the exchanges of its neighbours have, as you undoubtedly know, played such havoc with the national resources that bankruptcy is the inevitable corollary. The British Government, with the altruism that has always distinguished its foreign policy (I would not suggest for a moment that the heavy commitments of British capital in this quarter influence its actions in the least!), has come to the rescue of . . . of this State. Your Mr. Bliss, after a number of most secret interviews with the Finance Minister, has concluded a satisfactory arrangement for the secret pledging in London of the State jewels, the glories of the nation’s past. I think I have summed up the situation correctly.”

He leant forward across the desk, tapping the blotter with stub forefinger.

“You will recall Mr. Bliss,” he said, “and cancel the arrangement he has made. A group of German financiers is prepared to take such action as will avert the disaster that threatens . . . this State. You will recall Bliss!”

Very quietly the Chief shook his head.

“If the British Government declines assistance,” Grundt resumed, “this Government will be bound to fall back upon the offer of the German group. The withdrawal of the Bliss mission will enable the German syndicate to arrange a loan on its own terms. I observe that you are already familiar with the existence of this German consortium. You see I am perfectly candid with you. I will push my frankness a step farther. This Bliss affair will be my last case. The matter satisfactorily adjusted, I retire, Herr Kollege, and enable you to reorganize your shattered and nerve-destroyed Service!”

Reflectively the Chief stabbed at his blotter with his reading-glass.

“Don’t be too hard on us, Herr Doktor,” he remarked. “The two Okewoods are in excellent health!”

A warm flush crimsoned the pallid cheeks of the cripple. Hot anger suddenly gleamed in his dark and restless eyes. But he controlled himself. He ran one hand over the close iron-grey stubble that thatched the bony head and his fleshy lips bared his yellow teeth in a forced smile.

“Clever, clever young men, Herr Kollege!” he murmured. “I congratulate you upon your Okewoods. May they live long to enjoy the fruits of their cleverness!”

In his mouth the wish became an imprecation, with such glowing vehemence did he utter it. He spoke with a snarl that for a moment lent his features a positively tigerish expression.

But the Chief had stood up. “Is that all?” he demanded, and came round the desk.

Clubfoot, his hairy hands crossed above the crutch of his stick, leaned back in his chair and looked up at his interrogator.

“Yes,” he replied. “And now you know what you’ve got to do!”

The Chief plucked open the door. “Get out of here and go to hell!” he said without raising his voice, with the same dogged composure he had maintained throughout the interview.

Like some great animal heaving itself erect, Grundt struggled cumbrously to his feet.

“You . . . you refuse?” he blustered.

The Chief ignored the question. “If you’re not out of here in one minute,” he retorted with deadly calm, “cripple though you are, I . . . shall . . . kick . . . you . . . downstairs!”

Leaning heavily on his stick, The Man with the Clubfoot hobbled slowly to the door. On the threshold he stopped and, in a gesture of sudden ferocity, thrust his face into the other's.

“You have passed sentence of death on Bliss,” he said in a voice that fury rendered hoarse and almost inarticulate, “and sentence of death on yourself as well!”

Then he passed out and they heard his heavy footstep pounding down the stairs.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CHAMOIS LEATHER PACKET

Three times in the course of the ensuing week the Chief's life was attempted. There is reason to believe, Desmond Okewood says, that, previously to this, other attempts had been made; but he has certain knowledge only of these three plots. No word of the outrages passed the inmost circle of the Service represented by the Chief himself and Collins, his confidential clerk, and Desmond learned of them only when, visiting headquarters one day, he observed that liftman, doormen, messengers, and clerks had all been changed.

“Some one tampered with the lock of the gate of the lift which works automatically after hours,” the Chief explained reluctantly when Desmond tackled him, “and, but for a certain instinctive caution that has served me well before now, I should have taken a drop of six floors. Somebody inside did it, so I made a clean sweep of the office staff with the exception of Collins!”

But it was not until months afterwards that Desmond heard of the youth who, caught lurking in the area of the Chief's London house, was found to be carrying a hypodermic needle filled with prussic acid, and of the endeavour to derail the train by which the Chief was travelling to a conference in the north.

