

# THE WORLD MASTERS

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*"Captain Johnnie," etc. etc.*



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PROLOGUE

THE MOMENT OF TRIUMPH

High above the night-shrouded street, whose silence was only broken by the occasional tramp of the military patrol or the gruff challenges of the sentries on the fortifications, a man was walking, with jerky, uneven strides, up and down a vast attic in an ancient house overlooking the old Fisher's Gate, close by where the River Ill leaves the famous city of Strassburg.

The room, practically destitute of ordinary furniture, was fitted up as a chemical and physical laboratory, and the man was Doctor Emil Fargeau, the most distinguished scientific investigator that the lost province of Alsace had produced—a tall, spare

man of about sixty, with sloping, stooping shoulders and forward-thrown head, thinly covered with straggling iron-grey hair. It was plain that he was in the habit of shaving clean, but just now there was a short white stubble both on his upper lip and on the lean wrinkled cheeks which showed the nervous workings of the muscles so plainly. In fact, his whole appearance was that of a man too completely absorbed by an over-mastering idea to pay any attention to the small details of life.

And such was the exact truth—for these few mid-night minutes which were being ticked off by an ancient wooden clock in the corner were the most anxious of his life. In fact, a few more of them would decide whether the Great Experiment, for which he had sacrificed everything, even to his home and his great professional position, was to be a success or a failure.

On the long, bare, pine table, beside which he was pacing up and down, stood a strange fabric about three feet high. It was round, and about the size of a four-gallon ale jar. It was covered completely by a closed glass cylinder, and rested on four strong glass supports. From the floor on either side of the table a number of twisted, silk-covered wires rose from two sets of storage batteries. Within the four supports was a wooden dish, and on this lay a piece of bright steel some four inches square and about an inch thick, just under a circle of needles which hung down in a circle from the bottom of the machine.

A very faint humming sound filled the room, and made a somewhat uncanny accompaniment to the leisurely tick of the clock and the irregular shuffling of the doctor's slippered feet.

Every now and then he stopped, and put his ear near to the machine, and then looked at the piece of steel with a gleam of longing anticipation in his keen, deep-set, grey eyes. Then he began his walk again, and his lips went on working, as though he were holding an inaudible conversation with himself. At last there came a faint whirr from the clock, a little window opened, and a wooden bird bobbed out and said "Cuckoo" once. The doctor stopped instantly, took out his watch and compared it with the clock.

"Now, let us see!" he said, quietly, in his somewhat guttural Alsatian French, for in this supreme moment of his life he had gone back to the patois of his boyhood, which he had spoken in the days before the Teuton's iron hand had snatched his well-loved native land from France and begun to rule it according to the pitiless doctrine of Blood and Iron.

He pulled the platter out from under the machine, picked up a little wooden mallet from the table, and, with a trembling hand, struck the steel plate in the centre. It splintered instantly to fragments, as though it had only been a thin sheet of glass. The doctor dropped the mallet, lifted his hand to the window that looked out over the river towards the citadel, and said:

"It is done! And so, Germany, stealer of our land and oppressor of my people, will I break the great fabric of your power with one touch of this weak old hand of mine!"

Then he threw open one of the old-fashioned dormer windows that looked out over the northern part of the city towards France, and began to speak again in a low, intense tone which rose and fell slightly as his deep breaths came and went.

"But France, my beautiful mother France, thou shalt know soon that I have done more than given thee the power to turn on thy conqueror and crush him. I can make thee queen and mistress of the world, and I will do it. The other nations shall live and prosper only at thy bidding, and they shall pay thee tribute for the privilege of being something more than the savages from which they came.

"Those who will not pay thee tribute shall go back to the Stone Age, for I will show thee how to make their metals useless. Only with thy permission shall their steam-engines work for them, or their telegraphs record their words; for I have found the Soul of the World, the Living Principle of Material Things, and I will draw it out of the fabric of Nature as I have done out of that block of steel. And I will give it into thy hands, and the nations shall live or die according to thy pleasure.

"And you, Adelaide, daughter of our ancient line of kings, descendant of the Grand Monarch, you shall join hands with my Victor after he has flung off the livery of his servitude, and together you shall raise up the throne of Saint Louis in the place where these usurpers and Republican canaille have reigned over ruined France. The Prince of Condé shall sit in the seat of his ancestors, and after him Adelaide de Montpensier—and Victor, my son, shall stand beside her, ruler of the world!

"A miracle, and yet 'tis true! Possible, for I have made it possible. It is only for France to believe me and spend her millions—millions that will buy her the Empire of the Earth, and it is done—done as easily as I worked that seeming miracle just now. I have risked much—all—for I have hazarded even honour itself; but my faith is justified, and I have won—and now, let me see how I stand before the world for the present."

He went and sat down before the only piece of ordinary furniture that the laboratory contained, an old oak bureau, on which stood a little shaded reading-lamp. He unlocked a drawer, and took out a little wash-leather bag. He undid it and emptied it

into his hand. There were ten twenty-mark pieces—just ten pounds and a few pence in English money. In his pocket he had perhaps twenty-five marks more.

"It is not much," he whispered, as he looked at the gold in his hand; "not much at the end of a life's work, as the world would call it. But the world knows nothing of that!" he went on, half-turning his head towards the machine on the table. "As the world takes wealth, this is all that is left of fortune, lands, and savings. Everything is gone but this, and that—ay, and more also. Yes, it was a hard fate that forced me to do that. Still, science showed me how to alter the figures so that not even the filthy Jew Weinthal himself could tell if he had the draft in his hand. That he will never have; for it has a month to run, and before that France will have made me rich. It was not right, but the scoundrel only gave me half what the last farm was worth, and I had to have more to finish my work. Yet, is it not honourable even to sin in such a cause! Well, well, it is over now. I have triumphed, and that atones for all; and so to bed and good dreams, and to-morrow to Paris!"

## CHAPTER I

It was the 27th of January, the Kaiser's birthday, and the reception-rooms of the German Embassy, on the Nevski Prospekt, overlooking the snow-covered quays and ice-bound waters of the Neva, were filled with as brilliant a throng as could have been found between the Ourals and the English Channel.

It has been said that Petersburg in the winter season contains more beautiful women than any other capital in Europe; and certainly the fair guests of His Excellency the German Ambassador to the Court of the White Czar went far towards proving the truth of the saying. The dresses were as ideal as they were indescribable, and the jewels which blazed round the softly moulded throats and on the fair white breasts, and gleamed on dainty coiffures of every hue, from ebony black to the purest flaxen, would have been bad to match even among the treasures of Oriental princes.

The men, too, were splendid in every variety of uniform, from the gold-laced broadcloth of Diplomacy to the white and gold of the Imperial Guard. Not a man was present whose left breast was not glittering with stars and medals, and, in most cases, crossed with the ribbon of some distinguished Order.

The windless, frosty air outside was still vocal with the jingling of the sleigh-bells as the vehicles sped swiftly and noiselessly up to the open doors, for it was only a little after ten, and all the guests had not yet arrived. Precisely at half-past a sleigh drawn by three perfectly black Orloff horses swept into the courtyard, and a few minutes

later the major-domo passed through the open folding-doors and said, in loud but well-trained tones:

"His Highness the Prince de Condé, Duc de Montpensier! Mademoiselle la Marquise de Montpensier!"

At the same moment two lacqueys held aside the heavy curtains which hung on the inside of the doorway, and the latest arrivals entered.

The announcement of the once most noble names in Europe instantly hushed the hum of conversation, and all eyes were turned towards the doorway.

They saw a tall, straight, well-set-up man of about fifty, with dark moustache and imperial, and iron-grey hair still thick and strong. A single glance at his features showed that they bore the indelible stamp of the old Bourbon race. The high, somewhat narrow, forehead was continued in a straight line to the end of the long thin nose. The somewhat high cheek-bones, the delicate ears, the thin, sensitive nostrils, and the strong, slightly protruding chin, might have belonged to the Grande Monarque himself.

He was in ordinary court dress, the broad red ribbon of the Order of St Vladimir crossed his breast, the collar and jewel of the Golden Fleece hung from his neck, and the stars of half-a-dozen other Orders glittered on the left breast of his coat; but, though he bore the greatest name in France, there was not a French order among them, for Louis Xavier de Condé was a voluntary exile from the land over which his ancestors had once ruled so splendidly and so ruinously.

For three generations his branch of the great family had refused to recognise any ruler in France, from the First Consul to the President of the Third Republic. In his eyes they were one and all usurpers and plebeian upstarts, who ruled only by the suffrages of an ignorant and deluded mob. In short, his creed and the rule of his daily life were hatred and contempt of the French democracy. On this subject he was almost a fanatic, and in days soon to come this fanaticism of his was destined to influence events, of which only three people in all that crowded assembly were even dreaming.

The girl at his side—for she was not yet twenty-one—might well have been taken for a twentieth-century replica of Marie Antoinette, and to say that, is to say that among all the beautiful and stately women in that brilliant concourse, none were quite so beautiful and stately as Adelaide de Condé, Marquise de Montpensier.

Of all the hundred eyes which were turned upon this peerless daughter of the line of St Louis, the most eager were those of a splendidly-built young fellow of about twenty-

eight, dressed in the blue and white uniform of the Uhlan regiment of the German army. Captain Victor Fargeau, military attaché to the German Embassy in Petersburg, was perhaps the handsomest, and, at the same time, manliest-looking man in all that company of soldiers and diplomats. At least, so certainly thought Adelaide de Condé, as she saw his dark blue eyes light up with a swift gleam of admiration, and the bronze on his cheeks grow deeper as the quick blood flushed beneath it.

It was a strange bond that united the daughter of the Bourbons with the soldier and subject of the German Kaiser, and yet it must have been a close one. For, after the first formal presentations were over, her eyes sent a quick signal to his, which brought him instantly to her side, and when their hands met the clasp was closer, and lasted just a moment longer than mere acquaintance or even friendship would have warranted.

"Can you tell me, Captain, whether the gentleman who calls himself the French Ambassador has honoured us with his presence to-night?" said the Prince, as he shook hands with the young soldier.

"No, Prince, he has not," he replied. "I hear that, almost at the last moment, he sent an attaché with his regrets and excuses. Of course, as you know, there is a little friction between the Governments just now, and naturally, too, he would know that Your Highness and Mam'selle la Marquise would honour us with your presence—so, on the whole, I suppose he thought it more convenient to discover some important diplomatic matter which would deprive him of the pleasure of joining us."

"Ah," said the Marquise, looking up at him with a glance and a smile that set his pulses jumping, "then perhaps Sophie Valdemar was right when she told me this afternoon that His Excellency had really a good excuse for not coming—an interview with Count Lansdorf, and afterwards with no less a personage than the Little Father himself! And, you know, Sophie knows everything."

"Ah yes," said the Prince; "I had forgotten that. You told me of it. I should not wonder if the subject of their conversation were not unconnected with an increase of the French fleet in Chinese waters. And then Morocco is——"

"Chut, papa!" said the Marquise, in a low tone, "we must not talk politics here. In Petersburg ceilings have eyes and walls have ears."

"That is true," laughed Victor; "not even Embassies here are neutral ground."

At this moment a lacquey approached and bowed to Captain Fargeau.

"Pardon me a moment," he said to his companions; "I am wanted for something, and I can see a good many envious eyes looking this way. Ah, there goes the music! They

will be dancing presently, and there will be many candidates for Mam'selle's hand. But you will keep me a waltz or two, won't you? and may I hope also for supper?"

"My dear Victor," she replied, with a bewildering smile, "have I not already told you that you may hope for everything? Meanwhile, *au revoir!* When you have done your business you will find us in the salon."

As he moved away, the curtains were again drawn aside, and the major-domo announced:

"His Excellency Count Valdemar! The Countess Sophie Valdemar!"

The Count was a big, strongly-built man in diplomatic uniform. His face was of the higher Russian type, and heavily bearded. His daughter, the Countess Sophie, was a strange contrast to him, slight and fair, with perfectly cut features, almost Grecian in their regularity, golden-bronze hair, dark, straight eyebrows, and big, wide-set, pansy-blue eyes. The only Russian trait that she possessed was her mouth—full-lipped and sensuous, almost sensular, in fact; and yet it was small enough, and the lips were so daintily shaped that it added to, rather than detracted from her beauty.

They were lips whose kisses had lured more than one bearer of a well-known name to destruction. Some they had sent to the scaffold, and others were still dreaming of their fatal sweetness in prison or in hopeless exile; for Sophie Valdemar, daughter of Count Leo Valdemar, Chief of the Third Section of the Ministry of the Interior, had been trained up from girlhood by her father in every art of intrigue, until even he was fully justified in calling her the most skilful diplomatic detective in Europe.

To her friends and acquaintances she was just a charming and brilliantly-accomplished girl of nineteen, who had reigned as undisputed Queen of Beauty in Moscow and Petersburg until Adelaide de Condé had come from Vienna with her father, and, by some mysterious means, unknown even to her, had been received into instant favour at Court, and in the most exclusive circles in the most exclusive city in the world. In fact, the enigma which it was the present object of her life to solve was how this could be possible—granted the tacit alliance between the Russian Empire and the French Republic, and the Prince's openly expressed contempt for all modern things French and Republican. There were, indeed, only three people in Europe who could have solved that riddle, and she was not one of them.

As she entered she saw Victor coming towards her. Instantly her eyes brightened, and the faintest of flushes showed through the pallor of her silken skin. He stopped for a moment to greet them, but his clasp on her hand was nothing more than the formal

pressure which friendship expects, and she looked in vain for any gleam in his eyes answering that in her own.

