POOR DOCUMENT

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THE WEIGHT OF THE CROWN

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CHAPTER XVIII.

Watching.

It was not difficult for Jessie to guess the identity of the man who addressed her. Only a man who loved and felt sure that he was loved in return would have spoken to a girl like that. This was Charles Maxwell beyond a doubt. Nice-looking enough, Jessie thought, with a pleasing, amiable face—perhaps a trifle too amiable, but there was no mistaking the power in the lines of the mouth.

"What are you doing here like this?" he asked. "Heavens! has all the world gone mad tonight?"

The bitterness of despair rang in the speaker's voice. Jessie noticed that Maxwell was dressed not in the least like men in his position usually dress at that time of night. He wore a grey flannel suit and a panama hat pulled down over his eyes.

"I came on urgent business," Jessie said. "I presume that you are Mr. Maxwell?"

"Why should I deny it?" the other asked. "I am Charles Maxwell, and the most miserable dog in London. But I am forgetting. Why do you ask me such a foolish question, Vera?"

"Because I want to be quite sure of my ground," Jessie said. "And because I am not Miss Vera Galloway at all. If you look at me very closely you will see that for yourself."

Maxwell stared at Jessie in a dull, wooden kind of way, as if the whole thing were past his comprehension.

"Yes," he said, "there is a difference, but it is so subtle that even I should not have noticed it unless you had called my attention to it. But I know who you are now. You are Miss Harcourt, daughter of Colonel Harcourt, late of the —th. I have often told Vera of the wonderful likeness between you. If you should ever meet her in private life—"

"I have met her, I am personating her at the present moment," Jessie whispered.

"Amazing!" Maxwell exclaimed. "But I understood that you were—that you had been—in short—"

"Engaged in a Bond Street shop," Jessie finished the sentence. "So I was till today, when I was discharged through no fault of my own. Miss Galloway sent for me to take her place. Secretly I have played her part all this evening. And she went away dressed in my simple black clothes—"

"But why?" Maxwell demanded jealously. "Why all this absurd mystery?"

"Surely you can guess? Why do you look so suspicious? I am not altogether in Miss Galloway's confidence, but I understood that she wanted to save somebody whom she loved—somebody that was in trouble. It requires no great intelligence to guess that you were the person in question. It was all connected with those papers missing from the Foreign Office."

"I know no more about it than the dead," Maxwell said vehemently. "The papers in question—and others—were as much in Lancing's custody as mine. It was he who was to blame, though I admit that I locked the papers away tonight after Lord Merehaven had done with them. When I saw the Mercury I was horror-stricken. I guessed exactly what had happened."

"How could you guess what had happened?" Jessie asked.

"Because I have had my suspicions for some time," Maxwell said. "I dismissed those suspicions as unworthy of me and insulting to Captain Lancing. I know that he was greatly infatuated with Countess Saens, whom a Mr. Lechmere, a late Queen's Messenger, had warned me against as no better than a Russian spy. Lancing was mad over her. There is not the slightest doubt that she induced Lancing to let her have those papers to copy. Then she refused to return them, and Lancing committed suicide. That is what I make of it."

"The sensational report in the Mercury went farther than that," Jessie said. "It is assumed that you are a party to the conspiracy, and that you fled to Paris. Is that true, or going to true?"

"As heaven is my witness, no," Maxwell said in a hoarse whisper. "When I had made up my mind what had hapepn, ed I determined to get possession of those papers. I vanished, saying that I was called suddenly to Paris. For the last four hours I have been dogging Countess Saens. I followed her here, and I am not going to lose sight of her until she is safely at home. And when she is once safely at home, I am going to do a desperate and daring thing. What is she doing here?"

Jessie made no reply for the moment. She had pulled her wrap over her face again so that she should not be recognized. She was watching the movements of Countess Saens breathlessly. The woman had passed up the steps into the big hall beyond the swinging glass doors. She seemed to be arguing with a porter, who shook his head in an emphatic way. Evidently the countess was angry; so much could be seen from her gestures and the shake of her shoulders.

"She is trying to see a patient at irregular hours," Jessie said, "and the porter is adamant. I pray from the bottom of my heart that she may fail."

"Is this another piece in the puzzle" Maxwell asked hopelessly.

"It is the key-piece of the problem," said Jessie. "Ah, the porter is not to be moved. He has sent off an under porter, possibly to call one of the house surgeons. See, the countess sits down."

Surely enough the countess had flung herself angrily into a seat. Nobody seemed to care much about her, for she waited ten minutes without any sign of anybody in authority. Meanwhile Jessie was making Maxwell au fait with the situation.

"You threatened some dangerous and desperate enterprise a little later on," she said. "I suppose this is a supreme effort to try and get those papers?"