But when, one spring morning, the Chief arrived by car at Desmond Okewood's Surrey bungalow, Desmond saw at once by his face that the strain was beginning to tell. The steady grey eyes were as keen as ever and the mouth had lost nothing of its firmness; but there was a set air of restraint about the big man which did not deceive Desmond.

They breakfasted together and, the meal done, the Chief proposed a walk in the garden.

"We can talk better in the open air," he remarked as he filled his pipe.

It was an old garden whose high red walls, now clothed with the blossom of peach and apple, were a guarantee against eavesdroppers. For a spell they strolled in silence along the paths bordering the beds bright with spring flowers, the busy clamour of thrush and blackbird the only sound.

"Two days will see us through now," the Chief remarked suddenly. "Bliss has reached Berlin with the jewels, Okewood. He has had the most express injunctions to hand them over there to a trustworthy messenger of his choosing, for he himself, unless I am greatly mistaken, is by this time a marked man. The messenger will immediately convey the jewels to Brussels where you will take charge of them. A plane will be waiting for you at the Brussels aerodrome, you will fly straight back to Croydon where a car will be in readiness day or night to take you to the Bank of England. There you will hand the jewels over to the Governor against his receipt. Is that clear?"

“Perfectly!”

“To prevent leakage I forbade Bliss throughout his trip to communicate with me at all. I, however, have been able to send him instructions from time to time. His messenger was due to leave Berlin last night, and will report to you to-morrow evening at Box A at the Flora Theatre—it’s a music-hall—in Brussels!”

Desmond nodded. “Who is it?”

“Bliss had no means of telling me. But I have arranged a recognition signal. The messenger will ask you the question: ‘Do you know the Albany?’ to which you will reply: ‘From the Mansion to Vigo Street!’ On that answer, and on that answer only, the jewels will be handed over. Have you got that?”

Desmond repeated question and answer.

“It sounds idiotic,” said the Chief apologetically, “but I had to improvise something on the spot.”

“And when do I leave?” Desmond asked.

“By the morning train from Victoria to-morrow. You will be in Brussels by four in the afternoon. A red Minerva car will meet you at the station and will be at your disposal for the whole of your stay. Just say to the driver ‘Albany’ and he will obey your orders. He will take you to the theatre and afterwards drive you out to the aerodrome to the machine that we have ordered for you. I honestly believe that nothing can go wrong, for the details I have given to you

were sent sealed by air to Bliss in Berlin, and I have word that Bliss has received them. Our plan is, therefore, known only to myself, Bliss, and you . . .”

“And the messenger . . .” Desmond put in.

“Quite so. But you can trust Bliss to have picked a reliable person. He is, without exception, the most suspicious-minded cove I’ve ever come across . . . Hallo, what’s this?”

A maid came hurrying up the garden path.

“The gentleman is wanted on the telephone, please, sir,” she said to Desmond.

They went into the house, where Desmond, discreetly, left the Chief at the telephone in the study. He returned to find the Chief staring moodily out of the window in an attitude of abstraction most unusual for him. On the sound of Desmond’s entrance he turned round.

“Bliss was found dead in his hotel in Berlin with his throat cut this morning,” he said. “A remarkable man, your friend Clubfoot!” he added.

Desmond whistled. Then, with a shade of anxiety in his voice, he added: “I hope you’ll be cautious for a bit, sir!”

The Chief laughed dryly. “The warning applies to you with stronger force, young fellow,” he retorted. “Bliss’s messenger left Berlin for Brussels last night *with the packet*, as the message puts it. If only he isn’t followed! . . .”

“If only he isn’t followed! . . .” The Chief’s phrase accompanied Desmond across the North Sea. The wheels of the Pullman hammered it out as the boat train bore him swiftly to the Channel shores, and it resounded in the rhythmic thudding of the waves against the sides of the Ostend packet. He had a mental picture of the unknown messenger being whirled across Germany, even as he was speeding over land and sea, towards that enigmatical point of contact, Box A, at the Flora Theatre in Brussels.

“If only he isn’t followed! . . .” The phrase recurred to Desmond as the Brussels train pulled out of Ostend’s shabby station. Had they really eluded the long grasp of the man of might and mystery? If not, at what stage would he intervene? Would he interpose his massy bulk between the two emissaries speeding towards one another to meet? Or would he let contact be established and, once made, break it? . . .

