

Sylvia's Secret

by Robert Machray
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CHAPTER XXIII.

More of the Secret.

BY this time Max Hamilton, as he listened to the extraordinary statements of Bertha Schmidt, had lost any idea he had held that she was a servant or of the servant class; he saw that in her way she was a remarkable woman, with a good deal of education and no little natural acuteness; that she had acted as maid to Sylvia Chase had been part of a scheme—a detail in the vast plans of German espionage in England; she had been playing a part which had been assigned to her by her superiors. Still, he was utterly unprepared for and thoroughly surprised by what she now proceeded to reveal to him.

"Karl Hollander, whom you know as Captain Charles Hollander," she continued, "had a grandfather, whose name also was Karl Hollander; he was an officer in the Prussian army. Rather more than fifty years ago this man came to England, and settled down as a naturalized Englishman in London; his naturalization was nothing but a cloak, for in reality he was a German secret agent, and his business was to organize a system of espionage for Great Britain, just as it had been that of another ex-officer of Prussia a few years earlier with regard to France.

"That Karl Hollander died, but he had a son, also named Karl, but Englished into Charles, whom he had brought up to follow in his footsteps and go on with the work he had been doing for Germany in your country. This second Karl had been at both English and German schools; he had the English ways; it was not difficult to take him for an Englishman, though he had the German fairness of hair and complexion. He married, however, a German lady, who belonged to the family of the Von Nordheims—she was a cousin of the present Graf Von Nordheim."

"Who was the employer of your mistress, Sylvia Chase?" asked Max.

"Yes, the same," replied Bertha.

"Karl Hollander the third, that is, Captain Hollander, was their son?"

"He is the only child of the second Karl and of that lady," was the answer. "The second Karl went a step further in the course of duplicity and deception that was being pursued with respect to the English, for he placed his son, the man you know, in your army, having first trained him as a German secret agent, even as he himself had been trained by his own father. He went further still, for he suggested that the young officer, his son, should pretend to enter your secret service—"

"He is a member of the British secret service, I have always understood," Max interrupted her.

"Yes, he is, but it is only a pretence, a shield, a cover," rejoined Bertha, "under the protection of which he carries on with impunity his real business. Now and again they allowed him to impart some information to the British Intelligence Department of your army; it was nothing of real value, but was of sufficient apparent importance to lend colour to his being an efficient member of your secret service."

"Who are 'they?'" Max inquired, again recalling the phrase the woman had employed when told of the death of her mistress by Villiers Chase when the latter, Superintendent Johnson and himself had called at Sylvia's flat on the night of the discovery of the murder. "You said just now that 'they allowed' Hollander to impart some information."

"They are the heads of the German secret service in Berlin," said Bertha. "I do not know who they are, but Cap-

tain Hollander does. He is under their orders, but they have the greatest confidence in him, as he has been very successful. As I told you, he is an exceedingly clever man, and as daring as he is clever. It was he who obtained the plans of the new gun."

Max listened in a kind of stupefaction; what this woman had told him was all so astounding! Yet he could not doubt that she was speaking the truth—her manner, her accents declared it most emphatically. It seemed an improbable, almost an impossible tale, but Max knew that it was just such tales that were always proving truth to be stranger than fiction. What diabolical ingenuity and cleverness these Hollanders had shown; how little had they been suspected!

"How is it that you know all this?" he asked, in wonder rather than doubt.

"In different ways," she responded, frankly. "I need not tell you them, but I may point out that I had to know a good deal so as to watch fraulein, my mistress, effectively, and frequently I heard him discussing this thing and that with her. Besides, I had been in our secret service for many years, and had learned much."

"Captain Hollander killed your mistress?"

YES; he had his orders! He had to kill her, to shut her mouth for ever. You heard him say that it was necessary, and from his point of view it was necessary. 'They' commanded him to silence her."

"They!—you mean the people in Berlin to whom you referred a moment ago?"

"Yes, the heads in Berlin. It was necessary from their point of view that she should die."

"She knew too much?"

"It was not that, not quite!"

"How did she procure information for Hollander? How was she of use to him as a spy?" Max asked.

"You know her brother, Captain Villiers Chase?"

"You know that I do," said Max.

"It was principally through her brother that she was of use to Karl Hollander," said Bertha.

"Through Villiers!" exclaimed Max, incredulously.

"Yes through him, though I do not think that he was aware of the manner in which she used what he told her," said Bertha. "He was greatly attached to her—much more than she was to him; she was a cold woman, my mistress, with very little affection for anybody, and she was clever—and he is not; he is a dull, heavy man, and she twisted him round her finger with the greatest ease."

"Still—I don't understand—"

"Under the pretext of getting him to help her with the articles she wrote for reviews and journals she extracted much important information from him, and she had the run of his room in the War Office and of his private rooms. Now do you understand?" Bertha asked.

Max nodded assent; everything was becoming plain and clear to him.

"And Villiers is innocent?" he asked.

"That is my impression," she replied. "The fraulein stole the drafts, the plans of the new gun from her brother's safe, and gave them to Hollander."

"But the safe would be locked surely!"

"How exactly she did it I do not know, but that is the manner in which the plans were obtained by her," said Bertha. "I heard something of it, but not all. Villiers was not an accomplice, except in so far as his stupidity and his love for her made him one."

"I see," said Max. "Poor Villiers!"