When he had passed in towards the door she flung a swift glance round the room, and as the soft pansy eyes rested on the exquisite shape and lovely face of Adelaide de Condé they seemed to harden and blacken for just the fraction of a second. The next moment she and her father were greeting the Prince and the Marquise with a cordiality that was only tempered by the almost indefinable reserve which the place and the situation made indispensable.

"My dear Marquise," she said, in that soft, pure French which, outside France, is only heard in Russia, "if possible, you have excelled yourself to-night; you are a perfect vision——"

"My dear Sophie," laughed the Marquise, "what is the matter? You seem as formal as you wish to be flattering; but really, if it is a matter of compliments, it is not you, but I who should be paying them."

"Quite a waste of time, my dear children," laughed the Count, gruffly. "Imagine you two paying each other compliments when there are a couple of hundred men here with thousands of them crowding up to their lips. Still, Prince," he went on, "it is better so than rivalry, for rival beauty has always worked more harm in the world than rival ambitions."

"There can be no question of rivalry, my dear Count," replied the Prince. "Why should the Evening envy the Morning, or the Lily be jealous of the Rose?"

"Put like a Frenchman and a statesman, Prince: that was said as only one of the old regime could say it," said Sophie, with a little backward movement of her head. "How is it that the men of this generation never say things like that—or, if they try to, bungle over it."

"Perhaps they are too busy to revive the lost art of politeness," laughed Adelaide. "But come, papa; they are playing a lovely waltz, and I am dying for a dance, and so is Sophie, I daresay."

"And, by their looks, many of these young men are dying of the same complaint; so suppose we go into the salon," said the Prince, offering his arm to Sophie.

It was nearly half-an-hour before Victor found Adelaide disengaged in the ball-room. The first waltz that she had saved for him was just beginning, and, as he slipped his arm round her waist, he whispered under cover of the music:

"If you please, we will just take a couple of turns, and then you will give me a few precious minutes of your company in the winter garden."

She glanced up swiftly at him with a look of keen inquiry, and whispered in reply:

"Of course, my Victor, if you wish it; especially as it is getting a little warm here—and no doubt you have something more interesting for me than dancing."

"I think you will find it so," he said, as they glided away into the shining, smoothly-swirling throng which filled the great salon.

After two or three turns they stopped at the curtained entrance of the vast conservatory, whose tropical trees and flowers and warm scented air formed a delicious contrast to the cold, black, Russian winter's night. Almost at the same moment Sophie Valdemar said to her partner, a smart young officer of the Imperial Guard:

"I think that will do for the present, if you don't mind; I don't feel very vigorous to-night, somehow: suppose you find me a seat in the garden, and then go and tell one of the men to bring me an ice."

They stopped just as Victor and Adelaide passed through the curtains. They followed a couple of yards behind them, and Sophie quickened her step a little, her teeth came together with a little snap, and her eyes darkened again as she saw Adelaide look up at her companion and heard her say softly:

"Well, what is your news—for I am sure you have some?"

"Yes, I have," he replied; "and the greatest of good news; you know from whom?"

"Ah," said Adelaide, with a little catch in her voice, "from him; and has he——"

"Succeeded? Yes; and to the fullest of his expectations. He goes to Paris to-morrow, and then——"

The rest of the sentence was lost to Sophie as they turned away into the garden.

Her companion found her a seat under a tree-fern, and left her leaning back in her long-cushioned chair of Russian wicker, looking across the winter garden, through the palms and ferns, at Victor and Adelaide, as they moved along, obviously looking for a secluded corner. During those few moments her whole nature had, for the time being, completely changed. The jealous, passionate woman had vanished, and in her place remained the cold, clear-headed, highly-trained intriguer, with incarnate and unemotional intellect, thinking swiftly and logically, trying to find some meaning in the

words that she had just heard, words which, if she had only known their import, she would have found pregnant with the fate of Europe.

"I wonder who has succeeded beyond his best expectations? Someone closely connected with both of them, of course! And Paris—why should his success take him to Paris? Victor Fargeau, Alsatian though he is, is one of the most brilliant of the younger generation of German officers, a favourite of the Emperor, a member of the Staff, and attaché here in Petersburg. And she, my dear friend and enemy, is a Bourbon, an aristocrat of the first water, the daughter of an open enemy of our very good and convenient ally the French Republic. Paris—he who has succeeded is going to Paris. Well, I would give a good deal to know who he is and why he is going to Paris."

## CHAPTER II

"And so, Monsieur le Ministre, I am to take that as your final word? I have given you every proof that I can—saving the impossible—the bringing of my apparatus from Strassburg to Paris, which, of course, you know is an impossibility, since it would have to cross the frontier, which was once a French high road. I have shown you the facts, the figures, the drawings—everything. Can you not see that I am honest, that I love my country, from which I have been torn away—I who come from a family that has lived in Alsace since it was first French territory—I who am a Frenchman through five generations—I who have sold my son to the Prussians—I who have masqueraded for years in the Prussian University of Strassburg, once the Queen of the Rhine Province—I who have discovered a secret which has lain buried since the days of the great Faraday—I who have discovered, or I should say re-discovered, after him the true theory, and, what is more, the actual working of the magnetic tides which flow north and south through the two hemispheres to the pole—I who can give you, Monsieur le Ministre, and through you France, the control of those tides, so that you may make them ebb and flow as the tides of the sea do—prosperity with the flow, adversity with the ebb, that is what it comes to—ah, it is incredible!

"Once more, not as a scientist, not as an inventor, but only as a loyal son of France, let me implore you, Monsieur le Ministre, not to regard what I have told you as the dream of an enthusiast who has only dreamt and not done."

"If you have done as much as you say, Monsieur," replied the French Minister of War, leaning back in his chair and twisting up the left point of his moustache as he looked coldly and incredulously across his desk at Doctor Emil Fargeau, late Professor of Physical Science at the University of Strassburg, "how comes it that you have not been able to bring actual, tangible proofs to me here in Paris? Why, for instance, could you not have performed the miracle that you have just been telling me about in one of our

laboratories in Paris? If you had done that—well, we might have investigated the miracle, and, after investigation, might have some conviction—a conviction, if you will pardon me saying so, which might have enabled us to overcome the very natural prejudice that the Government of the Republic may be expected to have against a man of ancient family, whose ancestors had been French subjects for, as you say, five generations, but who has become himself a German subject, and has permitted his son, his only son, to enter the Prussian service, and has endured the shame of seeing him rise year after year, rank upon rank, in the favour of the man who is destined to be to Germany what the Great Napoleon was to France.

"No, sir, I cannot believe you; I can understand what you have told me about what you call your invention, but understanding without conviction is like hunger without a good dinner. I am not satisfied. Bring your apparatus here; let me see it work. Convince me that you can do what you say, and all that you ask for is yours; but without conviction I can guarantee you nothing.

"With every consideration that is due to the position that you have occupied in what may be called the enemy's country, the stolen provinces, I must take leave to say that very few days pass without an interview of this kind. I assure you, my dear sir, that saviours of our country and regainers of the Lost Provinces are to be counted by hundreds, but we have not yet found one whose scheme is capable of sustaining a practical test."

"But, Monsieur le Ministre, I can assure you with equal faith that this is not a scheme, a theory, a something in the air. On the contrary, it is a theory reduced to fact—solid fact; what I have said to you I can do before you. I can convince you——"

"Exactly, my dear sir, exactly," said the Minister; "you will not think me discourteous if I say that within the last six months I have had visits from inventors of air-ships who could create aerial navies which would assume the dominion of the air, annihilate armies and fleets, and make fortifications useless because impotent. Others have come to me with plans which, if the theory could only have been translated into practice, would have given us a submarine navy which in six months would have sunk every cruiser and battleship on the ocean. In fact, in one of the drawers of this very bureau I have a most exactly detailed scheme for diverting the Gulf Stream through the much-lamented Panama Canal into the Pacific, and so reducing the British Islands, the home of our ancient enemies, to the conditions—I mean, of course, the climatic conditions, of Labrador. That is to say, that nine months in the year London, Southampton, Plymouth, Liverpool, Glasgow, to say nothing of the ports on the east and the south, would be frozen up. The British Navy—that curse of the world—could

not operate; Britain's shipping trade would be paralysed, and after that her industries. They are free-traders, and so they don't believe it; but it would be if it could be done. But it could not be done, Monsieur; and that is the objection which I have to this most splendidly promising scheme of yours."

"But, Monsieur le Ministre, I assure that it is only a question of—well, I will say a few thousand francs to convince you that I am not one of those scientific adventurers who have perhaps imposed on the credulity of the Government before. What I have described to you is the truth—the truth as I have wrought it by my own labour, as I have seen it with my own eyes, as I have finished it with my own hand."

"Tres bien, Monsieur! Then all you have to do is, as I said before, to bring your apparatus here, perform the same experiment before a committee of experts, and if you break the piece of steel as you would a piece of glass—voila, c'est fini! We are convinced, and what you ask for will be granted."

"But, Monsieur le Ministre, nothing could be fairer than that; only you have not remembered what I told you during our last interview. I have spent hundreds of thousands of francs to bring this idea of mine to perfection. I have spent every centime——"

"Pfennige I think you should call them, Professor," interrupted the Minister, with a perceptible sneer. "I am afraid you are forgetting your new nationality; and, since you are a German subject, living in German territory, as it now is, it is permissible for me to ask why this wonderful invention of yours was not offered first to Germany—that is to say, if it has not already been offered and refused."

As the Minister of War spoke these few momentous words, accentuating them with his pen on the blotting-pad in front of him, Doctor Fargeau arose from his seat on the other side of the desk, and said, in a voice which would have been stronger had it not been broken by an uncontrollable emotion:

"Monsieur le Ministre, you have spoken, and, officially, the matter is finished. Through you I have offered France the Empire of the World. Through you France has refused it. You ask me to bring my apparatus here to Paris, to prove that it is a question of practice, not of theory. I cannot do it, and why?—because, as I told you, I have spent every centime, or pfennige, if you like, in making this thing possible.

"Everything is gone: the farms and vineyards that have been ours since the days of St Louis are mortgaged. We are homeless. I have no home to go back to. I have borrowed more than I can pay; I trusted everything to you, to the intelligence and patriotism of France. I have not even enough money to take me back to the home that I have ruined

for the sake of France and her lost provinces. It was impossible to think that you would disbelieve me. A thousand francs, Monsieur le Ministre, would be enough—enough to save me from ruin, and to make France the mistress of the world. Even out of your own pocket, it would not be very much. Think, I implore you, of all that I have suffered and sacrificed; of all the hours that I have spent in making this great ideal a reality——"

"And which, if you will excuse me saying so, monsieur," replied the Minister, rising rather sharply from his seat, "has yet to be proved to our satisfaction, to be a concrete reality instead of a dream—the dream of an enthusiast who does not even possess the credit of having remained a Frenchman. If, indeed, your personal necessities are so pressing, and a fifty-franc note would be of any use to you—well, seeing that you were once a Frenchman——"

As he said this the Minister took his pocket-book out, and, as he did so, Doctor Fargeau sprang from his seat, and said, in quick, husky tones:

"Mais, non, Monsieur le Ministre! I came here not to ask for charity, but to give France the dominion of the world. Those whom she has chosen as her advisers have treated me either as a lunatic or a quack. Very well, let it be so. Through you I have offered to France a priceless gift; you have refused it for the sake of a paltry thousand francs or so. Very well, you will see the end of this, though I shall not. I have devoted my life to this ideal. I have dreamt the dream of France the Mistress of the World, as she was in the days of la Grande Monarque. I have found the means of realising the ideal. You and those who with you rule the destinies of France have refused to accept my statements as true. On your heads be it, as the Moslems say. I have done. If this dream of mine should ever be heard of again, if it should ever be realised, France may some day learn how much she has lost through her official incredulity."

Emil Fargeau left the Minister of War a broken man—broken in mind and heart as well as in means. In youth it is easy, in early manhood it is possible, to survive the sudden destruction of a life's ideal; but when the threescore years have been counted, and the dream and the labours of half a lifetime are suddenly brought to nought, it is another matter. It is ruin—utter and hopeless; and so it was with Emil Fargeau.

He had risked everything on what he had honestly believed to be the certainty of his marvellous discovery being taken up and developed by the French Government. In fact, he was so certain of it, that, before leaving his laboratory at Strassburg, he had taken the precaution to destroy the essential parts of his accumulator, lest, during his absence, his sanctum might be invaded and some one stumble by accident on his discovery. In a word, he had staked everything and lost everything. To go back was impossible. Everything he had was sold or mortgaged. He had been kept by official

delays more than a fortnight in Paris, and he had barely a hundred francs left, and even of this more than half would be necessary to pay his modest hotel bill for the week.

And then, worse than all, there was that fatal indiscretion into which he had permitted his enthusiasm to betray him—an indiscretion which placed him absolutely at the mercy of a German Jew money-lender, who, under the rigid laws of Germany, could send him to penal servitude for the rest of his life.

No, there was no help for it; there was only one way out of the terrible impasse into which his enthusiasm, and that moral weakness which is so often associated with great intellectual power, had led him, and that way he took.

He went back to his hotel, and spent about an hour in writing letters. One of these was directed to Captain Victor Fargeau, German Embassy, Petersburg. Another was directed to Reuss Weinthal, Judenstrasse, Strassburg. The third, without date or signature, he placed in a little air-tight tin case, with the complete specifications of his discovery.