"You have guessed it," Maxwell said grimly. "If I could do that, the whole situation would be saved. We could do anything; we could point to Lancing's suicide as the result of reckless gambling. Mind you, that would be more or less true. If Lancing had not been desperately situated, he would never have yielded to the countess' fascinations and sold those precious documents."

"Yes, yes," Jessie interrupted, "But unless I am greatly mistaken, you have been forestalled. Somebody else has already removed the documents from the Countess Saen's custody."

"You don't really mean that! What was it—a case of diamond cut diamond?"

"Yes, but not quite in the way you imagine. Those papers were stolen in turn from Countess Saens tonight, taken from a drawer in her bedroom by Miss Galloway."

Maxwell pressed his hands to his head. The situation was too much for him. He groaned for an explanation.

"I can only surmise," Jessie said. "But presently you will have to admit that I have very strong grounds for my surmises. In some way Miss Galloway obtained a clue to what was about to happen. That is why I was called in to take her place, so that she could have an hour or two without being suspected. An hour or so ago Countess Saens' maid came to Merehaven House with the information that there had been a burglary in the countess' bedroom, but that nothing besides some papers seemed to be missing. That those papers were important could be guessed by the ghastly yet furious expression on the lady's face. The maid was pressed for a description of the thief—who, by the by, was a woman. And then and there the maid pitched upon me. She delard point blank that it was I who committed the burglary. What do you think of that?"

"You are a clever young lady," Maxwell said hoarsely. "Pray go on."

"The maid stuck to her guns, though everybody laughed at her. She said the thief was dressed in plain black, and as I was in evening dress, and had been seen all the evening, those who heard were amused. But I understood. In my plain black dress Miss Galloway had gone to the countess' house and stolen those papers. The thing was as clear as daylight to anybody behind the scenes. Under the circumstances, your prospective burglary would be so much loss of time."

"I quite understand that," Maxwell muttered. "It is exceedingly clever of you to read between the lines so clearly. Vera has done this for my sake. But how did she know—how could she possibly tell what was going to happen, and when those papers were to be found? Of course, I guessed where the trouble lay directly I saw the Mercury paragraph, but Vera! And she never takes the slightest interest in politics. What are you looking at?"

Once more Jessie was staring intently past the swinging doors of the hospital into the big hall beyond. The countess had now risen from her chair and was facing a little man with a bald head and gold-rimmed spectacles, who appeared to be explaining something to her. Jessie could see him bow and shake his head. Her breath came very fast.

"Why are you so interested in the countess' present action?" Maxwell asked.

"Because she has come to try and see a patient," Jessie whispered intently. "From the bottom of my heart I pray that she may fail. If she succeeds we are ruined, you are ruined. For the patient is no other than Vera Galloway."

CHAPTER XIX.

The Quest of the Papers.

"I supose I shall be able to take it all in presently," Maxwell said feebly. "Vera is a patient here, and the countess has come to see her. But would you mind explaining to me why Vera is here, what has happened to her, and what that fiend of a woman desires to know?"

"It was a case of cruel misfortune," Jessie said. "Miss Galloway was knocked down by a passing cab in Piccadilly and brought here. She was not so badly hurt, because she had the sense to call herself by my name. Besides, Dr. Varney saw her And Dr. Varney discovered my secret, so that I was obliged to confide in him. Now do you see?"

"I can't see where the Countess Saens comes in," Maxwell murmured.

"You are not very wise or long sighted for a diplomatist," Jessie said with a faint smile. "Don't you see that the countess' maid's suspicions fell on fruitful soil? When she left Merehaven House for her own, she discovered the full significance of her loss. Then she began to put things together. She had an idea that a trick had been played upon her. She had the police in—"

"Yes, but how did she discover that anybody answering to Vera's description was here?"

"Easily enough. Her maid gave the description of the thief. Then the police began to make inquiries. They discover that a girl in black answering to the maid's description has been brought here after an accident. They tell the countess as much. The police don't worry about the matter for the present, because their bird is quite safe. But that is not good enough for the countess. She comes here to make sure for herself; she suspects the trick."

"I confess that you are too clever for me," Maxwell sighed. "And yet everything you say is absolutely clear and convincing. I am afraid that there is still further trouble looming ahead. How did you get to know what had happened?"

"Miss Galloway sent me a message by a district boy. The idea was that I was to try and see her without delay, and go on playing my part until we could resume our respective personalities. Without some further coaching such a thing was impossible. I took Dr. Varney into my confidence, and he gave me a permit to see Vera Galloway tonight. I am here at considerable risk, as you understand, though I have prepared for my return to Merehaven House. Ah, she has failed."

The countess was standing up and gesticulating wildly before the little man in the gold-rimmed glasses. He seemed to be profoundly sorry, but he was quite firm. He signalled the porter, who opened one of the big glass doors and signified that the countess could depart.

"Even her fascinations have failed," Jessie said. "Please let me go, Mr. Maxwell. If I am recognized now everything is ruined. And you had better not be seen, either."