It was satisfactory to know, at any rate, Desmond reflected, that, so far as his experienced eye could detect, he had not been shadowed since leaving London. That he could set his mind similarly at rest about the man he was to meet! In the square outside the Brussels terminus the red Minerva car was waiting, and its driver, a button-nosed cockney with a surprising bilingual gift, showed his recognition of the password by the cheeriest of smiles.

Desmond drove to the Flora at once, though it was only four o’clock. To his great satisfaction, for he wished to make a reconnaissance, he found that a matinée was in progress. He was not in the theatre for more than

twenty minutes, and he spent the remainder of the afternoon on the field of Waterloo. Visits to La Haye Sainte and Hougomont and the attempt to snatch from their rather mournful atmosphere something of that mighty clash of arms effectively took his thoughts off the work before him.

In reality, however, he was looking forward with the keenest relish to the surprises of the evening. He dined well but wisely at the “Filet de Bœuf,” and the half-pint of champagne, which was his modest allowance, seemed to quicken in him that lurking delight in adventure which had first drawn him towards the Secret Service.

The evening performance at the Flora was billed to begin at nine o’clock, but when towards that hour, the ouvreuse showed Desmond into Box A, the house was not half full. Comfortable-looking bourgeoisie with their wives and often their children, mugs of beer on the ledge before them, formed the bulk of the audience, and Desmond, whose thoughts were with the auditorium rather than the stage, found some amusement in observing them.

The performance had been proceeding for about half an hour and a troupe of comic acrobats were giving their turn when behind him he heard the door of the box open. He felt a thrill—the Unknown had arrived. He heard the wheezy voice of the ouvreuse: “Voici, Madame! Merci, Madame!” the door swung to with a click and, as he turned, Desmond found himself facing a girl.

She was in evening dress, which, after the fashion of women at theatres on the Continent, she was wearing with a large

black hat. Petite and dainty, from the nape of her neck almost to her feet she was swathed in a long Spanish shawl, white, on which huge crimson flowers were embroidered, with a deep silken fringe.

“Madame, je regrette . . .”

Desmond stood up. The girl’s arrival was most untimely. At any moment now the messenger might appear. Seemingly, she had mistaken the box. Yet the grim old ouvreuse had let her in. She was a pretty girl, about twenty-five, he judged, and her dark eyes, with their curling lashes, the smooth curve of her cheek, were admirable.

The band was playing an interminable quick-step, to which the tumblers performed their tricks and contortions. The girl did not advance into the box, but remained in the half-light at the back.

“I demand a thousand pardons, Monsieur,” she murmured in French from the back of the box. “I was to have met some . . . friends who have not yet arrived. If I might remain a little at the back of the box. It is impossible to wait in the promenade!”

“Je vous en prie, Madame!” said Desmond politely, and advanced to the front of the box to fetch a chair. But the next moment he had stepped swiftly back from the red velvet ramp and remained rooted where he stood, staring, staring . . .

In the opposite box, with a party of men, Clubfoot was seated. He occupied the place of honour in the centre of the box, big, burly, and determined. With an opera-glass he was slowly sweeping the stalls.

“Damnation!” Desmond swore aloud. He had forgotten all about the girl behind him. Clubfoot had forestalled the messenger, then, and had come to see the transfer effected. It was ten o’clock already. What *had* happened to Bliss’s man?
. . .

“You are an Englishman, aren’t you?” The girl’s voice, the voice of an educated Englishwoman, broke in upon his meditation. He swung round. “I beg your pardon for swearing just now,” he answered in English. “I’m afraid I forgot about you!” He cast a swift glance at the box opposite.

The girl laughed. “You speak French so well that I should never have taken you for an Englishman,” she said.

“And, apart from your accent, I was convinced from your appearance that you were a Parisian,” retorted Desmond gallantly. He kept back in the shadow as much as possible.

Few women are proof against compliments on their good taste. The girl flushed with appreciation.

“Are you from London?” she asked.

