

met with a proposal to marry her at once. Polly was quite aware that this was a piece of imprudence; that she had not money enough yet put by with which to start housekeeping, and it was simply preposterous to suppose Dick had any reserve fund of this nature; that their position at the best would be extremely precarious, terminating of course as soon as the house was tenanted again. But Dick was obstinate, he argued that there were always plenty of houses to let in Manchester, and that if he once got a start in this sort of employment he should never be out of a job, and so after they had quarrelled and argued over the subject for some weeks Polly eventually gave in, and consented to become Mrs. Tarrant during the approaching Easter week. It was all over at last, Miss Phybbs had become Mrs. Tarrant, and Polly, having taken care to obtain the consent of the landlord, in the absence of her master, Dick was duly installed in the berth he coveted, and combined the post of caretaker of Dr. Lynden's house with his official duties.

After poring some days over the papers he had taken from the Doctor's laboratory, Sergeant Evans felt pretty sure that he had got to the bottom of the Doctor's mysterious occupation.

"I've heard of such a thing," he muttered, "Ah, heard it talked about often since this war began, but I never much believed in it. I've been told often that England is full of Russian spies, and I have very little doubt that the Doctor is one of them, and a top sawyer at the game. All those papers I took away from his laboratory mean that, if they mean anything, but I don't know what use we could make of it, even if I could prove it for one thing, and if we could catch him for another. I have never attempted to follow him up since he left, but he's probably well abroad by this time. I don't know what they'd do with a Russian spy, even if you took him red-handed. Out there, in the Crimea, they shoot such vermin I believe, but we couldn't do that here; nor do I believe that we could legally hang him. Ah, well, he's gone, and there's no more to be said about it. I take it, though, I could make it pretty hot for some of his correspondents if I only knew their names. They are employes in Government offices, I should fancy, many of them, and surely they are liable to punishment. The lady of the roses is the only one I know by sight, and further than that she came from London, I know nothing about her. He must have paid well, but even then, she doesn't look the sort to mix herself up in such a dirty business. That woman is a real lady, and holding her head pretty high too, ah well! given a passion for dress and a craving to take a place in the world, and there's no saying what a woman won't do. Who is she? She's a wedding ring on her finger. I wonder what her husband is! That fellow's most likely high up in the War Office, the Foreign Office, the Treasury or something, and selling Government information to pay for his wife's extravagance, dress and display," continued Sergeant Evans, shaking his head sagaciously. "Ah, dress and display! what a lot of domestic fire-sides you have burst up to be sure. It don't seem to matter a deal whether the man's on a clerk's stool at a hundred a year, or whether he's in the Director's parlour at five thousand. Well, this is all very pretty theory, but it ain't evidence. I've got the clue in my hand, it wouldn't be difficult to shadow that lady home, and then find out all about them; it's a beautiful case, it's a sin to give it up, it's just lovely, but then I'm not engaged in it.

"No," continued the Sergeant, "when people want one thing it's no use giving them another. When people are looking for the North Pole it ain't a bit of use sending 'em a lot of valuable information about Central Africa. Scotland Yard wants a coiner; well, I can only say we don't happen to have the article on hand at present. Scotland Yard must catch him themselves. As for Lynden, he'd doubtless his own reasons for making a bolt of it, though as far as I actually know there was no cause for his going. It's a very pretty puzzle, and I shall always feel sorry that the working it out didn't fall into my hands professionally. As for this Tarrant, how we came to take such a thickhead as that I can't think. I should recom-

mend the Chief to get rid of him at the first opportunity; and if I know anything about the lazy, good for nothing hound, he won't have to wait long for that."

CHAPTER XXII.—"EASTER EGGS."

The expedition that Byng and Brydon had planned and of which the ride to Batchi Serai had been only the forerunner, was now on the point of departure. There were half-a-dozen of them altogether, and they were taking with them a cart drawn by two stout ponies, which conveyed a bell tent for themselves, and a picket tent for their servants, besides rugs and other impedimenta. They were going, as Byng laughingly remarked, like all other fashionable people, into the country for Easter. They had got a week's leave, and the programme was to make their way up to Simpherpol by easy marches, and see as much as they could of that and any other towns before their return. They were to camp out, and so be thoroughly independent of hotels, while as for provisions, there would be no difficulty whatever in procuring them. It was a very pretty little tour, and many of them often looked back in after days to the free life they led, and the week's fun they had when they were campaigning in Russia on their own account, when there were no Colonels or Commander-in-chief to trouble them, and the only discontented man of the half-dozen was the man who had the middle watch. It was necessary that one of them should always be on guard at night, not that they feared either attack or robbery for themselves, but there was always the chance of one or other of the ponies getting loose and straying a little from their encampment, in which case his recovery would be very problematical.

"Well, I hope you fellows will have a good time," said the Adjutant, who, with two or three of their brother officers, had congregated about the mess-room door to see the expedition start. "By the time you come back we shall, most likely, have heard something about when we are to embark for home."