"Every word that you say is replete with wisdom," Maxwell said. "One moment. I must see you again tonight and know how things are going. Will you meet me in an hour's time in the garden at the back of Merehaven House? Don't say no."

"If it can possibly be managed," said Jessie. "Now I must go. You had better get into the shadow across the road. I feel that all is going to be well yet."

Maxwell lounged away, and Jessie passed quickly along as the countess came down the steps and stepped into her brougham. Jessie waited to see the flashing equipage drive away before she turned again and in her turn mounted the steps of the hospital.

Jessie boldly demanded to see a patient named Harcourt, and thrust her permit into the porter's hand. He looked a little suspicious over this fuss about a mere patient, but the name on the permit had its force, and presently Jessie found herself entering one of the wards under the charge of a nurse. The nurse glanced at Jessie's half-concealed face, and came to the natural conclusion that here was a sister of the latest accident case. Under the circumstances, she had no hesitation in leaving Jessie and Vera Galloway together.

"Thank Heaven you have come!" Vera whispered. "No, there is not much the matter. I suppose I must have fainted at the shock and the pain, but the doctor says I shall be out in two or three days at the outside. It is a case of bruised tendons more than anything else. You dear, brave girl!"

The dear, brave girl forced a smile to her lips. All the same, the prospect was alarming. It was one thing to carry this imposture through for an hour or two, but quite another to keep the comedy going for some days longer. But audacity carries such things through.

"Tell me everything that has happened," Vera went on. "Don't let us dwell on this cruel misfortune. Everything seemed going so well when that wretched cab came along. Perhaps I was dazed by my success. I know that I was shaking from head to foot. . . but that mattered to nobody but myself. Tell me."

Jessie proceeded with her story. She had a deeply interested listener. Vera turned from side to side and her face grew pale as she listened to the amazing story that Jessie told her.

"So I am in danger," she said. "The countess suspects. And it was all true, all about Charles and Captain Lancing. I heard that as I came along. If I could only see Charlie——"

"I saw him not five minutes ago," Jessie said. "Perhaps I had better finish my story, and then you can ask any questions you like afterwards."

Vera composed herself to listen with what patience she could. Her white face was flushed and hot before Jessie had finished. The latter looked uneasy. She was evidently uneasy in her mind about something.

"I am afraid that I must ask you to confide in me more fully," Jessie said. "Presently I will ask you to give me a few simple instructions whereby I can keep in touch with my position. But you will recognize the danger, both to you and myself. The countess has her suspicions aroused, as I have told you. Now tell me, did you visit her house tonight? Were you the burglar, so to speak, who——"

"I was. I may as well admit it to you. It was the matter of the papers. You see I knew——"

"Yes, but how, did you know?" Jessie persisted. "You saw me this evening quite early. At that time those papers were quite safe at the Foreign Office. How could you tell then that they were going to be stolen, or rather, conveyed to Countess Saens? And if you knew that the robbery was going to take place, why did you not warn Lord Merehaven? Or better still, tell Mr. Maxwell what you had discovered?"

"I could not get in touch with Charlie at that moment," Vera said, speaking as if with difficulty. The tears had gathered in her eyes. "There was no time to be lost."

"I am still very much at sea," Jessie said gently. "What aroused your suspicions?"

"Yes, I had better tell you everything," Vera said in a firmer tone. "You have been so good to me, you are so loyal and brave. There never was anybody so good to a stranger before."

"No, no. I did it all for money. It was because I was so desperately placed——"

"It is nothing of the kind, Jessie, and you know it. You would have done the same for me in any case—I feel certain that you would. My first suspicions were aroused by a letter which came into my hands. It was evidently sent in mistake, and written by Charlie to Countess Saens. It seems as if the two had struck up a violent flirtation together. If I cared less than I do for Charlie——"

"I would not let your mind dwell on that," Jessie said soothingly. "When you get to the bottom of this business you will find that there is some plan on the part of that infamous woman. May I ask you whether that letter was an admission of guilt on the part of Mr. Maxwell, or——"

"It might have been. In the light of recent events it certainly looks like it. But pretty well everything is capable of explanation, as you know. I shall possess my soul in patience. . . I am so dazed and confused now that I do not seem able to think clearly. But when I sent for you I could see everything as clear as crystal before my eyes. If I had not met that cab everything would have been all right, and you would have been back at home by this time and nobody any the wiser."

"Then you were quite successful?" Jessie asked eagerly.

"Absolutely successful. I can't think now how I had the courage to do it. Once I got going, my nerves never failed me for a moment. You see, I know that house where the countess lives; I have been there so many times before. And I felt so strong and resolute, especially when I passed the porter and he did not make any protest. But the rest you already have from the Countess Saens's maid. It was a sheer piece of bad luck finding her there at all."

"And you got safely out of the house with those papers? That was a bit of good luck indeed."