"I said to you that my mistress was

a cold woman, and it was true, yet she was not without some natural feeling for her brother, and she had a great deal of pride. She was afraid after taking the plans that her brother must be suspected of having betrayed the secret of the new gun, for a searching inquiry, she believed, could not but lead to his being compromised; the others who were in the secret were, with the exception of the inventor, all too high-placed—they were generals and ministers and above suspicion. They preyed on her mind. In a word, she was beginning to repent of what she had done; she grew timid and fearful; she told Hollander that she would work with him no more, and even threatened to unmask him. That was how it came about," said Bertha, with a sigh. "Her death, I mean," she added.

"She repented of her treachery!"

"Yes, and she was afraid, too; afraid for her brother—and also in a measure for herself. Towards the end she changed greatly, and Hollander was in terror lest she should carry out her threat to unmask him. He laid the matter before the heads in Berlin, and they said she must be got out of the way—and so he killed her."

"You knew that at the time?"

"I knew that it was he who had killed her, but I did not know that he was to kill her. I was sorry, too, when I knew of her death, for I got on well with her and rather liked her," said Bertha, quietly.

"How was it that she became associated with Hollander?" asked Max.

"You will remember that I told you his mother was a relative of the Von Nordheims; he met the fraulein when she was acting as governess to the Von Nordheim children, and came to know her intimately. He established some sort of ascendancy over her."

"Perhaps he made love to her," suggested Max.

"No, no," said Bertha. "There was nothing of that kind between them—I am certain of it! However it was, she agreed to become a secret agent in the interests of Germany, but towards the end, as I have just said, she repented. I do not know that there is anything more to tell you," she said, after a moment's silence.

IT all seemed simple enough now, Max thought, piecing together what he had heard; all was explained. Then he asked the woman a question.

"Why have you told me those things?" he inquired.

"So that you will be able to deal with Hollander when you and he are in England again. He cannot know that I have told you everything or even anything; you are armed against him," said Bertha, "with the knowledge which I have given you, and he will be in your power. You can do with him what you will, but be sure and consult your own safety."

"I understand," said Max.

"He is your enemy—and now he is mine," she added. "By some means, which I am not acquainted with, he caused you to come here to Treves, and it was through him that you were arrested as a spy."

"Through Hollander!" Max exclaimed.

"Yes; he had you watched from the time you left London till the moment of your arrest. You will remember I warned you; I had heard something. Then you snatched little Fritz from death, and I determined to help you." She did not tell him of her fruitless appeal to Hollander. "Now you are out of prison, and to-night you shall cross the frontier and so get back to London."

She looked at him thoughtfully, and was about to speak again, but she changed her mind and left him to his

own reflections for some time. Afterwards she brought him food, and told him that as her boy was coming to the house about five o'clock, an hour that was close at hand, she must shut him in the cupboard hidden behind the clothes in the wardrobe till the child was asleep for the night. Then she was to bring him the clothes of a civilian, and together they were to set out.

"There will be nearly fourteen miles to walk," she said.

"Won't it be too much for you?" asked Max.

"No," she assured him; "I am very strong. It would be easy walking but for the snow. Will it not be too much for you after being shut up so long?"

But Max would not entertain the notion for an instant. Was he not marching to freedom—and all that was dear to him? And did he not have a great duty, an imperative public duty, to perform? The duty of unmasking a traitor and of having him punished? He did not know how much Hollander owed to him personally. Something of this he said to Bertha Schmidt, and again she warned him to be on his guard with respect to Hollander.

AFTER he had spent some weary hours in the closeness and darkness of the hidden cupboard, Bertha Schmidt came to him and let him out of it. She had fetched some clothes, and told him to put them on, while she got some food ready for their journey. Taking off Herman's uniform, he attired himself in the garments she had provided, and found they fitted fairly well; he guessed they had belonged to Bertha's husband who must have been a tall man. A little after nine o'clock he and Bertha left the house. Snow was still falling, but not in such thick and heavy flakes as on the preceding evening; the night was dark, and once they had got away from Treves and its lamps, it was blackness itself.

Not that the intense darkness seemed to give Bertha any trouble; she moved on in front of Max without pause or hesitation for a couple of hours along a narrow road, on which the snow had evidently been trodden or beaten down to some extent. Then as they neared a place in which some lights were burning, she bade him halt while she went forward to reconnoitre. Presently she returned, and whispering to him that a picket was stationed there, moved on again, but in a northerly direction; hitherto they had been travelling almost due east. But here was no path, and the snow was deep, yet they struggled on and reached a narrow road similar to that by which they had left Treves.

"Two hours more, and we will gain the frontier near Echernach," she said. "Are you tired?" He protested he was not, and asked if she was, but the indomitable woman merely shrugged her shoulders, and set out more vigorously.

On and on they walked; after a long time, as it seemed to Max, Bertha diverged from the narrow road, and struck off into a forest; on she went again, though Max saw or rather felt no path under his feet—only soft deep snow through which he plunged after her, but as before she never was uncertain of her way. At length they came into a clearer space; they had emerged from the forest. Now she paused and listened, but no sound broke the all-enfolding stillness save that of running water.

"It is the river Sure," she told him; "it is the frontier, and there is no sign of the soldiers here; they are higher up near the bridge into Echernach. Once across the stream, and you are safe!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

In London Again.

HOPE to reach London tomorrow evening, but tell nobody, Max."

Such was the message contained in a telegram which was received by Peggy Willoughby one afternoon, as she was issuing from the house in St. Anton's Avenue.

When the despatch was handed to