He took off his coat and waistcoat, and fastened this to his body so that it just came in the small of his back. Then, when he had dressed himself and put on a light overcoat, he took a small handbag, for appearance's sake, walked to the Nord Station, and took a second-class ticket to Southampton, *via* le Havre.

At midnight the steamer was in mid-channel, and Emil Fargeau was taking his last look on sea and sky from the fore-deck. For a moment he looked back eastward over the dark waters towards the land of his ruined hopes, and murmured brokenly:

"My beautiful France, I have offered you the Empire of the World, but the dolts and idiots you have chosen to govern you have refused it. 'Tant pis pour toi!' Now I will give the secret to the Fates—to reveal it or to keep it hidden for ever, as they please. For me it is the end!"

As the last words left his lips he took a rapid glance round the deserted deck, and slipped over the rail into the creaming water that was swirling past the vessel's side. In another moment one of the whirling screws had caught him and smashed him out of human shape, and what was left of him, with the little tin box containing the secrets of a world-empire lashed to it, went floating away in the broad wake that the steamer left behind it.

### CHAPTER III

It was a lovely May morning on the English Channel, and the steam yacht *Nadine* was travelling under easy steam at about eight knots an hour midway between Guernsey and Southampton. Her owner, Ernest Shafto Hardress, Viscount Branston, eldest son of the Earl of Orrel, was taking his early coffee on the bridge with his college chum and guest, Frank Lamson, M.A. of Cambridge, and Doctor of Science of London, the youngest man save one who had won the gold medal in the examination for that distinguished degree. In fact, he was only thirty-two, and the medal had already been in his possession nearly a year.

The morning was so exquisitely mild, that sea and sky looked rather as though they were in the Mediterranean instead of the Channel. They were sitting in their pyjamas, with their bare feet in grass slippers.

"Well, I suppose it's time to go below and shave and dress; Miss Chrysie and Lady Olive will be up soon, and we'll have to make ourselves presentable," said Lamson, getting out of his deck-chair and throwing the end of his cigarette overboard. "Hello, what's that? Here, Hardress, get up! There's a body there in the water, horribly mangled."

"What!" exclaimed Hardress, springing from his seat and going to the end of the bridge where Lamson was standing. "So it is! Poor chap, what can have made such a mess of him as that?"

"Fallen overboard from a steamer, I should say, and got mopped by the screw," said Lamson, in his cold, bloodless voice. "It's a way screws have, you know, especially twin screws."

"That's just like you, Lamson," said Hardress; "you talk about the poor chap just as if he was an empty barrel. Still, he's been a man once, and it's only fair that he should have Christian burial, anyhow."

As he said this he caught the handle of the engine telegraph and pulled it over. "Stop." The yacht slowed down immediately, and he went on:

"Lamson, you might go and send the stewardess to tell the ladies not to get up for half-an-hour or so. This isn't exactly the sort of job a woman wants to see. Mr Jackson, will you kindly lower away the quarter-boat?"

The young Viscount was right—for the object that was hauled in from the sea could hardly even be called a human corpse, so frightfully was it mangled out of all mortal shape. When it was brought on board, a careful search was made through the tattered remnants of clothing that were still attached to it for some marks of identification; but

nothing was found. A couple of pockets, one in the waistcoat and one in the trousers which were left intact, contained nothing. There was no mark on what was left of the linen. The upper half of the head was gone, and so there was no use in photographing the remains. In short, the ghastly spectacle was the only revelation of a secret of the sea which might never be further revealed.

"I'm afraid it's no good," said Lamson; "there's nothing that anybody could recognise the poor chap by. In fact, it looks to me like a case of deliberate suicide by someone who didn't want to be identified. He's evidently fallen overboard from a steamer, and people don't do that by accident with empty pockets. For instance, that inside coat pocket was made to button, and would probably have had a pocket-book and tickets in it. From what's left of them I should say the clothes were French, and, judging by the locality, I should say he might have been a French passenger from le Havre—perhaps to Southampton on one of the South-Western boats. Hello, what's this? Perhaps this is a clue to the mystery."

As he spoke he put his hand on the back of the body, where the sodden clothes outlined an oblong shape, a few moments after it had been turned over.

"It feels like a box, or something of that sort. At any rate, we'd better see what it is," he went on, taking a sheath-knife from one of the sailors and ripping the cloth open. "Tied to the body. By Jove! Why, this is mystery on mystery! Nothing in his pockets, no mark on his linen or clothes, and this thing tied to his body! Well, I suppose we may as well see what there is in it; and as you're the owner of the yacht and Deputy-Lieutenant of your county, I suppose I'd better hand it over to you."

As he said this he cut the cords and handed the tin box to Viscount Branston, who said as he took it:

"Of course, we shall have to open it, and we'll do it together after breakfast. Now, Mr Jackson, oblige me by having the body sewn up in a bit of canvas. I don't want the ladies to see it in that horrible state. And you may as well put on full speed; we don't want it on board any longer than we can help. Now, Lamson, come along and dress."

When they came out of their state-rooms they found the ladies already on deck, taking an ante-prandial stroll arm-in-arm. Lady Olive was a tall, perfectly-proportioned young woman of about twenty-five, not exactly pretty, but with a dark, strong, aristocratic face, which showed breeding in every line, and which was lighted up and relieved most pleasantly by a pair of soft, and yet brilliant, Irish eyes. When her features were in repose, some people would have called her handsome; when she smiled, others

would have called her, not pretty, but charming—and they would have been about right.

Her companion, Miss Chrysie Vandel, daughter of Clifford K. Vandel, President of the American Electrical Storage Trust of Buffalo, N.Y., was an absolute contrast to her. She was about an inch shorter, exquisitely fair, and yet possessed of a pair of deep blue eyes, which in some lights looked almost black. Her brows were several shades darker than her hair, which was golden in the sun and brown in the shade. She was not what a connoisseur would call beautiful, for her features were just a trifle irregular, and her mouth was just ever so little too large. Still, taken as a whole, her face had that distracting and indescribable piquancy which seems to be the peculiar property of the well-bred American girl at her best.

Both were dressed in grey serge, short-skirted yachting suits, and each had a white duck yachting cap pinned to her hair.

"Well, Shafto," said Lady Olive, as the two men took their caps off, "and what is all this mystery about? Chrysie and I have been speculating all sorts of things."

"Why, yes, Lord Branston," chimed in Miss Chrysie. "I got out of my bath and fixed myself double quick, half expecting to come on deck and find ourselves held up by a French torpedo-boat, after all that talk we heard in Jersey about the trouble between you and France and Russia over China."

"I am happy to say it is not quite so serious as that, Miss Vandel," said Hardress, "and I hope we shall be able to get you safe to Southampton before the war starts. The fact is, about an hour ago, while Lamson and I were having our coffee on the bridge, he saw—well, the body of a man, terribly mangled, floating in the water. So we stopped to pick it up. It was frightfully mutilated, and, of course, it was nothing for eyes like yours to look upon, so we've had it sewn up in canvas, and we're taking it to Southampton to give it a decent burial."

"Now, I call that real good of you, Viscount. I guess you British have finer feelings in that way than we have. I don't believe Poppa would have stopped his yacht if he'd struck a whole burying lot afloat."

"Well," laughed Hardress; "that is what a busy man like your father might be expected to do. In fact, I suppose most Englishmen would have done so; but, as it happens, in this case virtue was rewarded—for we have discovered what may be a mystery."

"A mystery! Oh, do say, Viscount. That's just too lovely for words—a yacht, dead body at sea, and a mystery——"

"Yes," said Lamson; "and in a tin box, attached firmly by cords to corpse aforesaid."

"Don't, Mr Lamson; please don't," interrupted Lady Olive, somewhat severely. Then she went on, with a little shiver, "I hope, Shafto, you will get us to Southampton as quickly as you can. I don't want to be shipmates any longer than I can help with—with—ah—remains. It isn't lucky at sea, you know."

"My dear Olive," replied her brother, "about the first thing I thought of was that very idea; that is why we are now steaming full speed—twenty knots instead of eight—so that you and Miss Vandel may be relieved of this disquieting presence on board as soon as possible. And now, by way of passing the inconvenient hours that our new passenger will be with us, suppose we go to breakfast."

"A nice appetising sort of remark that, I must say, Viscount," said Miss Chrysie; "still I suppose we may as well go. This morning air at sea does make living people feel alive; I guess that's why I'm so hungry."

"And after breakfast, Shafto," said Lady Olive, "I presume that you will tell us all about the mystery of the tin box."

"My dear Olive," replied her brother, "it may be anything or nothing; and, as Lamson found it and gave it to me, instead of having it buried with the unknown deceased, I've agreed with him that we shall go through the contents, whatever they are, together; and, of course, if there's anything really interesting in them, then we shall tell you all about it."

"Now, that's real kind," said Miss Chrysie. "I guess if we don't have quite an interesting conversation over lunch it'll be the fault of our new passenger."

"My dear Chrysie," said Lady Olive, frigidly, "how can you! Really, you remind me rather strongly of what Kipling says about the Americans."

"And what might that be, Lady Olive?" she replied, looking up, with the flicker of a smile round her lips, and the twinkle of a challenge in her eyes.

"I don't think I remember the exact words just now, but I've got the 'Seven Seas' downstairs," replied Lady Olive; "but I think it's something about the cynic devil in his blood that bids him mock his hurrying soul."

"Thanks!" replied Miss Chrysie, with a toss of her shapely head, and an unmistakable sniff; "I think I've read that poem, too. Isn't there a verse in it that runs something this way?—

"Inopportune, shrill-accented,

The acrid Asiatic mirth

That leaves him careless 'mid his dead,

The scandal of the elder earth."

She repeated the lines with such an exquisite exaggeration of the "shrill accent" that the two men burst out laughing, and Lady Olive first flushed up to her brows, and then also broke into a saving fit of laughter.

"That's a distinct score for Miss Vandel, Olive," said Hardress. "If you knew the whole poem a bit better, I don't think you'd have made that last remark of yours. But, of course, Miss Vandel will be generous and allow you to take the only way there is out of the difficulty—the way to breakfast."

"Why, certainly," said Miss Chrysie, who was trying hard not to laugh at her little triumph. "Kipling's good, but breakfast's better, in an air like this."

And so, as she would have put it, they "let it go at that," and went down into the saloon to breakfast.

#### CHAPTER IV

During breakfast it had been agreed that Lamson, as the discoverer of the mysterious tin box, should open it by himself, and, after examining its contents, report on them to Hardress.

This was a speculative suggestion, made by Lady Olive, seconded by Miss Chrysie, and so, perforce, agreed to. And thus it came about that all the essentials of Doctor Emil Fargeau's great discovery fell into the hands of a man who, by virtue of imagination, intellect, and scientific training, was the one man in Europe, perhaps in the world, who could either use it or abuse it to the best or worst advantage.

He took the box into his cabin, and opened it as carelessly as though it might have contained a few old love letters, or the story of some obsolete Anarchist conspiracy. But as soon as he had read the first page of the closely-written manuscript, he got up from his chair and locked the cabin door. As he went back to his seat, he caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror. It looked almost strange to him; so he stopped and looked at it again.

"Good Lord!" he muttered, "is that me?" And then he said aloud: "You infernal scoundrel!"

He didn't go back to the little table on which the manuscript was lying. He looked at the pages as a man might look at a cheque that he has just forged. His hand, which had never trembled before, trembled as he took his cigar-case out of his pocket; and as he lit the cigar he could hardly hold the match steadily. He dropped full length on the sofa, looked sideways at the fatal sheets of paper on the table, blew a long stream of smoke up towards the port-hole, and began to talk with his own soul.

"The Empire of the World. I've read enough to see that it comes to that. Yes, Faraday was right; and so was this poor wretch that we fished out of the water this morning. A Frenchman, an Alsatian, who has made the biggest discovery that ever was made, who has practically achieved a miracle, offers the result to his country and gets refused, and then, for some reason or other, commits it and his body to the deep!

"Curious, very curious, from anything like a scientific point of view. What an infinite mercy it is for us, who have reason to believe that we possess a little brains, that the majority of men are fools, and that the official person is usually a bigger fool than the man in the street. Now, suppose our unknown and deceased genius had put even that first page that I have read before our good friend Clifford K. Vandel instead of, I suppose, the French Minister of War. Jump—why, he'd have got into it with both feet, as they say in the States. A man worth millions. Oh, millions be hanged! How many millions could buy that? Of course, that's one way of looking at it—but Frank Lamson, as I said before, you're in the way of becoming an infernal scoundrel. Perhaps I'd better interrupt this little monologue, and read the rest of what our deceased genius has to say."

He reached out and took the papers off the table, and for an hour there was silence in the cabin. He read the sheets over and over again, making rapid mental calculations all the time. Then, after a long look at the open port-hole over the sofa, he folded the sheets up, and stuffed them into the hip-pocket of his trousers. Then he got up, and looked at himself in the glass again.

"You scoundrel!" he whispered at the ghastly image of himself. "You thief—you utter sweep—who would accept the hospitality of an old college chum, and then, when the possibility of illimitable millions, when the empire of the earth, the means of enslaving the whole human race, the absolute control of every civilised Power on earth, gets fished up by accident out of the waters of the English Channel, you think about robbing him of it. You are not fit to live, much less to——"

He flung himself down on the sofa again, with his hands clasped hard over his brow, and there he remained, without moving a limb, until he was called out of his waking dream by a rap on the cabin door and the sound of Hardress's voice saying:

"Come now, Lamson, buck up! Are you going to be all the morning getting through that tin box? The women folk are on the point of mutiny with curiosity to know what there is in it. Hurry up!" And then, with a sudden drop in the tone, "You're not ill, old man, are you?"