Vera Galloway smiled. A sudden idea came to her—the idea seemed to come to both girls at the same time. It was Jessie who put the question.

"And where are the papers now?" she asked. "You had better let me have them."

"Have them!" Vera echoed blankly. "Where are they? Don't say they were lost after I fell under the cab!"

There were no papers anywhere to be found.

CHAPTER XX.

A Special Effort

Cool hand as he was, even Lechmere glanced with astonishment at the King of Asturia. The ruler was small and mean-looking generally, but now he seemed to be transformed. Varney's drug must have been a powerful one to make that difference. For here was a king—a boy specimen with red hair, but a king all the same. Count Gleikstein flashed a furious glance at Mazaroff, who merely shrugged his shoulders. But he was puzzled and annoyed, as Lechmere could see from the expression of his face. The comedy was a pleasing one for the old queen's messenger.

The great salon was still well filled by Lord Merehaven's guests, for this was one of the functions of the season, and few people were going farther tonight. It was known, too, that the great diva also had captured all hearts and was going to sing again. Therefore the big room, with its magnificent pictures and china and statuary gleaming with hundreds of electric lights, was still filled with a brilliant mass of moving color.

A thrill and a murmur had run round the brilliant assembly as the King of Asturia came in. There had been many rumors lately, but nobody quite knew the truth. The King of Asturia had either abdicated his throne or he had been deposed by a revolution. The papers had been full of gossip lately, for the Queen of Asturia was a popular figure in London society, and people were interested. It was for this reason—it was for this reason—it was for the sake of necessary people that Lord Merehaven had hoped to have seen his royal guest earlier.

But here he was at last, making a dramatic entrance at exactly the proper time, and surprising even the man who had brought this mischief about.

"The constitution of an ox," Varney told himself. "With a heart like his, too! And yet an hour ago he was looking death in the face. I'll try that drug again."

The king came forward smiling and at his ease. He bowed to the queen, and placed her hand to his lips. Then he extended his fingers to Lord Merehaven.

"My dear lord, I am much distressed to be so late," he said. "I dare say the queen will have told you the reason why I have been delayed. Ah, good evening, Count Gleikstein. Prince Mazaroff, I wonder you are not ashamed to look me in the face."

Mazaraff muttered something and looked uncomfortable. He was understood to ask what he had done.

"Now there is an elastic conscience for you!" the king cried. "That man comes between me and my duty to my people, and then he asks what he has done! He knows that love of pleasure is my stumbling-block, and he plays on my weakness. Only this very afternoon he comes to me with a proposal which I find utterly irresistible. My dear prince, I shall have to forswear your company. You had no right to take me where you took me today."

Mazaroff stepped back puzzled and confused. He had decided that he knew his man well, but here was an utterly unexpected phase of his character.

"You gave me certain papers to sign," the king went on. "Positively, I have utterly forgotten what they were all about. Nothing very important, or I should not have presumed to sign them. Something to do with concessions, were they not?"

"That is so, please your majesty," Mazaroff stammered. "It is a matter that will keep. If you will go over the petition at your leisure. As a liberal-minded man myself—"

"My dear Mazaroff, your liberal-mindedness is proverbial. But as to those papers, I lost them. Positively, they are nowhere to be found. You must let me have others."

A curious clicking sound came from Mazaroff's lips. The face of Count Gleikstein turned pale with anger. There was a comedy going on, and the grave listeners with their polite attention knew what was happening quite as well as if the conversation had been in plain words.

"Your majesty is pleased to jest with me," Mazaroff said hoarsely.

"Indeed I am not, my good fellow. Blame yourself for the excellency of that brand of champagne. We dined somewhere, did we not? I must have changed somewhere after, for I distinctly remember burning a hole in my shirt front with a cigarette, and behold there is no burn there now! Somewhere in the pocket of a dress-coat lies your precious concessions."

"I think," the queen said with some dignity, "we had better change the conversation. I do not approve of those medieval customs in my husband. Ah, Madame Peri is going to sing again."

There was a hush and a stir, and the glorious liquid notes broke out again. Mazaroff slipped away, followed presently by Count Gleikstein. The latter's face was smiling and gay as he addressed some remark to Mazaroff in a low tone, but his words were bitter.

"You senseless fool," he said. "How have you managed to blunder in this idiotic way? And after everything had been so perfectly arranged. It would have been known tomorrow in every capital in Europe that the Queen of Asturia attended the important diplomatic and social function alone. We could have hinted that the king had already fled. In the present state of feeling in Asturia that would have insured the success of the revolution."

"And the occupation of Russia in the interests of peace," Mazaroff sneered. "My dear Gleikstein, I am absolutely dumfounded. It was as the king says. I lured him into a house where only the fastest of men go, a gambling den. I saw that act of abdication in his pocket. I saw him so helplessly intoxicated that it was any odds he was not seen before morning. I arranged for him to be detained where he was. Tomorrow the thing would have been done; it would have been done today but he was past signing. Then he comes here clothed and in his right mind. It is amazing. We shall have to begin all over again, it seems to me."