Desmond looked at her quickly. An incredible suspicion had dawned upon him. What if Bliss’s messenger were a woman? There was no reason why it should not be. Nothing had been said about the messenger being a man.

“Yes,” he answered tensely.

The girl was at the mirror on the side of the box arranging her hat.

“*Do you know the Albany?*” she said.

The question was uttered casually. Like a flash the reply came back: “*From the Mansion to Vigo Street!*”

The girl whipped round, one hand beneath her enveloping shawl.

“Thank God!” she whispered. “Quick! Take them!”

“Be careful!”

Desmond gripped her hand and drew her back into the dim recesses of the box. He could see that Clubfoot, facing them across the auditorium, now had his glasses focussed in their direction.

“They’re watching us,” the young man whispered to the girl. “Pass them to me behind your back!”

A heavy packet, wrapped in soft chamois leather, about the size of a cigar-box, was thrust into his outstretched hand. It was too large for any pocket of his suit, so Desmond slipped it into the pocket of his grey tweed overcoat, which he carried on his arm.

“I was . . . *scared!*” the girl murmured. “Bliss told me that an Englishman would meet me, and I thought,

when I saw you, that I had got into the wrong box. I didn't dare go out into the promenade again on account of the man outside . . .”

“You were followed here?”

The girl nodded. “All the way from Berlin. I thought I had given him the slip at the station here, but, if I did, he evidently picked up my trail again.”

“What's he like, this man who shadowed you?”

“A young man, slim and fair. He has a long white scar on his face and . . .”

“H-sst!”

Desmond pressed her arm. The handle of the box door was being slowly turned. They drew back behind the door as it opened. Then in the mirror hanging on the velvet tapestry of the opposite wall Desmond saw a face, bloodless and crafty, barred with a livid cicatrice, the face of Heinrich, Clubfoot's aide. He, on his side, must have seen Desmond mirrored in the glass, for he gasped audibly. The face disappeared.

“He's gone to warn the others!” Desmond whispered. He glanced across the house. “And Clubfoot's left his box. If only this turn would finish! They wouldn't dare to attack us when the lights are up . . .”

But the tumblers were the star turn, the top of the bill. With shrill cries, to the lilt of that never-ending quick-step, they

bounced and whirled across the stage, working up to their grand climax.

Desmond turned to the girl. “Are you game for a dash?” he demanded.

He plucked the door wide. The corridor was deserted. Behind them, as they stepped quickly outside, the theatre now rang with the applause that marked the fall of the curtain.

Desmond, the girl behind him, darted softly down a staircase marked “Sortie d’Incendie” in red lights, that stood almost opposite the box door. They descended unmolested and Desmond congratulated himself on his forethought in having made that preliminary reconnaissance as he pushed outwards the emergency door at the foot of the flight.

In the street without, by the side of the theatre, the red Minerva waited. Desmond thrust the girl inside, sprang in after her, the self-starter whirled, the engine throbbed, and they glided out into the broad and brightly lighted avenues of Brussels.

CHAPTER XIX

A FLIGHT AND WHAT CAME OF IT

From the barrier of the aerodrome, where the Minerva pulled up, Desmond could see the machine destined for their night journey. What a puny thing it looked, stranded there, forlorn and solitary, in the centre of the vast open space swept by the glare of the lights of the night landing-station and surrounded by the long, low sheds whose roofs were now silvered by the effulgence of the moon!

On their way to the flying-field the girl had told Desmond her history. Her name was Mary Brewster, and for two years she had been acting as confidential secretary to the head of one of the British missions in Berlin. Her General had recommended her to Bliss as a trustworthy German-speaking messenger, and though she was fully aware of the danger of the mission, she had jumped at the chance of a trip home at Government expense.

She was a funny little girl, Desmond decided. Her work in Berlin had given her some insight into the workings of the Secret Service, and the grave seriousness with which she took her mission amused Desmond, grown blasé in eight years' experience of its ways. Her very conscientiousness made her profoundly suspicious—even of Desmond at first; and she subjected him to a prolonged cross-examination as to the *bona fides* of the chauffeur.

When the last-named, on their arrival at the aerodrome, went off in search of the pilot, the girl wanted to know whether he was sure that the aviator was to be trusted.

