

Nordheims were very kind to her, and she appeared to be perfectly happy with them." He addressed the last words to Peggy.

"Oh," said that young lady, "I was just turning things over in my mind, and it occurred to me that Sylvia's fate might be traced ultimately to have depended on something or some one in Germany."

Hollander shook his head.

"It is such an inexplicable murder," she said.

"Indeed, it is," he agreed, and his manner implied that it was idle to talk of it, since that was the case. Besides, he had something else to talk of—it was a mere pretext, for he had come really to see Peggy, and if opportunity favoured him to make love to her. He had by no means forgotten the special interest she had exhibited in Max Hamilton's conversation two days before as well as that she had shown with regard to the journalist himself, and he was anxious to find out, if it was possible, what that special interest might mean, particularly with respect to his own prospects.

WHAT he had to speak about was in itself a splendid pretext—so splendid that he was certain that it would not appear a pretext at all to the Willoughbys.

There was prevalent at this time, as there had been for a considerable period before, in British military circles the deepest distrust of the designs of Germany. The colossal size of her army, the menacing growth of her fleet, the vast expansion of her commerce, the magnificent development of her industries, and, what was most significant, the steady increase of her population were facts with which every one was well acquainted; what these facts might portend so far as the British Empire was concerned was not understood, except by naval and army people, who viewed them with scarcely concealed alarm.

Supreme on the continent of Europe, Germany's only real rival was Great Britain, still the greatest power in the world, and it was often said that the conquest, or at least the humiliation, of England was the real object that lay behind the enormous activities of Germany. From time to time there was a general "scare" in the Press and throughout the country over the "German Menace," but these panics had been short lived, and their cumulative effect had been to make the bulk of the population somewhat indifferent—the cry of "Wolf, wolf," was raised so frequently, and apparently with so little justification, that it came to be heard with something like contempt. But though this was the state of affairs with the majority of the public, it was not so with men like Colonel Willoughby. To him the "German Menace" was the most real thing imaginable.

It was of this that Hollander spoke. The references which had already been made to the life of Sylvia Chase in Germany made easy the passing of the conversation to the general subject of Germany, and when he began to speak of a certain rumour which had reached his ears, the subject was so interesting that Willoughby forgot, for the time at any rate, to speculate about the murder of Sylvia Chase; nor was the subject much less interesting to Mrs. Willoughby and Peggy, for they, too, through the Colonel and other army men with whom they came into constant contact, were imbued with hostility to Germany.

And if the subject was interesting, Hollander, the man who now introduced it, was also interesting—more especially because he had his own sources of information; in other words, it was tacitly understood by those "in the know" that his position on the General Staff of the British army was merely a nominal one, and that he was in reality the boldest and cleverest member of the Intelligence Department of the War Office, otherwise and more popularly known as the Secret Service.

Himself of German descent, his family had been settled in England for three generations, but it had never ceased to keep up some intercourse with its German relatives and connections. Hollander paid frequent visits to them, and it was believed

that these visits were a cloak, as it were, covering up a profound and widespread system of international espionage, of which he was the centre and the inspiration.

Naturally such things were not shouted from the housetops; they were whispered amongst service men. Colonel Willoughby, for one, knew; even Mrs. Willoughby and Peggy had more than a suspicion, and Hollander rather rose than fell in their estimation by reason of it, for they judged that his vocation was one of the utmost danger and called for all manner of fine qualities—devotion, courage, coolness, patience, foresight and a consummate skill.

"Have you heard what they are saying about the new gun?" he asked Colonel Willoughby.

There was a report current that the Army Council had adopted a new kind of cannon of great size and power. In what way it differed from the cannon then generally in use was not specified; indeed, there was a great deal of mystery about it, but it was thought that a process had been invented by which it was no longer necessary to have guns "wired."

"No," said Willoughby, with quick interest; there was that in the tone of the other which at once excited his attention.

"It is being said," Hollander continued, "that some plans of the new gun have found their way across the North Sea."

"Oh, I hope that's not true," cried the Colonel.

"I fancy it is," Hollander answered. "I heard of it in a round-about way, but for all that I think the rumour is probably true."

"We have been betrayed again, then?"

"It must be so."

"BY whom, I wonder? Surely not by one of our own countrymen!" said Willoughby, indignantly.

"It is difficult to believe that any Englishman would be a traitor!" exclaimed Peggy. "It is far more likely, is it not, that the Germans have got the plans of the new gun, if they've really got them, through some spy?"

"They have spies everywhere," said Mrs. Willoughby. "Everybody is aware of it!"

"Yes, Germans," said the Colonel. "Not Englishmen!"

As he spoke in an almost fierce voice, Max Hamilton entered the drawing-room.

"Have you any news?" asked Peggy, as she shook hands with him.

"About the murder?" he asked, and as she nodded assent he went on, "There's nothing, I believe, that's not in the evening papers."

"We have seen them; they tell us only what we already knew," she said. "I hoped you might have some fresh news."

"There may be some to-night yet," said Max. "Presently I shall ring up the office, if you will permit me, and see."

"Oh, thank you, yes, Max," said Mrs. Willoughby, who had been listening. "We were wondering if the murder could have come out of anything dealing with Sylvia's life in Germany—and then we were talking of the success of German spies in England."

"I don't quite see the connection," said Max, with a charming smile that deprived his remark of all rudeness.

"There isn't any," she returned, also smiling. "First we talked of poor Sylvia, and then of something Captain Hollander had heard, but which had nothing to do with Sylvia."

"Have you heard of it, Max?" broke in Colonel Willoughby. "Have you heard the rumour that German spies have contrived to steal some of the plans of the new gun?"

"No, sir," Max replied to the Colonel. Then addressing Hollander he said, "Do you think the rumour is true?"

"I think it quite likely to be true that copies of the plans are in the hands of the German Staff; sooner or later, and it generally is sooner, they hear of everything we do," Hollander answered.

"The country is filled with their

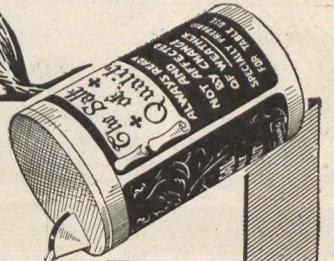
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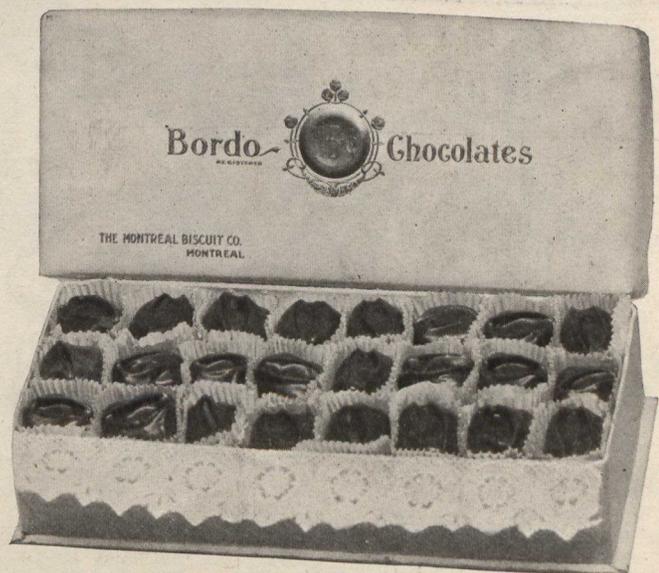
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