"We certainly have received a check," Gleikstein admitted with a better grace. "But there are other cards to play yet. Those papers missing from the Foreign Office, for instance. To get to the bottom of England's game will be a great advantage."

"Don't you know that we have been beaten there as well?" said Mazaroff.

"You don't mean to say so! Impossible! Why, the countess sent a cypher message to say that she had been entirely successful. The message was not sent direct to me, of course, but it came by a sure hand about eight o'clock. The countess had not read those papers, but they were most assuredly in her possession. She promised me that—'

"Well, she is no longer in a position to fulfil her promise," said Mazaroff. "To return, the papers were most impudently stolen from her house. It is quite true my dear Gleikstein, that we both realize the powerful secret combination that we have to fight against. Don't you see what a clever lot they are! How they have tracked our deeds and acts! How they did they manage to recover the king and bring him here clothed and in his right mind? Why, the thing is nothing less than a miracle. Then the countess loses those papers almost before they are in her possession. It is any odds that she had not even sufficient time to glance at them."

"But you are quite sure that the papers have been lost, Mazaroff?"

"Absolutely certain, though the countess did not tell me so. She left here in a violent hurry on her maid coming to say that there had been a burglary at her house. I heard all that in the hall. The maid said that nothing but papers had vanished. One glance at the face of the countess told me what papers those were. And so we have a powerful combination against us who can work miracles and undo our best efforts almost before the knots are securely tied. For the present we are beaten, and it will be just as well for you to realize it thoroughly."

Gleikstein would have said more, but Lechmere lounged up at the same moment. His grey, lean face was quite smooth and placid; there was a smile on his face.

"What are you two old friends conspiring about?" he asked.

"There is never any conspiracy so far as diplomacy is concerned," Gleikstein said smoothly. "We are all crystal wells of truth. Who told you we were old friends?"

"My eyes," Lechmere said quite coolly. "And my excellent memory. It is idle to try and deceive an old queen's messenger like me. You look puzzled, both of you. Cast your minds back to 15th November, 1897, at Moscow. It was at the Hotel Petersburg. Three men were playing loo. There was a waiter with one eye in the room. Come, there is a puzzle for you."

And Lechmere lounged on as if anxious to catch up a passing acquaintance.

"What does he mean?" Mazaroff muttered anxiously. "What does the fellow know?"

CHAPTER XXI.

"Forewarned, Forearmed."

Gleikstein looked as utterly puzzled as his companion. They glanced at one another in a guilty kind of way. Evidently the allusion to the Hotel Petersburg mentioned by Lechmere conjured up some painful and none too creditable associations.

"There was only one other man present, and he has totally disappeared," said Gleikstein. "Now how did that man come to know all about it? One never seems quite to get away from the past."

Somebody attracted Gleikstein's attention, and Mazaroff wandered off into the garden. He was uneasy and disturbed in his mind, and anxious over the failure of his plot. It seemed as if the whole affair was little better than an open secret. As an agent of Russia, he was anxious to see the abdication of the throne by the King of Asturia. Asturia was a stumbling-block south in the path of Russian progress. Once the king had abdicated or been forced from his throne by a revolution, Russia would certainly step in under the plea of the maintenance of peace in a notoriously turbulent region. They might concede to European opinion by placing a puppet on the throne, but henceforth Asturia would be no better or worse than a Russian province. If this was accomplished, then Mazaroff netted a fortune. Only today it had seemed in his grasp.

And with the swiftness of a lightning flash, everything had changed. The puppet had been torn from Mazaroff's hands; those compromising papers had vanished from Countess Saens's drawer. At the present moment Lord Merehaven was in a position to shrug his shoulders, and say that those suspicions must be verified before he was prepared to admit anything. It was a comedy on both sides, but it remained a comedy so long as those papers were not forthcoming.

Mazaroff was brought back out of the grave of these gloomy reflections by a footman who tendered him a note. There was no answer, the servant said, he had merely had to deliver the letter to Prince Mazaroff. With a new interest in life, Mazaroff recognized the Countess Saens's neat writing. He read the letter slowly and thoughtfully, then tearing it in small pieces he dropped the fragments into the heart of a laurel bush. A slow, cruel smile spread over his dark face.

"So that is the game," he muttered. "Strange that I did not spot it before. Still, the marvellous likeness would have deceived anybody. The maid was not far wrong after all. Well, at any rate, I shall have some sport out of this. Who knows what it may lead to?"

Quite eagerly Mazaroff dropped his cigarette and returned to the house. He walked from one room to the other as if looking for somebody. He was in search of Miss Galloway, he said. Had anybody seen her lately? He had an important message to deliver to her from Countess Saens. The cry was taken up—it became generally known that Vera Galloway was sought after.