“My dear child,” said Desmond, laughing, “that’s not my responsibility. It’s the Chief’s. Each of us has his job in this show. The chauffeur’s is to bring me alongside the aeroplane and hand me over to the pilot . . .”

As he spoke they saw a hooded and muffled figure detach itself from the knot of mechanics gathered about the plane. It proved to be the pilot, a swarthy young man, to judge by as much as his helmet disclosed of his features, short and stocky, in leather flying-kit. He came up with the chauffeur to the car.

“You’re my passenger, I think,” he said to Desmond.
“We’re all ready for you!”

He shot an enquiring glance at the girl. Desmond remarked that she was to accompany them on their journey. The pilot seemed put out. The machine was a two-seater, he protested; and he had been warned to expect only the one passenger. Besides, the girl couldn’t travel in evening dress; she would perish of cold.

Desmond swept aside these objections. The girl, he announced with a humorous side-glance at her, would sit on his knee.

“As for the cold,” he went on, “that extra coat on your arm, which is doubtless intended for me, will do very well for her.

I've got my overcoat!"

And he tapped his ulster bulging with the packet of precious stones.

The pilot made no further comment, but led the way to the machine. Rather sullenly he helped the girl into the belted leather jerkin he had brought with him, while Desmond swung himself up the short ladder into the passenger's seat, protected by a curving shield of talc, behind the pilot.

The girl, helped from above and below, clambered after, her hat in her hand. Almost before they knew that the pilot was at the joy-stick, the propellers began to roar, the driver raised his hand, and all the world except the lucent moon and the glittering stars in the wide sky above them seemed to slide away—the flares, the sheds, the trees, the twinkling lights of Brussels in the distance.

Desmond gave a little sigh. "Safe!" he murmured, and patted that comforting bulge in his overcoat.

They had, indeed, he told himself, made a clean escape, shaken old Clubfoot right off their track. Since leaving the theatre they had seen nothing of him or of any of his men. If this were the last episode in the master spy's career, it had ended, the young man reflected, in his signal discomfiture. Desmond felt his heart swell within him as the icy night air smote his cheek and, hundreds of feet below, the dim chessboard of the Low Countries swayed and heeled over beneath the moon.

Perched demurely on his knee, the girl remained very still. Speech was impossible; the deafening roar of the propellers saw to that—but Desmond’s quick intuitiveness told him she was uneasy. Perhaps she was nervous, he told himself; night-flying is always something of an ordeal.

The channel was yet a silvery streak below them when the pilot, crouched over the wheel in front, turned and made a vague gesture with his gauntleted hand. With his huge goggles and furry helmet he looked like some gesticulating goblin. He seemed to be pointing downwards. At the same moment the rush of air increased, a long black ridge, far below at first, seemed to rise and rise at them while, with a suddenness that was pain, the roar of the propellers abruptly ceased.

“Engine missing!”—the pilot’s voice came to them in a muffled roar—“hang on! Forced landing!”

Out of the blackness, sweeping up at them with hideous velocity, a light winked and blinked. Coughing and spluttering, the engine picked up again. Suddenly they were bumping wildly over the fleeting ground past a handful of stunted trees and bushes and, in hard, black silhouette against the moon, the dark shapes of some scattered houses.

The engine was shut off again and they careered to a standstill, the machine trembling to the gentle jar of the earth. The pilot heaved himself up in his cockpit and pushed the goggles back from his eyes.

“Sorry,” he said, and began some technical explanation to which Desmond Okewood paid no attention. His thoughts were busy with the next step. He did not relish the idea of wandering about the country-side at dead of night with some hundreds of thousands of pounds’ worth of jewels in his overcoat pocket. He looked at his watch. Its hands marked ten minutes to one on the luminous dial.

“Have you any idea where we are?” Desmond asked. “I am positive,” he added, “that I saw a light as we were planing down, but there’s no sign of it now.”

The pilot, who had jumped down and was fussing with the landing-wheels, turned round.

“Distance is very deceptive at night,” he said. “That light is probably five or six miles away. It’s devilish fortunate,” he went on. “I know exactly where we are. This is the War Office rifle ground at Stoke Bay, about six miles out of Lympne. I was at Dover during the war and know the whole of this country like my pocket. So, when the engine started petering out over the Channel just now, I steered straight for this spot.”