"All right, Hardress," he replied, in a voice which, by a supreme effort of will, he managed to keep steady. "I have had a bit of a shock—heart, I think. I wish you'd tell Evans to bring me a brandy-and-soda, will you?"

As he said this, he unlocked the cabin door, and as his host saw him he exclaimed:

"My dear fellow, you do look bad; sit down, and I'll get you the B.-and-S. myself in a moment."

He disappeared, and Lamson sat down again on the sofa. Again he looked up at the open port-hole. There were only a few moments left him now to decide what might really be the fate of the human race. No man had ever been face to face with such a tremendous responsibility before. No mortal had ever passed through such a terrible temptation as he had done during the last hour. Should he fling the priceless papers, the warrant for the mastery of the world, into the sea and be done with it? Should he keep them in his pocket and make untold millions out of the power that they placed in his hands? After all, he had discovered this priceless treasure-trove. But for him it would have been buried with the hideous relics of humanity lying in the forward hold sewn up in a canvas sack. Was it not his by right? Did any human law compel him to share it with anyone?

But, again, ought he or anyone else to be entrusted with such a tremendous power for good or evil as this?—the power, literally, to reduce mankind to slavery. He was a man of average morals himself; he had lived a clean, hard, studious life, and no man could say that he had done him a mean action. Hardress, too, was well up to the high standard of the British aristocracy—but his partner had married an American girl—the daughter of a man who had made millions out of railway developments after the Civil War. He was either in love or falling in love with the daughter of another American millionaire who had made his millions out of electrical storage. The first thing Hardress would do would be to take the papers over to America and put them before him. Clifford Vandel would grasp their gigantic possibilities instantly, a trust, commanding millions of capital, would be formed, and the world would become an American dependency.

"Here you are, old man," said Hardress, coming into the cabin with a long glass in his hand, "I've made it pretty stiff, because you look as if you wanted it. Why, what's the matter?"

Lamson took the glass, and as he put it to his lips Hardress saw his hand tremble and heard the glass rattle against his teeth. He drained it in two gulps, put it down on the table beside the sofa, threw himself back on the cushions at the end, looked once more at the open port-hole with the fate of a world on his soul, and said in a shaking voice:

"Lock the door, Hardress, and sit down. I've something to say to you."

"Why, my dear chap, what's up? You look positively ghastly," said the Viscount, as he closed the door and locked it.

"I don't suppose you'd look much better if you'd spent an hour in hell, as I have."

"An hour in—Oh, come now, old fellow," Hardress interrupted, with a look which Lamson instantly interpreted as a query as to his sanity. "Don't you think you'd better turn in for a bit? You really do look ill; just as if something had shaken you up very badly. Is it anything to do with that infernal tin box?" he went on, pointing to it on the table.

"Yes," said Lamson, pulling himself together with a struggle, and sitting up on the sofa. "I wish to heaven I hadn't got up just at that moment on the bridge and we'd left our unknown deceased to the mercy of the waves. But, even then, somebody else might have discovered it."

"Discovered what? The corpse?"

"Yes; and——Look here, Hardress, I've been horribly tempted—tempted, perhaps, as no other man ever was; but my father was a gentleman, and I'll do the straight thing. How would you like to be master of the world?"

"Master of the—Oh, look here, Lamson, this won't do at all, you know. You're as pale as a ghost; your eyes are burning, and your hands are shaking. You must have got a touch of fever, or something of that sort. Take a dose of quinine and turn in. We'll be at Southampton in two or three hours, and then you can see a doctor."

Lamson laughed. It was a laugh that wouldn't have done anybody much good to hear, and Hardress shivered a little as he heard it.

"I see what you mean. You think I'm a bit off my head. To tell you the truth, I almost wish I were, or that this infernal thing were only a dream—nightmare, I should say."

"What thing?"

"This," replied Lamson, putting his hand into his hip-pocket and pulling out some crumpled sheets of paper. "You thought I was mad when I asked you if you'd like to be master of the world. When you've read that you'll see that you can be. They're what I found in that tin box. There's no name or address or any mark of identification on them, but they were written by a man, a Frenchman, who has discovered a means, as one might say, of soaking up all the electricity of the earth in one huge storage system, and then doling it out to the peoples of the earth like gas or water or electric light."

"Great Scott, what a gorgeous idea!" exclaimed Hardress, jumping from his seat and holding out his hand for the papers. "Why do you want to get ill over a thing like that, man? Don't you see there are millions in it if it's true, and of course you'll come in on the ground-floor? Great Caesar's ghost! It'll be the very thing for old Vandel. The Morgan Steel Trust won't be in it with this."

"I thought you'd say that," said Lamson. "That's the American blood talking in you. Now, I'll tell you candidly that I've only given you those papers from a sense of honour and friendship. I admit that my first impulse was to throw them out of the port-hole; and my second," he went on, after a little pause, "was to keep them to myself, and tell you some lie about the box being empty."

"You might have done the first, old man, but you couldn't have done the second," replied Hardress, putting the papers into his hand. "There, take them back; I don't suppose I should understand them. Anyhow, you can make a better use of them than I can; and if there's anything in it we'll share alike. In fact, after all, the whole thing really belongs to you, for if you hadn't discovered the body, it might have drifted around till it went down to feed the fishes. Really, I don't see what there is to be so upset about in it."

"My dear fellow, hasn't it struck you yet," said Lamson, "that if this discovery works out all right, as I'm certain it will, it will really mean, as I said just now, the mastery of the world? For instance, to put the thing into a nut-shell: Here we are, on this seven-hundred-ton yacht of yours, steaming at a speed of eighteen or twenty knots, engines working smoothly, and so on. Now, if this man's scheme were put into practice, the *Nadine* would be, as I might say, for want of a better word, *electrolised*. That is to say, every atom of metal in her would lose its tone; the boilers would burst, the engines fly to pieces, and even the hull would splinter up into a thousand fragments, just as though she were made of glass, and she got hit with a hundred sledge-hammers at the same minute."

"Is that really so, Lamson? Are you quite serious?" said Hardress, gravely, for he was just beginning to grasp the enormous possibilities of the discovery. "Do you really mean to say that that is actually feasible? Of course, I know what a swell you are at these subjects, and I don't suppose for a moment that you would say it if you didn't believe it; but are you quite sure that your—well, that this scientific imagination that I've heard you talk about hasn't run away with you?"

"My dear Hardress," replied Lamson, getting up from the couch, "there is no imagination whatever about this. I can assure you it is just a matter of hard facts and figures. Whoever that poor fellow was that we're going to bury at Southampton, it's quite certain that the world has lost one of its most brilliant physical scholars. The man who discovered this scheme and worked it out in these papers was a second Newton or Faraday. In short, I can tell you in all seriousness—I will pledge my reputation, such as it is—that, granted the necessary capital, which would certainly run to a million or two, I could work this scheme out myself. I could construct works that would mop up the electricity out of the earth as a sponge takes water. I could change climates as I pleased. I could hurl my thunders where I chose like a very Jove. I could make myself arbiter of life and death on earth. In fact, I could be everything that a mortal ought not to be."

"There; I can't say that I quite agree with you," said Hardress. "Personally, I can't see why a man shouldn't be all that he can be, and there's no reason why you and I and the governor and Chrysie's dad shouldn't syndicate this business and run the earth. You say it's possible. That's good enough for me. We'll find the millions and you'll find the brains, so we'll consider that settled. Fancy picking a thing like that up out of the sea on a pleasure cruise! Talk about luck! Well, come along; let's go and break it as gently as we can to the girls."

## CHAPTER V

The *Nadine* had been lying for a fortnight in Southampton Water, and all that was mortal of the man who might have been master of the world was resting in a nameless grave in the cemetery.

In the oak-panelled dining-room of Orrel Court, an old rambling mansion, dating partly from Reformation times, and standing on the lower slopes of the South Downs overlooking the distant Solent, there was a little dinner-party in the process of eating, drinking, and chatting, which was a good deal more pregnant with the fate of nations than many a Cabinet meeting.

At the head of the long, massive table sat a man of a little over fifty, tall and rather squarely built, and still erect. A man, still handsome and capable of attracting the attention and even the admiration of many fair ladies, who would have been only too glad to occupy the place at the other end of the table which was now occupied by the owner of the *Nadine*, for Harry Shafto Hardress, eighth Earl of Orrel, came of one of the oldest and proudest stocks in the country, and, thanks to the millions which his dead American wife had brought him, the broad, fat acres that he owned in half-a-dozen counties were absolutely unencumbered, and he possessed a personal fortune that yielded more than twice his goodly rent-roll.

Miss Chrysie Vandel sat at his right hand, and, next to her, Doctor Lamson, faced by Lady Olive and a tall, angular, square-headed, keen-featured man of about the Earl's own age, with a heavy, well-trained, iron-grey, moustache, and an equally well-ordered, little tuft of hair on the square chin. This was Clifford K. Vandel, President of the Empire State Electric Storage and Transmission Trust of New York and Buffalo. He was commonly known throughout the States and Europe as the Lightning King; and he controlled not only the power distribution, but also the whole system of Etherography or wireless telegraphy throughout the Continent of North America.

He had come over post-haste from New York in response to an urgent cable from Lord Orrel. He was an uncle of the late Lady Orrel, and he and the Earl had already done a good deal of business together on both sides of the Atlantic. The cablegram had contained the words "urgent business," so he had taken the first available steamer and arrived in Southampton that afternoon.

During dinner only ordinary topics had been touched upon, but when the cloth was removed and the butler, with a ceremonious care that was almost reverential, had placed the ancient decanters and jugs containing the port and claret and Madeira, for which the cellars of Orrel Court had long been famous, his lordship told him that they were not to be disturbed until he rang; and, when the door had closed behind him, he said:

"Well, now, Vandel, we can talk. Miss Chrysie, a glass of port—allow me—and, if you will, pass the decanter. Mr Lamson, this is the same seal as before. Olive, you will make the coffee later on, won't you, in that patent concern of yours? You certainly do it much better than they do downstairs; and I don't see why for once we shouldn't have our smoke here, since our—what is it they say?—revolting daughters both indulge."

"Revolted, if you don't mind, my lord," remarked Miss Chrysie across her wine-glass. "Though I don't see much what Olive and I want to revolt for; and I guess if two girls

ever had more easily managed poppas they'd be curiosities. What do you say poppa? You haven't tried to run me much, have you?"

The iron-faced man of millions, the commander-in-chief of armies of hand and brain workers, the ruthless wrecker of industries which stood in the way of the realisation of his gigantic schemes, looked smilingly at the living likeness of his dead wife, and said, with that soft intonation and hardly perceptible accent which evidenced his old Southern descent:

"Well, Chrysie, I don't know that either of you ever wanted very much running; and as for smoking, well, your mothers and grandmothers did it down South two generations ago, and I guess what was good enough for the South in those days is good enough for anywhere else."

From which speech it may be gathered that Clifford Kingsley Vandel was one of those Americans who, although he had come in with the Union, and made many millions out of it, still cherished the traditions of the old Southern aristocracy. In fact, in his heart of hearts, no man, saving only perhaps Louis Xavier de Condé and his present host, had a greater contempt for all democratic institutions than he had; a contempt which is amply shared by nine out of ten of the dollar despots of the great Republic.

He helped himself to a glass of the pale ruby-coloured port, and passed the decanter to Hardress. Lady Olive was taking claret.

"And now," said Lord Orrel, raising his glass, "suppose we begin in the good old-fashioned way. Here's success to the Storage Trust and all its future developments."

"Which, from what I've heard of them, will be big and go far," said the Lightning King.

"Even unto the running of the earth, and all that therein is. Is that good American, Chrysie?"

"Not quite," she laughed, in reply. "I must say that your ladyship seems to have considerable difficulty in picking up the American language. However, the sentiment's all right, so we'll let it go at that. What do you say, Doctor? Somehow you don't seem quite as enthusiastic about this as a man who knows everything might be."

"If a man knew everything, Miss Vandel," replied Lamson, rather gravely, "he would probably be enthusiastic about nothing. Still, I confess that, as I said at first on board the yacht, I do look upon this scheme, splendid and all as it is, and perfectly feasible from the scientific point of view, as something just a little too splendid for human responsibility. After all, you know, to make oneself the arbiter of human destiny,

supreme lord of earth and air, dispenser of life and death, health and sickness, is what is popularly described as a somewhat large order."

"Well," chimed in Miss Chrysie, "I guess if it enables you to reform the British climate, by way of a start, and give this unhappy country some weather instead of just a lot of ragged-edged samples, you'll not begin badly."

"And if we can also do something with the furious, untamed, American blizzard," laughed Hardress, nodding at her over his glass, "we shall also confer a certain amount of blessing upon a not inconsiderable proportion of the Anglo-Saxon race. What's your idea, Mr Vandel?"

"We could do about as well without them as London could do without fog, or the British farmer do without a week of January shifted on into May," replied the Lightning King. "I've often thought that a syndicate which could control the British climate, and educate your farmers and railroads into something like commonsense, would make quite big money. Maybe that's what we'll do later on."