"Ah, it will take a good while," rejoined Byng, "even when it's begun. Think what a lot of ships it took to bring us all here. Wonder whether they will take home the railroad! If I was shareholder I should try and sell mine at Simpherpol. Good-bye!" and with that Tom and his companions rode off.

The party were by this all old hands at camp life, the organization had been efficient, and the result was satisfactory in the extreme. As a matter of course they pitched their tent one night on the outskirts of Batchi Serai, and here they counted upon coming across Hugh Fleming and bringing him back to dine with them at least, even if they didn't bring him back altogether. They soon found that the Russians were already withdrawing their troops from the Crimea. Many regiments were on their way to cross the Steppes, indeed several of the officers who had entertained Byng and Brydon a fortnight ago were already gone; so they were informed by a grey-headed old Colonel, who told them he had fought against them at Inkermann, and had served in Sebastopol from that day to its fall. From him they learnt that Mademoiselle Ivanhoff and the English officer were also amongst those who had left the place. Where they had gone to he didn't know.

"We have collected men," he said, "in the Chersonese from all parts of the empire; there was no keeping count of where they came from, any more than there is of where they are going to. My Corps came from Moscow. They are on their way back to St. Petersburg, and I follow them tomorrow. Half of them we have left round Sebastopol, and though the weather is fine, the rest have a weary march across the Steppes before them. You are fortunate, gentlemen, your ships will carry you home."

"It's a rum go," said Brydon, after they had said farewell to the Russian Colonel, "but I can't believe but what Hugh Fleming might have rejoined us at any time in the past month if he had wished to."

Byng assented shortly. He was quite of Brydon's opinion, but did not dare to discuss what he con-

sidered Hugh's weakness. It all mattered nothing to him. If Hugh chose to jilt his *fiancée* and marry this Russian girl, it was no business of his. He thought his old chum was making a grievous mistake, and that though Mademoiselle might be extremely charming to philander with, Hugh would find she didn't do as a wife.

"Of course, she's a tremendous pull," he murmured. "She's nursed him through a deuced bad bout of it, saved his life, and all that, which gives her a claim upon him, and she struck me as just the sort of woman to rivet such manacles tight. They are all condemning Hugh and calling him a fool, but very likely none of us would have come out of the thing a bit better. Men often find it difficult to escape an entanglement of this sort, when the lady holds nothing like such cards as chance dealt Mademoiselle Ivanhoff." With such reflections Byng beguiled the way back to their small encampment; he would say nothing to his companions, who, finding that Hugh was not at Batchi Serai would probably for the present dismiss him from their memories; but would take every opportunity that afforded itself of ascertaining whether Hugh had veritably left the Crimea. Mademoiselle Ivanhoff was apparently a lady of some note, and when they got up to Simpherpol he would possibly learn something definite about her movements at all events.

The whole party were all in the highest possible health and spirits, and as Byng foresaw, the strange conduct of Hugh Fleming had already faded from his companions' minds. Had they not camped on the banks of the Alma and consoled themselves for not being present at that brilliant victory by bathing in the famed stream? At length they pitched their tent in the environs of Simpherpol; though not nearly so pretty, this was much more of a town than Batchi Serai. The semi-Oriental appearance which marked the capital of the Khans was absent here. Simpherpol was emphatically a Russian town, and just now thronged with Russian officers and all that multitude of followers that an army, if stationed ever so short a time, rapidly collects round itself. The hotels, by no means numerous, were crowded, and the party rather congratulated themselves upon their own canvas habitations that made them independent. Easter was in full swing. The churches were thronged, and the bells seemed to peal continually, both day and night. Easter eggs were much in vogue, and more than one, gaily painted and beribboned, was presented to Tom and his friends. They attracted some little attention in the town, not that the British uniform had been an uncommon sight there for the last month, but they were rather a strong party, and when they first rode into the place many of the passers by turned to stare at them.

They had lounged into one of the churches the evening after their arrival, and were listening to the solemn swell of the organ in the celebration of Midnight Mass, when Byng suddenly felt his arm touched, and turning round saw a neat looking peasant girl at his elbow, throwing him a meaning glance, who slipped an Easter egg into his hand, then breaking another in her own, nodded him to do likewise, put her finger for a second on her lip, and vanished. Tom quietly made his way out of the church after his mysterious messenger, but at the door she looked back at him, frowned, shook her head, and signified unmistakeably that he was not to follow her. Then, once more making a motion with her hand as if breaking something, she darted down the street and left Byng standing in the brilliantly lighted doorway of the building. Tom crushed the egg in his hand, as it had been clearly intimated that he should do, and found, as he expected, that it contained a note, and marvelled considerably who his unknown correspondent could be, Byng proceeded to run his eye over it.

"If you have a little more strength of mind than most of your sex, take away your friend. There is no keeping flies from the honey, and once cloyed with its sweets they are powerless to help themselves. You know what I mean; your friend has fallen into the toils, and is but as wax in the hands of Marie Ivanhoff. I would wish no enemy of mine a worse fate than this. Who am I, and why do I interfere? A woman, a woman on whom in