“How long is it going to take you to put things right?” asked Desmond.

The pilot shook his head sadly at the plane. “Can’t say. At any rate, I’ll never get up here again in the dark. We’d break our necks most likely. You’ll have to go on to London in the morning.”

Desmond swore under his breath. It seemed to him that the airman was taking things very lightly.

“That’s all very well,” he remarked with some heat. “But I’m on duty, and it is essential that I should get on to town without delay. And in any case Miss Brewster can’t spend the night in the open, you know. What are we going to do about it? Isn’t there anybody we can knock up?”

“It’s just occurred to me,” answered the pilot, wiping his hands on a wisp of cotton waste, “that I know a fellow who lives close at hand. Magnus is his name, a very sound chap. He has a bungalow a piece down the beach road. We’ll knock him up. I’ve no doubt when we’ve explained things to him he’ll be pleased to give us a shake-down for the night. He’s on the telephone, too. Just let me turn off the juice!”

He clambered back into the cockpit and busied himself with the engine. Desmond and Miss Brewster alighted. Suddenly the former felt his sleeve plucked. He turned round to find Mary Brewster’s big eyes staring at him. With an upward glance at the machine, she drew her companion unobtrusively aside.

“Don’t trust him!” she whispered. “He’s . . . he’s got a dishonest face! How do you know that this landing isn’t a plant? He cut off the engine on purpose; I’m sure he did. He meant to land here all along. Look at the ground! It’s perfectly smooth. It’s an aerodrome . . .”

“Aerodrome?” broke in the pilot. He had descended from the machine and was standing behind them. “Of course it’s an

aerodrome, an experimental ground. That's why I steered for it."

Desmond looked at him. Certainly the fellow had a shifty eye. Now that he regarded the pilot more closely, he noticed that he seemed to be labouring under some excitement. The man saw that the other had remarked his distress.

"It's a nervy business, landing in the dark!" he was quick to explain.

Desmond felt that his suspicions were ungenerous. He knew how airmen loathe night-flying.

"You made a devilish good landing!" he said. "I'm afraid you must have thought us very unappreciative. Now, what about your friend Magnus?"

The girl said no more and they set off in silence across the moonlit grass. In front of them a black shape loomed immensely out of the darkness. As they drew nearer, Desmond saw, to his astonishment, that it was an aeroplane, a huge machine with metal wings on which the moonbeams glinted.

Desmond stopped. "What's that plane doing here?" he demanded.

The pilot shrugged his shoulders. "They're trying out machines all the time," he replied. "We're getting too much to the left," he added. "We want to bear more to the right or we'll miss the gate!"

But Desmond was walking in the direction of the machine.

“I say!” the pilot called out. “They don’t like strangers monkeying about with . . .”

Desmond heard no more. He had reached the machine. Mary Brewster was just behind him. It was a tremendous machine and its immense spread of wing quite dwarfed them. A blast of warm air smote them on the cheeks.

“Why,” cried Desmond, “the engine’s warm. This machine has been out this very night . . .”

He turned swiftly round to the girl. As his eyes fell on her face, it blanched with terror.

“Behind you! . . .” she gasped; but, before he had time to defend himself, a cloth fell across his face from the back and was pulled taut, an iron grip clutched his throat and he was borne to the ground. A guttural voice said close to his ear: “A sound and I blow out your brains!”

Out of the darkness rang a woman’s scream.

CHAPTER XX

IN WHICH MISS MARY BREWSTER SPEAKS HER MIND

Blind and helpless, gagged and bound, his eyes bandaged, Desmond felt himself lifted up and carried swiftly along. Presently he heard the sound of the sea and his bearers' feet grinding on shingle. Then through his bandage he was conscious of a brilliant light. He was flung violently down and the cloth removed from his face.

Silhouetted against the garish light of an acetylene hurricane lamp in the cheaply furnished living-room of a seaside bungalow, Clubfoot stood before him. A hideous tweed cap pulled down until it rested on the tips of his large projecting ears lent him a horribly grotesque appearance. He looked like a great ape dressed in man's clothes. Mary Brewster, trussed up even as Desmond was, reclined in a chair. She had lost her hat and her soft brown hair was disordered by the wind. Her small face, pale and piquant, was enigmatic in its absolute serenity.