One had seen her here and one had seen her there, but nobody knew anything definite. The more difficult the search became, the more Prince Mazaroff appeared to be pleased. The quest came to the ears of Dr. Varney at length. He dropped the ever-pleasant conversation in which he was indulging with a famous lady novelist and became alert instantly.

"I fancy I can find her," he said. "Who seeks her so closely at this time of night?"

"Prince Mazaroff," a girl laughed as she passed by. "Is it a proposal, do you think, doctor? Fancy being proposed to by a real prince!"

But Varney was anxious behind his answering smile. His name had not been mentioned in the business at all. He was quite free to cross-examine Mazaroff without the latter being in the least suspicious. And Varney had a pretty shrewd idea that Mazaroff regarded him as an elderly old fossil who had a child's mind outside the regions of science. He pottered up to the Russian presently.

"What are you seeking?" he asked. "Is there anything that I can do for you?"

"Yes; I am looking for Miss Galloway," Mazaroff said, with a gleam in his eye that told Varney a great deal more than the speaker imagined. "I have an important message for her."

"Well, tell me what it is and I will deliver it," Varney said with a vacuous smile. "As the family physician there are no secrets from me. Who seeks Miss Galloway?"

"Tell her the Countess Saens," Mazaroff said. "I fancy she will understand that. I have had a letter—"

But Varney had wandered off as if the conversation did not in the least interest him. As a matter of fact, he was both startled and uneasy. Mazaroff had been too communicative in the hour of his supposed triumph, and he had told Varney everything. Mazaroff had had a letter from the countess, and the countess had guessed, on finding her precious papers missing, exactly what had happened. On making inquiries, Countess Saens had discovered that there was a double of Miss Galloway somewhere, and she had asked Mazaroff to make sure of the fact. And Mazaroff was the very man who was wholly responsible for the appearance of Jessie Harcourt at Merehaven House. But for his flagrant insult of the girl she would not have been here at all. There was danger in the air.

And the danger was not lessened by the fact that Jessie had not returned. People presently would begin to think it strange that Miss Galloway was not to be found. And if those two came face to face—Jessie and Mazaroff—what an explosion there would be!

Well, forewarned was forearmed, Varney told himself as he walked back to the house. Jessie would be back before long, and then the whole thing must come out. But Jessie had done good work, not only on behalf of her new friend Vera Galloway, but also on behalf of England and the peace of Europe. This pretty, resolute, sharp girl had suddenly become an important piece in the great game of diplomatic chess. If necessary, Merehaven must be told everything. He must be shown the absolute importance of checking Mazaroff and rendering his last stroke utterly futile. When Merehaven came to know what had happened, he would be compelled to stand by the side of Jessie Harcourt. It would have to be a strong game of bluff, Varney decided. Merehaven would be properly indignant when the confession came; he would refuse to believe that his niece could be party to anything of the kind. Jessie could come into the room if Mazaroff decided to make an exposure, and sit with becoming dignity. She would decline to listen to the Russian's preposterous suggestion, and with all the dignity at his command Merehaven would back the girl up. Varney began to chuckle to himself as he thought of Mazaroff's discomfiture.

But whilst Mazaroff was hunting round for the double of Miss Galloway, never dreaming that she also had left the house, Merehaven must be warned. It was a dificult matter to detach the old diplomat from the circle surrounding him, but Varney succeeded at length.

"Now what is the matter?" Merehaven said tartly. "Another surprise? Really, I seem to be living in an atmosphere of them tonight, and I am getting too old for these shocks. What is the matter?"

"A great deal, or I would not bother you in this way?" Varney said. "Make an excuse to get away for a few minutes and go to your study. It is absolutely imperative that I should have a word or two with you before you speak to Mazaroff again."

Merehaven complied with a sigh for his lost social evening. He went off in the direction of his study, but Varney did not follow him direct. On the contrary, he lounged into the garden intending to enter the study by the window, which he knew to be open. By the time he reached the garden he had a full view of Merehaven bending over his writing table as if dispatching a note. At the same instant a figure rose from behind a group of rose trees and confronted Varney. As her black wrap fell away he had no difficulty in recognizing the features of Jessie Harcourt.

"I am back again, you see," she said breathlessly. "It is such wonderful good fortune to meet you here so soon, and where we can speak at once. Dr. Varney, have I missed anything? Is there anything that you have to tell me? Have I been missed? Nothing has happened since I left?"

"Not till the last moment," Varney said. "My dear child, positively I can't stay a moment to tell you. It is imperative that I should have a few words with Lord Merehaven at once, before Prince Mazaroff can get to him. Stay here under the shadow of the house; keep your wrap over your head. Nobody is likely to come out again tonight. And please to listen to everything that is going to be said, because the conversation will give you the clue that I cannot stay to afford you now. Ah!"