"An excellent idea," laughed Lord Orrel. "I have suffered from both of them—as well as from our free-trading amateur politicians who make it as expensive for me to bring a ton of my own wheat from Yorkshire to London as to import a ton of yours from Chicago. However, we shall be able to alter that later on. And now, suppose Olive brews the coffee, and we have a cigar, and then, perhaps, Mr Lamson will oblige us by shedding the light of his knowledge on the subject before the meeting. I suppose, Mr Lamson, you have not found, on more mature study of the question, that there are any serious objections to the scheme, saving, of course, the one which your modesty has created?"

"No, Lord Orrel," he replied, with one of his grave smiles. "During the last week or so I have worked out, I think, every possible development of the scheme, and I am bound to say that the unknown genius whom we buried the other day has left nothing to chance. There is not even a speculation. Everything is fact, figure, and demonstration. Given the capital, and the concessions from the Canadian Government, there does not appear to me the remotest chance of failure. The ultimate consequences of putting the scheme into practice are, of course, quite another affair—but on that subject you already have my opinion."

"My dear Lamson," said Hardress, "that, if you will pardon me saying so, is merely one of the characteristic failings of the scientific intellect. It has too much imagination, and therefore looks too far ahead."

"I'm with you there, Viscount," said the Lightning King. "This is just a question of dollars first, last, and all the time. Of course, we've got to see the other side of it; but we're not concerned much with what there is beyond—or back of beyond, for that matter. So, as practical men, we'll just respect the doctor's scruples all they deserve, and take all the help he can give us."

"Exactly," said Lord Orrel; "you put the case with your usual terseness, Vandel. And now, if you won't have any more wine, Olive will give us some coffee, and we may light up and get to business."

"And, Lamson, you will consider yourself on deck for the present," added Hardress. "I can see that Mr Vandel is just dying to know the details, in spite of that cast-iron self-control of his."

"My dear Viscount," laughed the multi-millionaire, "I'm among friends, and I'm not controlling any just now. Still, I'll admit that I'm just about as anxious to know the details of this scheme as Chrysie was to try on her first ball-dress, and that was no small circumstance, I tell you."

"I should think not," laughed Lady Olive. "There's only one thing more important in life than that, and that's a wedding-dress. But if these people are going to immerse themselves in facts and figures, Chrysie, suppose we have our coffee up in my room. I want to have a good talk with you about the presentation dresses."

"An even more weighty subject," laughed Hardress, "than the wedding-dress—which may never be worn. I mean, of course——"

"I guess I wouldn't try and explain, Viscount," said Miss Chrysie, as she got up and went towards the door. "Wasn't it your Lord Beaconsfield who said that the most dreary duty of humanity was explanation? Reckon you'll find it pretty dreary work explaining that remark away."

Hardress looked distinctly uncomfortable, for there was a flush on Miss Chrysie's cheeks, and a glint in her eyes which, although they made her look distractingly pretty, were not of great promise to him.

"I'm awfully sorry——" he began.

"My dear Shafto," laughed Lady Olive, as Lamson opened the door for them, "don't attempt it. A man who could make a remark like that could not possibly improve the situation by an apology."

With that they disappeared, and Lamson shut the door. When he got back to his seat he took a lot of papers out of the breast-pocket of his coat, put his plate aside, laid them on the table, and said:

"Well, then, since I am in the chair, I may as well get to business. As Mr Vandel has not yet been made fully acquainted with the details of the scheme, perhaps it will be as well if I begin at the beginning."

"Quite so," said Lord Orrel, with a nod; "and your kindness will have the additional effect of refreshing my own memory, which, I must admit, is not a particularly good one for technicalities."

Then Doctor Lamson began, and for a couple of hours or so expounded with every possible exactness of detail the discovery made by the man whose mangled remains had been picked up by the *Nadine* in mid-Channel, and which might have made France mistress of the world.

When he had finished, they went into the library, where they were joined by Lady Olive and Miss Chrysie, and the conversation gradually drifted away into topics more socially interesting, but of less imperial importance. But when Clifford Kingsley Vandel went to bed that night he spent half-an-hour or more walking up and down his big, thickly-carpeted bedroom, with his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes fixed on the floor, and his lips shaping inarticulate words which would have been worth millions to anyone who could have heard them. Then he stopped his promenade, undressed, and got into bed, and just before he dismissed the whole subject from his perfectly-trained intellect and addressed himself to the necessary business of sleep, he said:

"Well, that's just about the biggest scheme that mortal man ever had a chance of bringing to a head; and I guess we'll do it. Masters of the world, givers of life or death, lords of the nations, makers of peace or war as we please! That's so, and now, Clifford Vandel, I have the honour to wish you a very good night—a very good night indeed—about the best night you've ever had."

And then the masterful brain ceased working, like an engine from which the steam had been shut off, and he fell asleep as quickly and as peacefully as a little child.

## CHAPTER VI

Miss Chrysie's European visit had come to an end, and she and her father had accepted Hardress's invitation to take a trip home in the *Nadine*. Doctor Lamson was also a guest on board, and during the trip many of the details of the great scheme

were exhaustively discussed. Each of the three men was going on a special mission. Clifford Vandel had definitely accepted the position of president and general financial and business manager of the International Magnetic Control Syndicate, as the newly-formed company had been provisionally named. He was going to the States to do the necessary financial part of the work, buy up rights and patents which might be necessary to the furtherance of the scheme, and to perfect the organisation of the great combine of which he was president—a combine whose influence was now to extend not only over the United States, but over the whole world.

Doctor Lamson was going to make a personal study of the electrical machinery to be found in the States, so that he might be in a position to design the great storage works to the best advantage and with the greatest possible economy of time and money.

Hardress, armed with introductions from the highest official sources in England, was going northward, after leaving his guests at New York, to Montreal, to obtain a lease of a few square miles of the desolate, ice-covered wilderness of Boothia Felix, which, as a glance at the map will show you, is the most northerly portion of the mainland of the American continent. Further, in its scanty history, you may read that there Sir John Ross discovered the magnetic pole of the earth, and named the wilderness after his friend Sir Felix Booth, who had furnished most of the funds for his expedition.

His ostensible object in obtaining the lease was the foundation of an observatory for the examination of magnetic and electrical phenomena; one of which was the possible solution of the so far unsolved riddle of the Northern Lights. He also stated to the Dominion authorities, by way of giving something like a practical air to his mission, that a remoter possibility of the scheme was the establishment of a magnetic centre for a world-wide system of wireless telegraphy.

The few square miles of ice and snow and rock were absolutely worthless, and so the Dominion Government had not the slightest hesitation in accepting his offer of a thousand a year for ten years for the exclusive use and possession of the peninsula, with right to import materials, construct works, and do whatever might be necessary for the development of the scheme.

If he had not been the heir to an ancient peerage and the son of one of the wealthiest men in England, he would probably have been looked upon as a harmless crank who was wanting to lose his money in a vain attempt to harness the electrical energy displayed in the *Aurora borealis* and make thunderstorms to order out of it. As it was, he was treated indulgently as a man who had big ideas, and who was conducting at his own expense a great scientific experiment which he could very well afford to pay for.

Thus, after very brief negotiations, consisting of one or two interviews, two or three dinners, and the handing over of a cheque, the Canadian Government in all innocence parted with what was soon to prove the most precious piece of land, not only on the American Continent, but in the whole world.

But this was not the only concession that Shafto Hardress took back to England with him. For when he returned to New York and took a run up to Buffalo on the Empire State Express, with the lease of Boothia Land in his pocket, to talk matters over with President Vandel, he had a brief but momentarily interesting interview with Miss Chrysie, at the close of which she said, as her hand rested in his:

"Well, Viscount, I'm not going to say 'Yes' right away. You're a gentleman, and I like you. You're going to be a peer of England some day, and, if this scheme of yours works out all right, one of the masters of the world. As my father's daughter I have no natural objection to being a peeress of England and mistress of the world, but I am also a natural-born woman, and I want a little more than that—I mean something that a man could not give me if he owned the Solar System. I want to know for certain that you love me as a man should love a woman, and that I can love you as a woman should love a man if she is going to marry him. I like you; yes, I like you better than any other man I've ever seen. I tell you quite honestly it hasn't been a case of love at first sight with me, and I guess I haven't known you quite long enough to give you something that I can never take back. Go to your work and do it, and while you're doing it we shall get to know each other better, and meanwhile you may consider that you have the option of another piece of half-discovered territory."

Before releasing her hand he stooped and kissed it, saying, with a laugh that bespoke a certain amount of satisfaction:

"That, you know, is—well, we will call it the seal on the contract. This is my act and deed, you understand—as people say when they conclude a contract with an option. A definition of kissing which I once read describes it as equivalent to syllabus."

"Syllabus!" she said, releasing her hand and raising it to her brow, pushing a fold of hair back by the motion and smiling up at him in a somewhat disconcerted fashion.

"And what might that mean in your dictionary of kisses?"

"It was defined as kissing the hand of the girl you want very badly instead of——"

Her red lips smiled an irresistible challenge at him, and the next instant his arm was round her waist, and he said:

"After all, I don't think that contract was properly signed, sealed, and delivered; at least, the seal was in the wrong place, and the delivery was not quite complete."

"Now I call that real mean, Viscount," she said, a moment afterwards. "I only gave you an option on the territory, and you're starting to occupy it right away."

"Well, then," he said, taking her hand again, "suppose, instead of the territory, we call it a reserve. How will that do?"

"Not quite," she said, drawing back a bit. "To some extent I've been taken by assault, but I've not surrendered at discretion yet. That sounds a bit mixed, I know—but it's pretty near the truth."

"And at that," he said, gravely smiling, "I am quite content to leave it." And so, with the magical touch of her lips still thrilling through his blood, he left her, more than ever determined to fulfil to the utmost the tremendous destiny which chance had cast in his way.

To him there could have been no more delightfully satisfactory ending to his mission. In blood he was himself half-American, and in him the old-world aristocrat was strangely blended with the keen, far-seeing, quick-witted, hard-headed, and perhaps, in one sense, hard-hearted man of business. It was to this side of his nature that the physical charms, the keen wit, and sprightly spirit of Miss Chrysie had first appealed; but later on the aristocrat in him had recognised that she too was a patrician of the New World, whose ancestry stretched back into the history of the old, and so gradually interest and admiration had grown into a love which completely satisfied all his instincts.

The very way in which she had received his proposal had increased both his love and his respect. If she had surrendered at discretion there might have remained the possibility of a suspicion that, after all, she had been tempted to take hold of a magnificent opportunity, not only for placing herself in the front rank of European society, but also of wielding through her husband a power such as no woman had ever exercised before. But she had given him frankly to understand that these things were as nothing in her eyes, great and splendid as they were, without that certainty of mutual love which could alone induce her to give herself, body and soul, into the hands of any man, however powerful or nobly born; for Chrysie Vandel was a woman in the best sense of that much-meaning word, and she knew that for her there was no choice, save between the complete independence of thought and action which she had so far enjoyed, and an equally complete surrender to the man to whom she could render, whole-hearted and unreserved, the sweet service of love.

After dinner that night he had an equally satisfactory interview with the president, who, when he had heard his story, just got up from his chair and said:

"Viscount, we'll shake on that. My girl's free to choose where she likes, or not to choose at all, and you are not going to have any help from me in the way of persuasion; but if she does choose, why, I'd sooner she chose you than any other man I know."

"I ask for nothing better, I can assure you," said Hardress. "Thank you a thousand times."

And so they shook.

The next day by noon the *Nadine* was steaming out past Sandy Hook. Allowing for difference in longitude, it was almost at the same moment that the night mail pulled out of the Petersburg station. Two of the sleeping-compartments were occupied by Prince Xavier de Condé and his daughter; and so, from the ends of the earth, both travelling towards an obscure little watering-place hidden away in the depths of the German forest land, were approaching each other the man and the woman whose destinies had been, all unknown to themselves, so strangely linked together by the last despairing act of the man whose country had refused to permit him to make her the mistress of the world.

## CHAPTER VII

The village of Elsenau, which has hardly yet risen to the dignity of a town, lies somewhere midway between the Hartz Mountains and the Thuringia Wald, which, as everyone knows, stretches away in undulations of wooded uplands and valleys southward to the Black Forest. Its most recent possession is the fine Hôtel Wilhelmshof—an entirely admirable creation of the German instinct for catering, facing south-west, and sheltered north and east by uplands crowned with stately pines. Southward it has smooth, new-made lawns, dotted with clumps of firs and parterres of flowers, shielded by curves of flowering bushes. The lawns slope down to the edge of a long narrow lake, which, on the evening of the day after the prince and the marquise left Petersburg, lay smooth and blue-black beneath the cloudless azure of the summer heaven.

But the principal attraction of Elsenau, which, indeed, had given the luxurious hotel its reason for existence, and which had raised the little village of charcoal-burners and woodcutters to the dignity of a Kur-anstalt, was a spring, accidentally discovered by an enterprising engineer who was looking among the mountains for a water-supply for the city of Ilmosheim, some three miles away to the south. The waters had a curious

taste and a most unpleasant smell. Learned chemists and doctors analysed them, and reported that they contained ingredients which formed a sovereign remedy for gout and rheumatism—especially the hereditary form of the first. They were bottled and sent far and wide, and soon after their qualities had been duly appreciated and commented on by the medical press of Europe and America, the Hôtel Wilhelmschhof rose, as it were, with the wave of the contractor's magic wand, hard by the little limestone grotto in which the spring had been discovered.

About eight o'clock on a lovely evening in July, Lord Orrel and Lady Olive, under the broad verandah of the Wilhelmschhof, sat drinking their after-dinner coffee and watching the full moon sailing slowly up over the black ridges of the pine-crowned hills which stretched away to the southward.