"He has not got the jewels, either, Herr Doktor!" said a voice.

Desmond could not turn to see the speaker. He glanced down at the pocket of his overcoat where the packet had been. The parcel had vanished. It had certainly been there when they

had set out to walk to the bungalow. Had that rascally pilot stolen it? It didn't matter much now what had become of it.

Clubfoot snarled out an order in German. Rough hands brutally searched the Englishman's clothes. Clubfoot looked on impassively.

"Nothing!" reported the voice.

"It must be there!" thundered Grundt, "unless one of you has stolen it."

"The Herr Doktor was himself present when we seized the Englishman," the voice protested. "The Herr Doktor knows that nothing was found."

"Ungag them!" ordered Clubfoot. "And clear out! Warn the pilot to have the machine ready for instant departure!"

The order was obeyed, a door was softly closed, and Desmond nerved himself to face what he divined was to be the crucial ordeal of his career. Never had he been in so tight a place. It wanted hours to daylight, and he was bound and helpless in a lonely district in the hands of a ruthless and remorseless enemy.

"A false trail, eh?" said Grundt slowly, his nostrils twitching ominously. "You'd play tricks with me, would you, you dog? Do you know what I'm going to do with you, Okewood? I'm going to kill you, yes, and the girl as well!"

Desmond felt his throat grow dry. "Not the girl," he said in a low voice. "She's not even of the Service, Grundt!"

“It shall be a lesson to her to mind the company she keeps!” said Grundt grimly, and produced an automatic from his pocket. He bent to examine the magazine. Slowly he raised the pistol.

Then the girl spoke. “I shouldn’t do anything hasty!” she said. “Kill us and your career is at an end. You speak of retiring voluntarily. One shot and your retirement will be compulsory. And Stauber takes your place!”

Clubfoot recoiled. “Stauber!” he muttered, frowning.

“You’ve made a mess of things in England, Grundt,” the girl continued serenely. “Your employers, the big industrialists, granted you this last chance. It rests with you whether you give your employers your own version of this affair, or whether they take it from the English newspapers. Do you understand me?”

Clubfoot stared at her like a man hypnotized.

In the same business-like manner Mary Brewster proceeded: “Kill us and there’ll be such a rumpus that the echoes of it are bound to reach Germany. You can’t suppress murder in England, Grundt. You’ve missed your chance of getting the jewels, and what you’ve got to do now is to put up the best explanation you can. I know that you have the reputation of being the man that commands success. If you touch us, that reputation is gone forever, for, you can take it from me, the whole story, the true story, will then come out and you’ll be saddled with the greatest failure of your career. And your rival, Stauber, gets your job . . .”

“That Schafskopf!” muttered Grundt. He seemed half dazed by the vigour of the girl’s onslaught. Then, “What have you done with the jewels?” he roared suddenly, recovering himself.

“They’re out of your reach!” said Mary Brewster.

“But you’re not!” snarled Clubfoot. “And you shall tell me where they are. Herr Gott! You’re not the first woman whose tongue I’ve loosened!”

But it seemed to Desmond that, for all his bluster, much of Clubfoot’s wonted assurance had disappeared.

The girl never flinched. “Make the best of a bad job, Grundt,” she said. “Leave things as they are and return to Germany and you will hear no word from us to dispute or disprove any story you like to tell those who sent you. I repeat: You can kill us, you can torture us, but you’ll never recover the jewels. Make up your mind to that and go—while you can!”

The hairy hand that clutched the pistol faltered and slowly dropped to the cripple’s side. Of a sudden he seemed to have grown older. For a full minute he stood and glowered at Desmond—the girl he ignored. As the two men faced each other, it seemed to the Englishman as though the scroll of the years were unrolled and that, like him, Grundt was telling over in his mind the many bouts which these two had fought out between them. Then slowly, listlessly, the great hand went up and he thrust the Browning into his breast pocket.