Varney darted forward until he reached the window of the library, and then he stumbled into the room as if he had found his way there quite by accident. At the same moment Mazaroff entered from the hall. His face was pale, his eyes glittered with something of sneering triumph. He advanced to the writing table and laid a hand on Lord Merehaven's shoulders.

"May I ask your lordship's attention for a moment?" he said. "I have something important and, I am afraid, very painful to say to you."

Jessie strained her ears to listen.

CHAPTER XXII

The Trail Grows.

As Jessie sat there by the bedside of her new-found friend, she hardly knew what to say. It was impossible, after all that Jessie had seen and heard, to believe that the papers so boldly purloined by Vera Galloway were not of the least importance. Otherwise there would not have been all those alarms and excursions, and most assuredly Countess Saens would have made no attempt to get into the hospital. Vera had handled the missing Foreign Office documents beyond a doubt.

"Cannot you recollect anything about them?" Jessie urged.

"Absolutely nothing at all," Vera replied. "You see, I was so utterly overcome by the success of my daring exploit that I was half dazed. I had saved the situation, and I had saved Charlie Maxwell also. I suppose I must have crossed Piccadilly in a dream. Then there was a violent shock, and I came to my senses; but only for a moment, and then I was utterly unconscious till I arrived here. I had just sense enough left to remember that I was called 'Harcourt,' and there it ended."

"And yet I suppose all your underlinen is marked?" Jessie suggested.

"Only with a monogram, one of those intricate things that nobody could possibly understand. But look round, and see if you can find any trace of those papers. In a vague way I remember clutching them tightly in my hand as the cab struck me."

But there were no papers to be seen. The nurse knew nothing of them, and the hall porter was equally sure that the patient carried nothing as she entered the hospital. Doubtless they had fallen in the road and had been picked up by somebody who would not have the slightest idea of the value of their contents. It was so cruelly hard that the tears rose to Vera's eyes.

"It does seem terrible," she said, "after all the risk and all the danger. I could cry out when I think of it. I could sit up in bed and scream. And to think that those documents are perhaps lying in the gutter at this very moment! Jessie, is there nothing you can do?"

"I can have faith and courage," Jessie replied. "I will ask Dr. Varney what is best to be done. At any rate, there is one way in which we have the better of our foes. They know that the papers are stolen, but they don't know that they have been lost again. I dare say Dr. Varney will think of a plan. But I cannot believe that Mr. Maxwell was guilty. I saw him just now, as I told you, and I am quite certain that he is no traitor to his country."

"I hope not," Vera said. "It seems almost incredible. When Charlie's face rises up before me, I feel that I have been dreaming. Yet I know that he has been exceedingly friendly with the Countess Saens. There was assuredly a kind of flirtation between them. I tried to believe that I was needlessly jealous. I should have thought no more about it until I received that anonymous letter——"

"Anonymous letter!" Jessie exclaimed. "That is the first time that you have mentioned it at all to me."

"Because I forgot. As a matter of fact, I had no opportunity. It was only just before I ome to you in my distress and trouble. The letter was beautifully written on very good paper. I am quite sure that it emanated from a lady of education. It simply said that if I would save the man I loved from ruin, I had better contrive to find my way into the Countess Saens's bedroom tonight between the hours of nine and eleven. Also, I was to open the second drawer of the Dutch cabinet, the key of which I should find on the top of the clock. You see, I had heard my uncle mention this Asturian trouble. The queen was a friend of mine, and I divined what was going to happen. I tried to see Charlie, but I was baffled there.

"Then you came into my mind, and I determined to put a desperate resolve into execution. I knew Countess Saens's house well; she took it furnished from some friends of ours, and I had been in every room there. I knew the countess was coming to my aunt's party. And when I started out on my errand I was more or less in the dark until I heard those dreadful newsboys proclaiming the tragedy. Then one or two hints dropped by the Queen of Asturia came back to me, and I knew then the import of my mission. That mission was accomplished, as you know. How I failed at the very last moment you already know."

"But I am not going to admit that you have failed," Jessie urged. "There can be no question of the fact that you dropped those papers. It is equally certain that somebody picked them up. They would be nothing to an outsider, who would probably take them to Scotland Yard. I decline to admit that we are beaten yet."

"It is very good of you to say so," Vera said gratefully. "You will have to play my part till tomorrow, when Dr. Varney must contrive to come and see me. He will have to certify that I am quite well enough to be moved, and then I shall proceed in a cab to your lodgings, still passing as Jessie Harcourt. You will write to your sister and aske her to be prepared. Then you will come home and we will change clothes once more, so that nobody will be any the wiser. Don't worry about anything; be prepared and silent, and leave matters to my maid. And never again so long as I live shall you want a friend, Jessie. God bless you!"