"I suppose the prince must have missed his train, or else the train was behind time and missed the coach," said Lord Orrel, taking out his watch. "It is rather curious that I should have met him regularly every year at Homburg or Spa or Aix, and that somehow you have never met him; and now it seems from his letter that we have both discovered this new little place of evil-smelling waters together. I am glad that he is bringing his daughter with him."

"Ah, yes; his daughter—she is the second Marie Antoinette, isn't she?" said Lady Olive, putting her cup down and taking up her cigarette. "The most beautiful woman in Europe, the last daughter of the old House of Bourbon—I mean the elder branch, of course. And the prince?"

"The first gentleman in Europe, in my opinion," replied the earl, flicking the ash off his cigar. "A man who, granted the possibility of circumstances which, of course, are not now possible, might mount the throne of Louis XIV., and receive the homage of all his courtiers without their knowing the difference. A great man, my dear Olive, born four generations out of his time. If he had succeeded the Grand Monarque—there would have been no French Revolution, no Napoleon——"

"And therefore, my dear papa," laughed Lady Olive, "no Peninsular War, no Wellington, no Waterloo, no Nelson, no Nile and Trafalgar, and so none of that expiring British supremacy which you were arguing about so eloquently the other day in the House of Lords."

While she was speaking, the double doors giving on to the verandah were thrown open, a lacquey, gorgeously uniformed in blue and silver, came out, with his body inclined at an angle of thirty degrees, and his arms hanging straight down, and said, in thick Swiss French:

"Your Excellency and Madame la Marquise will find Milord and Miladi on the verandah here."

As Lady Olive looked round she heard a rustle of frilled skirts on the planks of the verandah, and saw a tall, stately gentleman and the most beautiful woman she had ever seen coming towards her.

The gentleman's eyes brightened and his brows lifted as he raised his hat. The woman's face might have been a mask, and her eyes looked out upon nothingness.

"Ah, my dear prince," said the earl, rising and going towards him with outstretched hands. "Delighted to renew our acquaintance in a new and yet a very charming place. I was hoping that you would get here for dinner; but, of course, once off the main line, you can never trust a German train to get anywhere in time. And this is Mam'selle la Marquise, I presume. This is fortunate. You see I have my daughter Olive taking care of me, so perhaps they may help to entertain each other in this out-of-the-way place."

"Yes," replied the prince, as they shook hands, "this is my daughter of whom I have spoken to you so often; and this is yours, the Lady Olive. Mam'selle, I have the honour to salute you. Adelaide, this is the daughter of Lord Orrel—an old friend, and one of the ancienne noblesse."

Olive had risen while he was speaking; the mask melted away from the marquise's lovely face, her lips softened into a smile, and a swift gleam of scrutiny took the place of vacancy in her eyes. Lady Olive's met hers with a frank though involuntary look of challenge. She certainly was what the gossip of half-a-dozen countries called her—the most beautiful woman in Europe. She possessed an exquisite grace of form and face and manner which made her indescribable. When one woman honestly admires another it is always with a half-conceived sense either of envy or hostility. Lady Olive was herself one of the best types of an English patrician, and the blood in her veins had flowed through ten generations of the proudest lineage in Britain; but in Adelaide de Condé, the daughter of the most ancient aristocracies of France and Austria, she instinctively recognised her equal, perhaps her superior.

She put out her hand in a frank, English way, and said, in the most perfectly accented French:

"My father has told me so much about yours, and they are such good friends, that I hope it isn't possible that we can be anything else."

"Quite impossible!" smiled the marquise, taking the hand of the new-made friend who in days to come was to be an enemy. "Since our fathers are such old and good friends,

why should we not be new friends and good ones too?" And then, turning round to her father, she said: "Voila, papa, since we find ourselves in such good company, and we have missed the dinner, and cannot eat till they get something ready, why do you not have your vermouth and a cigarette? In fact, as we are so entirely 'chez nous' here in this delightful retreat, you may order one for me too, I think."

The prince lifted his eyelids, and the lacquey approached and took his order, and then the party proceeded to make friends.

A little after tea the same evening, when Lady Olive and the marquise had retired to Lady Olive's sitting-room for a chat on things feminine and European, Lord Orrel and the prince were strolling up and down the moonlit lawn, smoking their cigars and exchanging the experiences that they had had since their last meeting at Homburg the year before.

Their friendship had begun by a chance acquaintance some six years before at Aix-les-Bains. Both of them aristocrats to their finger-tips, it was not long before they struck a note of common sympathy. The once splendid name which the prince bore appealed instantly to the Englishman, who could trace his descent back to the days of the first Plantagenet, and it was not long before they found a closer bond than that of ancient ancestry.

One night, when the beach at Trouville was lit up by just such a moon as was now floating high over the pines on the hills round Elsenau, he had told the prince the story of his life—the story of an elder scion of an ancient line devoted rather to literature and the byways of science than to the political and social duties of his position, and, moreover, a man who had never found a woman whom his heart could call to his side to share it with him. He had devoted his after-college days to study and travel. His younger brother, a splendid specimen of English chivalry, had found his mate in the daughter of his father's oldest friend. He was a soldier, and when the Franco-German war broke out, nothing, not even the longing, half-reproachful looks of his betrothed, could keep him from volunteering in the French service. He had fought through the war with brilliant distinction, a private at Saarbruck and a captain during the Siege of Paris. Then, captured, badly wounded, by the Germans after a brilliant sortie, he was cured and released, only to be murdered by the communards on the eve of his return to England. A year or two after, the Earl abjured his vows of celibacy under the fascinations of a brilliant American beauty, and so had accepted the responsibility of perpetuating his race.

So these two men had met on common ground, and nothing was more natural than that they should have become such friends as they were. To a very great extent they

stood apart from the traditions of their times. They were aristocrats in an age of almost universal democracy. Both of them firmly believed that democracy spelt degeneration, national and individual. Both of them were, in fact, incarnations of an age that was past, and which might or might not be renewed.

This was, indeed, the subject of their conversation as they strolled up and down the smoothly-shaven lawn under the sheltering pines, chatting easily and comparing in well-selected phrases the things of their own youth with those of the present swiftly moving and even a trifle blatant generations of to-day.

"I quite agree with you, my dear Lord Orrel," said the prince, as they turned at the end of their walk. "Democracy is tending now, just as it did in the days of Greece and Carthage and Rome, and to-day in my own unhappy France, to degeneration, and the worst of it is that there is no visible possibility of salvation. Our rulers have armed the mob with a weapon more potent than the thunders of Jove. The loafer of the café and the pot-house has a vote, and, therefore, the same voice in choosing the rulers of nations as the student and the man of science, or the traveller who is familiar with many lands and many races. I often think that it is a pity that some means cannot be found for placing—well, I will call it a despotic power—in the hands of a few men—men, for instance, if I may say so without flattery or vanity, like ourselves—men of wide experience and broad sympathies, and yet possessing what you and I know to be the essentials of despotism—that something that can only be inherited, not acquired."

"My dear prince, I agree with you entirely," replied Lord Orrel. "Our present civilisation is suffering from a sort of dry-rot. Sentiment has degenerated into sentimentalism, courage into a reckless gambling for honours, statesmanship into politics, oratory into verbosity. In short, the nineteenth century has degenerated into the twentieth. Everything seems going wrong. The world is ruled by the big man who shoots his quotations on the Stock Exchange and the little one who serves behind his counter. It is all buying and selling. Honour and faith, and the old social creed which we used to call noblesse oblige, are getting quite out of date."

"Not that yet, my friend, surely," the prince interrupted, quickly gripping his companion's arm; "not that, at least, for us. I confess that we and those like us are, as one might say, derelicts on the ocean of society—we, who one day were stately admirals, to use the old phrase. And yet, as you said just now, if only some power could be placed in the hands of a few like ourselves, a power which would over-ride the blind, irresponsible, shifting will of the mutable mob which changes its vote and its opinions with the seasons, the world might be brought again into order, and the proletariat might be saved from its own suicide."

"And," he went on, turning at the other end of their promenade, "perhaps you will not believe me, but only a few weeks ago there was such a power in the hands of a Frenchman—of an Alsatian, perhaps I should say, but a man who had preserved his loyalty to France—a scientist of European reputation—a man who had discovered that this earth had a spirit, a living soul, and who could gain control of it—so complete a control, that he could draw it out and leave the earth dead—a man who—But there, I am wearying you; I am sure you must think that I am telling you some fairy tale."

"By no means, my dear prince," said Lord Orrel, doing his best to keep his voice steady, and not quite succeeding. "In the first place, I am quite sure that you would not speak so seriously on a subject that was not serious; and, in the second place, I can assure you that I am most deeply interested."

"A thousand pardons, my lord," said the prince. "Of course you would not think that of me. We have both of us lived too long to indulge in romance, and yet, if I could tell you the whole story, you would say that you have never heard such a romance as this."

"And, if it is not trespassing too far upon your confidence, my dear prince, I should be only too happy to hear you tell the whole story," said his lordship, with an unmistakable note of curiosity in his tone.

"I can tell you part of the story," replied the prince; "but not here. It is so strange, and it might have meant so much, not only to France, but to the world, that I can only tell it to you where no other ears than ours can hear it, and even then only under your solemn pledge of secrecy."

"As for the first condition, my dear prince," replied Lord Orrel, "I will ask you to take a glass of wine with me in my sitting-room. As for the second, you have my word."

"And, therefore, both conditions are amply satisfied. Let us go, and I will tell you the strangest story you have ever heard."

## CHAPTER VIII

By the time the prince had ceased speaking there was not the slightest doubt in Lord Orrel's mind that, in some most mysterious manner, he was connected with the discovery which Hardress had made when he took the mutilated body out of the waters of the Channel. Perhaps even the unknown dead might have been someone near and dear to him. It seemed to him utterly impossible either to doubt the prince's word or to believe that two such discoveries could have been made by two men at the same time, or even that there could exist at the same time on earth two men whose genius, once put into practice, could make them rival masters of the world.

And supposing that he knew part of the story which the prince was going to tell him—the sequel, and, from a practical point of view, the all-important portion—ought he to tell him what he knew too? He was under no actual pledge of secrecy to his associates in the great Trust, but still he felt that he was under an honourable obligation to keep the story of the discovery to himself. On the other hand, granted that the prince knew the first half, would it be right—would it be honourable, according to his own exact code of honour, to keep the sequel from him? Perhaps the prince even had a definite personal interest in the scheme; and, in that case, to keep silence would be to rob him of his prior rights. What was he to do?

He had been a Minister of the Crown for a short term of office, and by the time they reached his sitting-room, and he had locked the door, after the wine had been placed on the table, diplomacy had come to his aid, and he had made up his mind. When he had filled the glasses he took out his cigar-case, selected the best it contained, and said:

"Prince, I'm going to ask you to allow me to take a very great liberty."

"My dear Lord Orrel, there is nothing that you could do that I should consider a liberty. Thank you, I will; I know that your cigars are always most excellent, and now we will make ourselves comfortable, and you shall take your liberty."

He took the proffered cigar as he spoke, snipped the end, and lit it. Lord Orrel did the same, and when they had saluted each other over their wine, in the old-fashioned, courtly style, he began:

"My dear prince, the liberty that I am going to ask your permission to take is a very great one, because it is a liberty of anticipation; and few men, even the most chivalrous, care to be anticipated, especially when they have an interesting story to tell. In other words, I, too, have a very strange story to tell you. In fact, the strangest that ever came within my experience. And there are reasons, which I will explain to you afterwards, why I am asking the favour of your permission to tell it before yours."

The prince looked puzzled, and his dark brows approached each other for just the fraction of a second. He took a sip at his wine, leant back in his chair, and blew a long whiff of smoke up towards the gaudily-painted ceiling. Then he said, with a barely perceptible shrug of his shoulders:

"My dear Lord Orrel, you are not asking me any favour. On the contrary, you are merely requesting that you shall entertain me before I try to do the same by you. Moreover, as it is quite impossible that there can be any connection between our stories, there can be no question of anticipation; so, pray, proceed. I am all attention."

"As I said," began Lord Orrel, settling himself in his chair, and taking a long pull at his cigar, "the story is a very strange one, and it is also one which could not well be told from the housetops, because it involves—well, what may be something almost as wonderful as what you hinted at in the garden just now."

"Ah," interrupted the prince, with a visible start and a sudden lifting of the eyebrows, "then, in truth, it must be strange indeed; and so I am more than ever anxious to hear it; and if, as I divine, you wish me to treat it in confidence, you, of course, have my word, as a gentleman of France, that no detail of it shall ever pass my lips."

His host felt not a little relieved at being released from the necessity of binding him to secrecy, as, for the sake of his colleagues, he would have felt obliged to do; so he said:

"That, my dear prince, it would be quite impossible to imagine; and now, as it is getting a little late, I will get to my story."

He began with the finding of the mutilated body by the *Nadine*, and the discovery of the tin box containing the momentous papers, and had just given a sketch of their contents and the use that was about to be made of the dead man's discovery when the prince, whose face had been growing greyer and greyer during the recital, at length lost his hold upon the stern control under which he had just placed himself. He sprang to his feet, flung his arms apart, and cried, in a high-pitched, half-choked voice:

"Mon Dieu! mon Dieu! It is the same!—what miracle has happened? My lord, you have been telling me the end of the story of which I was going to tell you the beginning. And so France, poor France, through the stupidity of the ministerial puppets that the mob has placed in the seats of their ancient rulers, has refused the sceptre of the world; and I—I, the heir of her ancient royal house, have lost not only the throne of my ancestors, but the power to make her the mistress of the nations. Truly, the mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small. Her kings misruled her, and she took other rulers, who have cheated and swindled her, and humbled her before those who once did her bidding; and now, when the hand of Fate holds out the means of regaining all that she has lost, and more, infinitely more, she puts it aside with the sneering laugh of contemptuous ignorance. Truly it is a judgment that judges even unto the third and fourth generation. Ah, yes; and on me, too!—I, who am innocent! Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, it is cruel!"