“I told your Chief, Okewood,” he said in his deep, stern voice, “that this would be my last case. Though he has taken this trick, I think I may let my decision stand. But tell him this from me—that, though he has gained this trick, he has not won the game. The cards have been against me throughout. I have played a losing hand, dealt me by the blinded, besotted fools”—his voice hissed with anger—“who, in overthrowing my master, destroyed our country. But do not forget that in politics nothing is stable, that the enemies of to-day may be the friends of to-morrow, and vice versa, Okewood—vice versa!”

He broke off, and for an instant the dark, expressive eyes rested on the young man’s face.

“Do not fall into the error of believing that I am grown sentimental in my old age, my young friend,” he resumed. “I have always been a Realpolitiker, and in this instance I have bowed my head to the unanswerable logic of your companion just as in different circumstances, should my interest, or the interest of those I serve, have required it, I should have had no hesitation in putting the pair of you to death. Your luck is in to-night, Herr Major. You can tell your Chief that you owe your life to a woman’s tongue!”

On that he turned and left them, and limped, a lonely defiant figure, to the door, where the night received him and swallowed him up.

“My dear,” cried Desmond when the door had closed behind him, “you’re a marvel! In all the years I’ve known him such a thing has never happened before. You beat

him fair and square! It was like a miracle the way you laid him low! How on earth did you come to think of it?"

"The man's a mass of vanity like the rest of you," little Miss Brewster ejaculated scornfully. "A little knowledge, a little intuition, a little bluff"—she smiled rather wanly. "You men take each other too seriously, anyway . . ."

"But what has become of the chamois leather packet with the jewels?" demanded Desmond.

"It is in a rabbit-hole by that German aeroplane," said Miss Brewster. "When you would not heed my warning about that odious-looking pilot, I took the packet out of your overcoat pocket—I thought the jewels would be safer with me than with you. And as that man attacked you from behind, I let the packet slide into a rabbit-hole at my feet and they saw nothing in the dark. It seemed to me it was time I took charge. They'll never find that packet in the dark. But I know the spot, and when it's light and we're free, we'll . . ."

Her head drooped suddenly forward. She had fainted. Out of the night resounded, loud and challenging, the roar of propellers . . .

At noon next day the Chief received Desmond Okewood and Mary Brewster. They found Francis Okewood in the office with a grey-haired man of distinguished appearance who was in the last stage of restless anxiety. It was to him that the Chief, having received it from the hands of Mary Brewster, presented the chamois leather packet sodden with damp and

stained with Kentish marl. With trembling hands he examined the seal, and, having found it intact, muttered a broken phrase of thanks and fairly bolted from the room, carrying the packet under his arm. The Chief shook his head and laughed.

“Cabinet Ministers have great responsibilities,” he remarked, “only they are too fond of shoving them off on other people’s shoulders. And now, Miss Brewster, to hear your story.”

But Mary Brewster, who had faced The Man with the Clubfoot unabashed, was tongue-tied in the Chief’s rather forbidding presence. It was Desmond who ultimately narrated their adventures of the night ending with their release at dawn by an astonished fisherman who, on his way to inspect his lobster pots, had answered Desmond’s cries for help.

“They drugged and kidnapped the pilot I had engaged for you,” the Chief said after Miss Brewster had taken her leave, “and slipped their man in his place. I have here a telegram from Brussels about it. There’s been a leakage somewhere which,” he added grimly “is being investigated. In the mean time, thanks to you, Okewood, and to this young lady, with whom I intend to hold some converse regarding her future career, we’re rid, it would seem—for the present at any rate—of Clubfoot and his gang.”

His manner grew reflective. “I wonder,” he said, “when and where we shall see him again!”

A silence fell on the three men. Each felt that a fourth was present, invisible save in the mind's eye—a vast figure of a man who, with misshapen foot drawn up beside him, leaned on his crutch-stick and glared at them defiance from savage, cruel eyes . . .

THE END

Transcriber's Notes

- Copyright notice provided as in the original—this e-text is public domain in the country of publication.
- Silently corrected palpable typos; left non-standard spellings and dialect unchanged.
- In the text versions, delimited italics text in _underscores_ (the HTML version reproduces the font form of the printed book.)

[The end of *Clubfoot the Avenger* by Valentine Williams]