Jessie rose and kissed the tearful face of the speaker. The nurse was hovering about again with a suggestion that it was high time the visitor departed. Jessie blessed the long black wrap and hood that Varney's foresight had provided her with, seeing that she would have to walk home. She would not have been afraid under ordinary circumstances, but the spectacle of a well dressed woman walking in that guise at dead of night was likely to attract attention. As a matter of fact, it did attract attention, for a man passed Jessie at the hospital door.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "It is I—Charles Maxwell. Glad to find that a turned-up collar and hat pulled over the eyes makes so much difference. How is she Miss—Miss—"

Maxwell boggled over the name, and Jessie did not help him. Miss Galloway was going on very well indeed, but she had had her perilous errand for nothing. There was no object whatever in Mr. Maxwell committing a second attack on the house of the countess, seeing that the precious documents had already been abstracted by Vera Galloway. That Miss Galloway had lost the papers made no difference.

"That's very unfortunate," Maxwell said with a little sigh. "A brave and daring action like that should have been fully rewarded. Still, it gives us breathing time; it enables me to defy the foe. Let me walk back with you as far as the garden gate of Merehaven House. We shall pass the residence of Countess Saens on the way, and we may notice something."

Jessie had no objection to make. On the contrary, she was glad of a male companion. Usually she did not mind being out late; but then she was not dressed for society, and the shoes she wore were not satin ones with old paste buckles.

Very silently they walked along the now deserted streets. Then Maxwell paused, and indicated a house on the opposite side of the road. A brilliant light burned in the hall, and in the dining room the electrics were fully on. The lace blinds were half down, and beyond the bank of Parma violets and maiden hair fern in the window boxes it was possible to obtain a glimpse into the room.

"The countess is at home," Maxwell whispered. "I know that for certain. I don't fancy she has gone out again, for a messenger boy was summoned to the house. Ah, there she is!"

By stooping a little it was possible to see the figure of the countess. She had discarded her jewels and her flowers; she had a tiny cigarette in her mouth. She took her place at a table and seemed to be writing something. Presently a man entered the room—a slight man, with a pale face and a mass of flame-colored hair on his head; across his gleaming white shirt an order or two glittered.

Maxwell grasped Jessie's arm; he spoke with a fierce indrawing of his breath.

"Do you see that?" he whispered. "Do you recognize anybody in that figure standing there—the man, I mean?"

"The King of Asturia," Jessie replied promptly. It was not possible to be quite certain at that distance, but the dining room was flooded with light. Beyond doubt here was the ruler of Asturia, whom Jessie had left not so long before in a state of collapse.

"Look at him," Maxwell said in tones of the depest contempt. "Look at the smiling scoundrel. And yet to save him and his kingdom one of the noblest women in England is risking her all. For his sake General Maxgregor does outrage to his feelings and conceals his passionate love for the queen. I would give ten years of my life to know what is going on there."

It was impossible to hear, however. It was also impossible to see anything from the near side of the road. Jessie's anger was almost as passionate as that of her companion. It seemed a lamentable thing that the King of Asturia should be so lost to all sense of his position. And he must have known that he was making himself quite at home in the house of his deadliest enemy.

(To be continued.)

MAY BE DOG SHOW AT THE EXHIBITION

Management Asked to Take Up the Idea --- Women's Council Decide to Assist in the Fair.

It is possible that a dog show will form one of the special attractions at the St. John exhibition next fall. Proposals to that end have been received by Manager C. J. Milligan from several local dog fanciers and are being given careful consideration. Should arrangements be made it will be the first occasion on which a bench show has been held in connection with the exhibition. Mr. Milligan, when asked about the matter yesterday said nothing had yet been decided and he would be pleased to hear the views of any who are interested in order to ascertain if the innovation would prove popular. It is suggested that the show would have a wide scope and be open to exhibitors outside the province. There have been dog shows here in former years, but always under private auspices, and it is thought that, backed by the exhibition, the affair could be managed on a larger scale and be successful and attractive.

Word has been received by the manager from Mrs. David McLellan in connection with the proposed exhibit by the Women's Council that they have decided to carry out their plan of giving assistance. A meeting of the council will be held today when it is likely that details will be discussed.

A prize of $100 has been offered by the Short Horn Breeders' Association to be competed for in a special class for cattle of that breed. There is also a likelihood of a special prize on similar lines in the Ayrshire breed.

MAN WHO NEARLY KILLED H. C. FRICK RELEASED

Pittsburg, Pa., May 18—Alexander Berkman, who made an attempt on the life of Henry Clay Frick during the great steel strike at Homestead in 1892, was released from prison today. His sentence was 23 years but by good behavior it has been reduced to 14 years. Deputy Superintendent Johnson, of the Anegheny police department, and three Pittsburg detectives met Berkman upon his release and notified him to leave the city at once. He said he would start for St. Louis this afternoon.

In an interview Berkman said: "I want to deny the story that I am to become a leader of the anarchists in this country. There is nothing in that. I shall try to make an honest living and I have no doubt that I can do so."