As the last words came from his trembling lips his hands came together on his forehead, and he dropped back into his chair.

For a moment of speechless astonishment Lord Orrel stared across the room at him. Then, dropping his cigar on the tray, he got up and went and laid his hand on the prince's shoulder.

"My dear prince, my dear friend," he said, in a voice moved by emotion, "I am most deeply distressed that my story should have affected you so painfully. Believe me, I had no intention, no thought even——"

The prince dropped his hands from his head, and stood and faced him, his face white and set and his eyes burning; but with a perfectly steady voice, he said:

"My lord, I thank you. So much emotion, though perhaps it was natural, ought not to have been shown. I should not have permitted it to myself, save in solitude. It was impossible that I should know that your lordship's story was the same as mine, and so, naturally, the shock was greater. And now, may I ask your lordship one question?"

"I will answer it, prince, before you ask it," interrupted Lord Orrel. "But first, let me beg of you to drink your wine; really, you do not look well."

The prince took the glass from him and drained it in silence, his hand shaking ever so little as he held it to his lips, and the other went on:

"Knowing what I did, I felt certain that two such miracles could not have happened at the same time; moreover, some inspiration told me that the discovery you spoke of in the garden was the same that my son made under such terrible circumstances in the Channel. Now, sit down, pray, do, and let us talk this matter over as men of the world."

"Men of the world!" echoed the prince, sadly, as he sat down again; "nay, of two worlds. I of the old, you and your son and your great business syndicate of the new; I of the past, you of the present and the future; I who would have revived the glories of an ancient race, the despotism, if you will, of a bygone dynasty, you who would found a new one—despotism a thousand times harder, a dynasty of money, not of blood, the most soulless and brutal of all dynasties. Ah, well, it is fate, and who shall question that? No; if you will pardon me, my dear Orrel, we will not talk further upon this subject, to-night, at any rate. I confess that what you have told me has affected me deeply. If you will permit me, I will go to bed. The Russians, you know, have a saying, 'Take thy thoughts to bed with thee, for the morning is wiser than the evening.' To-morrow, perhaps, I shall be able to converse with you on this momentous matter more calmly than I could do to-night."

"By all means, my dear prince," was the reply; "and, no doubt, such a course would be better for me too, for I admit that this extraordinary coincidence has upset me not a little as well. And so, good-night, and sound sleep."

"Ah, yes," replied the prince, as they shook hands at the door; "sound sleep. I hope so. Good-night, my lord, and pleasant dreams of the world-empire."

He turned away to his bedroom, which was the next but two to his daughter's. The intervening rooms were occupied by his valet and her maid. The valet's door was ajar, and there was a light in the room. He stopped, and said:

"I shall not want anything to-night, Felix, so you may go to bed. If I require you in the night I will knock on the wall, as usual."

"Bien, monseigneur," replied the valet, opening the door and bowing. "J'ai l'honneur de vous sous haïter le bon soir, monseigneur."

"Bon soir," replied the prince, as he passed on to his room. "Le chocolat a huit heures."

But Xavier de Condé, Prince of Bourbon, would never drink another cup of chocolate. As soon as his door closed behind him, a sternly-repressed flood of passion broke out, and he spent half the remainder of the night walking, in his stockinged feet, up and down his big bedchamber, with clenched teeth and tight-gripped hands, his brain seething with a thousand thoughts of passion, and his white, twitching lips shaping unspoken words of rage, bitterness, and despair. It was a cruel irony that Fate had wrought on him and his ancient house. The possible sceptre of the world had been offered to his hereditary enemies, the Republicans of France, and, if Fargeau had held to his compact, the compact for which he had given his daughter to his son, he would have been master of France; and Fargeau would have kept it, for he was a loyal Frenchman; and his son would have married a future Queen of France! And now not only had France refused the sceptre and snatched the crown from him, but the sceptre had passed by some bitter caprice of Fate into the hands of France's hereditary enemies. What could he say or do? Nothing. It was maddening—worse than maddening. He had pledged his honour, and could tell no one—but even if he could, what then? The secret was out—worse—it was in the hands of men who could make the ideal a reality. They could not even give him back the power if they would, for the knowledge was theirs already, and they could act on it while he could not.

The more he thought the faster the fever that was burning in his blood increased. His lips and tongue grew parched. His steps grew irregular and faltering. The veins in his head were beating on his brain like sledge-hammers. The lights began to waver before his eyes. He felt instinctively that madness—that long-inherited curse of his race—

was coming. What if he should really go mad and babble not only of this great secret, but also of all the plots and intrigues of which he had been the centre! How many devoted friends and adherents would be consigned to prison and exile—perhaps even to the scaffold! The very thought chilled him back into sanity for the time being. He rapped sharply at the wall, and presently Felix appeared, half-dressed, and doing his best to stifle a yawn.

"Felix," said the prince, who was now sitting in his arm-chair with his head between his hands, "bid Marie arouse mam'selle immediately, and request her to dress and come to me. I am unwell—another of my attacks, I fear—and she only knows what to do for me. Quick—I need her at once."

Felix vanished, and within ten minutes the marquise was in her father's room; but by this time the blood was beating on his brain again, and the fierce light of insanity was beginning to dawn in his eyes.

With the valet's help she partly undressed him and got him to bed. Then she locked the door and braced herself for what she instinctively knew must be a terrible ordeal.

She saw at a glance that some terrible shock had thrown his brain off its balance. She had plotted with him and for him, and she knew why it was her duty to lock the door. But what was this? Whence had come this blow which had struck him down so swiftly? She soon learnt, as the disjointed words and fragmentary sentences were shaped in the struggle between sanity and delirium for the command of his brain. Hour after hour it went on, a piteous jumble of the memories of a long, busy life; but in the end, out of the mental tangle she was able to unravel one clear thread of thought. Emil Fargeau had given his secret to the sea, and the sea had given it into the hands of the English, the ancient enemies of her country and her race; and it was the son of this Lord Orrel, the brother of the haughty English beauty sleeping here, under the same roof, who had re-discovered it, and they were even worse than English, they were half-American; and England and America would between them share that empire of the world, that mastery of the human race, which should have been her father's and hers. She had even permitted her troth to be sold to a simple officer in the German army, a spy in the enemy's camp, in order to purchase this new sovereignty for her house.

The prince was rapidly sinking; she could see that, and yet she was helpless to save him, for she had promised that no one, not even a doctor, should be admitted into the room. She gave him a dose of an opiate which he always carried with him, and about dawn he was sleeping, but every now and then talking in his sleep more coherently. At sunrise the effect of the drug wore off, and delirium resumed its sway for a few moments. His eyes opened, and with a sudden jerk he sat up in bed, his eyes glaring

at the opposite wall, and his fingers clutching and tearing at the bedclothes. His lips worked convulsively for a while, then, with a hoarse, croaking scream he died.

"France! O ma belle France, maitresse du monde—et moi ton roi, ton—ah——!"

His voice dropped suddenly in a low, soft sigh, his eyelids fell, and his arms shrank to his sides, and he rolled back into his daughter's arms. The fresh rush of blood to his head had broken a vessel on the brain.

Adelaide knew instinctively that the dead weight in her arms was not that of a living man. She laid him back on the pillows, called up Felix and sent him for the resident physician. When he had made his examination, he said, in his guttural French:

"Mam'selle la Marquise, there is no hope. The prince is dead. If I had been called earlier I might have done something. I will make an examination afterwards and certify the cause of death, according to law. Accept my most respectful condolences."

That evening Shafto Hardress arrived from Paris at the Hôtel Wilhelmshof.

## CHAPTER IX

In the midst of the desolation which had so swiftly and unexpectedly fallen upon her, the help and solace even of those whom she now knew to be her enemies—enemies perhaps to the death—were very welcome to Adelaide de Montpensier. Every sort of trouble that could be taken off her hands they relieved her of. Hardress travelled to Vienna, which the prince had made his headquarters, to interview his man of business and to escort back the prince's sister, Madame de Condé, Princess of Bourbon, who was now, save Adelaide, the only representative of the older branch of the ancient line. The younger had bowed the knee to the Republican Baal in France, and they were not even notified of the prince's death.

Lord Orrel undertook the arrangement of the funeral and all the legal formalities connected with it, and Lady Olive was so sweet and tender in her help and sympathy that, in the midst of her grief, Adelaide began to love her in spite of herself.

The funeral was without any display that might have signalised the rank of the dead man, and Louis Xavier de Condé, Prince of Bourbon, was laid to rest in an ordinary brick grave on the hillside under the pines of Elsenau. Both Adelaide and her aunt would have applied to the French authorities to permit his interment in the resting-place of his ancestors, but the old prince had given special instructions that while the Republican banner waved over France not even his dead body should rest in her soil, and so his wishes were, perforce, respected.

The night after the funeral the marquise was sitting at her writing-table before the window of her private sitting-room. The window looked out over a vast expanse of undulating forest land, broken here and there by broad grassy valleys through which ran little tributaries of the Weser, shining like tiny threads of silver under the full moon riding high in the heavens.

She had drawn the blind up, and for nearly half-an-hour she had been gazing dreamily out over the sombre, almost ghostly landscape. The deep gloom of the far-spreading pine forest harmonised exactly with her own mood, and yet the twinkle of the streams amidst the glades, and the glitter of the stars on the far-off horizon, were to her as symbols of a light shining over and beyond the present darkness of her soul.

The night had fallen swiftly and darkly upon her. First the vanishing into impenetrable mystery of the man upon whom rested her hopes and dreams of one day queening it over France as her ancestress Marie Antoinette had done, and not only over France as a kingdom, but as mistress of the world. And now the veil of mystery had been rudely torn aside, and showed her these English and Americans, the hated hereditary enemies of her house and country, in possession of the power which should have been hers. Then, last and worst of all, her father and her friend, the only real friend she had ever had, the only human being she had ever really loved—for she barely remembered the mother who had died when she was scarcely out of her cradle—had been stricken down by the same blow that had fallen upon her, and lay yonder on the hillside under the pines, all his high hopes and splendid ambitions brought to nothing by the swift agony of a single night.

There was an open book on the table before her—a square volume, daintily bound in padded Russia-leather, and closed with a silver spring lock. A gold-mounted stylographic pen lay beside it, and she held between her fingers a little cunningly contrived silver key which she had just detached from her watch-chain.

"Shall I write it," she murmured, in a soft, low tone, "or shall I keep it hidden where no human eyes can read it? But who can ever read this?" she went on after a little pause, letting her hand fall on the square volume. "After all, are not all my secrets here? and is not this the only friend and confidant that I have now left to me? Yes, I am a woman, when all is said; and I must open my heart to someone, if only to myself."

She turned the little shaded lamp by her side so that the light fell on the volume, and she put the key in the lock and opened it. About half the pages were filled with writing—not in words, but in a kind of shorthand which could only be read by her father, herself, and three of the most trusted adherents of their lost cause. Her eyes ran rapidly over the last few pages. They contained the last chapters in the book of her

life which was now closed. Before she reached the end a mist of tears was gathering in her long, dark lashes. She wiped it away with a little lace-edged handkerchief, and took up her pen. She scored two heavy lines across the bottom of the last written page, turned over a fresh one, and began to write.

"My father is dead, and with him the dreams which for years we have dreamt together. Was there ever a more cruel irony of Fate than this? Was Fate itself ever more unkind to man or woman? Only a few weeks ago, and I had sold myself, with his consent, so far did our devotion go to serve the sacred cause of our house, to this big, handsome Alsatian—a servant of the German Emperor, the arch-enemy of our country, the owner of the two provinces which my ancestor Louis tore from Germany. I did it because in high politics it is necessary sometimes to sacrifice oneself, partly too because no other man had appealed to me as he did. I knew that he was running tremendous risks; I believed—yes, and I still believe, that he was risking everything—rank, honour, liberty, even life itself, by wearing the uniform of his country's enemy so that he might learn his enemy's secrets.

"He loves me—yes, if ever man loved woman, he loves me—me, Adelaide de Condé, Marquise de Montpensier; and I—ah, mon Dieu, is it possible that the daughter of Marie Antoinette has sunk so low?—I allowed him to believe that I loved him too. He believes it now. I suppose he would still believe it, even if he knew what I know now—that his father is dead, that the secret of the world-empire which he could have given us, that power for which I promised myself to him, so that I might share it with him, has gone, that it is worse than lost, since the Fates have given it into the hands of the enemies of our house.

"And so it is gone—worse than gone—and so, my friend Victor, I am afraid you will have to find out in the course of circumstances that a woman's smiles do not always mean a reflection of the light in her lover's eyes, and that her kisses do not always mean love. It is a pity, because, after all, I believe you are a true Frenchman, even if you wear a German uniform; and if that dream had become a reality, and you and I had shared the throne of France, perhaps I should have loved you as well and as truly as most queens have loved their consorts.

"But, alas, my poor Victor, the sceptre has passed away—for the time being, at least—from the House of Bourbon. It is given into the hands of our enemies, and so you, by force of fate, must stand aside. I shall not tell you this yet, because afterwards, perhaps, you may be useful. I wonder what you would think of me—even you, a man who in the old days would only have been a sort of slave, living or dying socially as the great Louis smiled or frowned upon you—I wonder what you would think if you could

look over my shoulder and read this writing and see a woman's soul laid naked on this page. Perhaps you might think me utterly mean and contemptible—you would if you didn't understand; but if you did, if you could see all and understand all—well, then, you might hate me, but I think you would be man enough to respect me.

"At least you are diplomatist enough to know, after all, in the great game of politics, a game that is played for the mastery of kingdoms and peoples, to say nothing of the empire of the world, women have to count themselves as pawns. Even the cleverest, the most brilliant, the most beautiful of us—that is all we are. Sometimes our beauty or the charm of our subtle wit may win the outer senses of the rulers of the world; they may admire us physically or mentally, or both, but even at the best, it is only the man that we enslave. The man goes to sleep for a night, he dreams perhaps of our beauty and the delight of our society, but in the morning it is the statesman that wakes, and he looks back on the little weakness of the night before, and thinks of us as an ordinary man might think of the one extra liqueur which he ought not to have taken after a good dinner.

"And now these English—these people into whose hands Fate has given my heritage! Ah, cruel Fate; why did you not make them hateful, vulgar, common—something that I could hate and tread under foot—something that I could think as far beneath me as the bourgeois canaille of Republican France? But you have made them aristocratic! Lord Orrel's lineage goes back past the days of St Louis. His ancestors fought side by side with mine in the first Crusade. True, they have mixed their blood with that American froth, the skimming of the pot-bouillé of the nations, but still, after all, the old blood tells.

"Lady Olive—how I wish that she were either vulgar or ugly, so that I could hate her!—is a daughter of the Plantagenets fit to mate with a Prince of Bourbon, if there were one worthy of her. Lord Orrel might have been one of those who went with the Eighth Henry to meet Francis on the Field of the Cloth of Gold, patrician in every turn of voice and manner and movement. And Shafto Hardress, who will be Earl of Orrel some day, and master of the world: yes, he is a patrician too; but with him there is something a little different—the American blood perhaps—keen, quick, alert, one moment indolently smoking his cigar and sipping his coffee, the next on his feet, ready to assume the destinies of nations. A man, too, strong and kindly—a man who would risk his life to save a drowning dog, and yet strike down an enemy in his path, so that he might rise a foot or so on the ladder of fame or power. But he is more than that, he wants far more than the empty fame of applause. The fame he wants is that which comes from acknowledged power. You can see the dreamer in his eyes and on his

forehead, and you can see the doer on that beautiful, pitiless mouth of his and the square, strong jaw which is under it.

"What a man to love and to be loved by! What would he think, I wonder, if he could read what I am writing here! And yet, are not all things possible? Is it not the unexpected that comes to pass? Why not? Behold, I am left desolate, the garden that I called my heart is a wilderness—a wilderness ploughed up by the ploughshare of sorrow and bitterness, and so it lies fallow. Would it be possible for him to sow the seed for which it is waiting?—and then the harvest would be the empire of the world shared between us! Well, after all, I am not only Adelaide de Condé, daughter of a lost dynasty. I am a woman, with all the passions and ambitions of our race burning hot within me. If I cannot sit on the throne of the Bourbons, why should I not be empress-consort on the throne of a world-wide empire?—why not? It would be a magnificent destiny!"

When she had written this she laid her pen down, put her elbows on the table, and, with her chin between her hands, looked up in silence for some minutes at the moon sailing through rank after rank of fleecy clouds. Then she took up her pen again, and wrote:

"I wonder if there is another woman?"

She looked at the last words for a moment or two, then put down her pen, closed the book and locked it, and, as she put it away into a drawer of her writing-table, she murmured:

"Ah, well, if there is—if there is——" She caught a sight of herself in the long glass of one of the wardrobes, and she saw a tall, exquisitely-shaped figure of a beautiful woman clad in the plainest of mourning. She looked at herself with eyes of unsparing criticism, and found no fault, and she turned away from the glass, saying:

"Ah, well, if there is—we shall see—and, if there really is, I wonder what she's like."

## CHAPTER X

Within a week after the funeral Adelaide and Madame de Condé returned to the late prince's hotel on the Ringstrasse in Vienna. They had taken most cordial leave of Lord Orrel and his son and daughter, and, in spite of all their prejudices of race and nation, Adelaide de Condé had brought something more away with her than the memory of a great sorrow tempered by the kindness of those whom a strange freak of fortune had made friends as well as enemies.

Even the two or three days that she had spent in his society had sufficed to show her that Shafto Hardress possessed in an infinitely greater degree those qualities which go to make the rulers of humanity than her big handsome Alsatian, whose utmost ambition was the command of an army corps. He had the hard, keen, unemotional common-sense which enabled him to see even the tremendous possibilities of Emil Fargeau's discovery in a purely practical and even commercial light, but at the same time he possessed sufficient imagination to enable him to see how far-reaching the moral and social effects of the working-out of the scheme would be on the peoples of the world.

She had herself said nothing of what had passed during that terrible night. For all they knew, the prince had taken the secret with him to the grave. Once Lord Orrel had very delicately led the conversation up as near to the edge of this supremely important subject as his instincts would let him go, but he had learnt nothing, and an hour or so later he said to his son:

"My dear Shafto, it is perfectly certain that my dear old friend the prince died without giving her any inkling of the great secret which he took to the grave with him."

"Either that, dad," he replied, "or she is the most perfect diplomatist in Europe. I think I have heard you say that the first essential of diplomacy is the ability to assume a perfect counterfeit of innocence and ignorance—in other words, to convey the impression that you know nothing when you know everything."

"Well, if that is so in this case," replied his father, "the mask which mam'selle wears is as impenetrable as it is beautiful. Really, Shafto, I think that rumour did not exaggerate when it called her the most beautiful woman in Europe."

"Yes," said Hardress, slowly; "she certainly is very lovely, and, from the little I've seen of her, she seems as gifted as she is beautiful."

"Then, my dear boy, if you really think that," said Lord Orrel, "how would it be if you were to repair this involuntary injustice which the Fates have wrought upon her? The most beautiful woman in Europe, and perhaps the most nobly born, and you one of the masters of the world! Why not? There is the realisation of a dream even greater than the prince's; and if I have any skill in reading a woman's face or woman's eyes, it is a dream not very difficult for you to realise."

Hardress laughed, and shook his head, and said:

"No, dad; I'm afraid that's not difficult. It's impossible."

The earl looked up sharply, and said:

"Oh, then, of course, there is someone else in the case; and that can hardly be anyone but——"

"You're quite right, dad; it's Chrysie Vandel. I meant to tell you before, but such a lot of things have happened since I got here, and I didn't really think it was of very much consequence for the present—because, after all, she's only accepted me conditionally—but, lovely and all as the marquise is, I think I would rather rule over the Orrel estates with Chrysie than over the world with her."

"Then that, of course, settles it," said the earl, with a certain note of displeasure in his voice. "Miss Vandel is a most charming and fascinating girl, but you will perhaps pardon me, Shafto, if I say that she no more compares with the daughter of the royal line of France than——"

"You needn't go on, dad," said Hardress, interrupting him with a laugh; "comparisons are always more or less unpleasant; and then, you see, you're not in love with either of them, and I'm pretty badly in love with one."

"Well, well," said his father, "of course, if that's the case, there's an end of it, and there's nothing more to be said. Still, for more reasons than one, I must say that I wish you had met the marquise first. The Plantagenets and the Bourbons would have made a splendid stock."

On the same day that this conversation took place in the gardens of the Hôtel Wilhelmshof in Elsenau, a very different one was taking place in the prince's hotel at Vienna between Adelaide de Condé and Victor Fargeau, who, on receipt of the news of the prince's death, had obtained a few days' leave, and travelled post-haste from Petersburg to Vienna.

It was after dinner, and Madame de Condé had retired to her own room with a slight attack of nerves. The marquise and Victor Fargeau were sitting on either side of the open fireplace, with a little table, holding coffee and liqueurs, between them. Adelaide had accepted a cigarette from his case, and he had lit one too. For several minutes after her aunt had left the room she puffed daintily at her cigarette, and looked across at him with intricately-mingled feelings. At length Victor broke the silence by saying, with a note of impatience in his tone:

"And now, Mam'selle la Marquise, or, if you like it better, my most beautiful Adelaide, I have possessed my soul in patience for nearly two hours. When are you going to tell me this wonderful news of yours?"

"Wonderful, my dear Victor? Alas, it is not only that; it is most sorrowful as well." Then, bracing herself with a visible effort, she threw her half-smoked cigarette into the fireplace, and, gripping the arms of the big chair in which she was sitting, she went on, staring straight into his eyes: "It is nothing less than the story of how your father met his end, and what became of his great secret."

"Nom de Dieu!" he cried, springing to his feet; "you know that, and from whom?"

"From these English and Americans—or Anglo-Americans, as I suppose I ought to call them," she replied; "the people to whom the Fates gave the secret with your father's dead and mutilated body; the people who buried him—the man who might have been the saviour of France—in a nameless English grave."

She kept her voice as steady as she could while she was saying this; she even tried to speak coldly and pitilessly, for she had made up her mind that the reasons of state for her betrothal to this man no longer existed. She had an even higher stake to play for now, and, in spite of all her pride of blood and racial prejudice, this would not be a sacrifice; on the contrary, it would be rather a victory—and so she hardened her voice, as she had done her heart.

"Dead! mutilated!" he exclaimed again. "Yes; I knew he was dead, for he told me in his letter from Paris that he would not, and could not, survive the failure of all his hopes. There were reasons why he should not, but they are of no consequence now. He staked everything, and lost everything, and that is enough. It is not for me to be his judge, now that he has gone to the presence of the highest Judge of all."

"That was said like a good son and a true man, Victor," replied the marquise, with a swift glance of something like admiration at his flushed and handsome face. "But there is something more serious than even the death of one whom you have loved and I have most deeply respected. I heard enough from my own father, during the night he died, to convince me that these people have not only got the secret, but that they are already devoting millions to convert your father's theory into a terrible reality."

"This Viscount Branston, Lord Orrel's son, has already been across to America, and has leased the land about the Magnetic Pole from the Canadian Government. A syndicate has been formed, and even at this very moment the preliminaries of the work are being pushed forward as rapidly as possible. Within a few months they will have begun the storage station itself, and then nothing can save the world from the irresistible power which will be theirs."

While she was speaking, Victor was striding up and down the dining-room, his hands clasped behind his back, and his frowning eyes bent on the thick carpet. Suddenly he stopped and faced her, and said, in sharp, almost passionate accents:

"Perhaps it is not too late after all. My father left me those papers in duplicate. I am weary—sick to death of playing this double game. In a few months war between France and Germany will be inevitable. Russia will side with us, and the prize of the victors will be—for France, the restoration of the Lost Provinces, and a good fat slice of China, and for Russia the whole of Northern China and Korea. Germany hasn't a friend on earth. The English hate her because she is beating them in trade rivalry; Austria has no more forgotten Sadowa than we have forgotten Sedan. Italy is crippled for lack of money, and so is Spain. The rest don't matter; and England and America will be only too glad to stand aside and see Europe tear itself to pieces. So France and Russia will win, and we shall crush our conqueror into the dust."

"But how can that be?" she interrupted, "if your father's calculations were correct—as these people have evidently found them to be—for if they had not done so they would not have risked their millions on them. From what you and he have told me of his discovery, once these works are set in operation round the Magnetic Pole, fighting will be impossible, save with the permission of those who own them. Metals, as he proved in his last experiment, will become brittle as glass, cannons and rifles will burst at the first shot, even swords and bayonets will be no more use than icicles; steam-engines will cease to work, and the world will go back to the age of wood and stone."

"Picture to yourself, my dear Victor, the armed millions of Europe facing each other, unable to fire a shot, or even to make a bayonet charge. Fancy the fleets of Russia and France and Germany laid up like so many worn-out hulks. No, no, my friend; there can be no talk of serious war while these people possess the power of preventing it at their will."

"But war there must and shall be!" he exclaimed. "I have not been a traitor to my country even in appearance, I have not worn this German uniform—this livery of slavery—for nothing. I have not wormed my way into the confidence of my superiors, I have not risked something worse than death to discover the details of Germany's next campaign against France, to have all my work brought to nothing at the eleventh hour by these English-Americans. No, there may be time even yet; I have risked much, and I will risk more; and you, Adelaide, will you help me? Will you keep the compact which your father made with mine?"

She had been growing paler all the time he had been speaking, knowing instinctively what was coming. She rose slowly from her chair, and said, almost falteringly:

"What do you mean, Victor? How can I help you, when these people already have the secret in their hands, and have been spending their millions for weeks? What can we do against them?"

"We can do this," he replied, stopping again in his walk; "my father pledged his honour as well as everything else he had in the world to insure the success of this scheme. I, his son, can do no less; I will pledge mine in the same cause. I am on leave, and I can wear plain clothes. To-morrow I will start for Paris and see if I cannot bring that pig-headed Minister of War to something like reason. I think I have a suggestion which he will find worth working out, and certainly he will be interested in other things that I shall put before him. Germany I have done with. I have worn the livery of shame too long. Henceforth I am what I was born—a Frenchman. I will resign my commission to-morrow, even if France lets me starve for it. I can easily do that, for the son of a disgraced man cannot remain in the German army, and my poor father disgraced himself to make France the mistress of the world. A miserable Jew in Strassburg holds the honour of our family in his hand. I have no money to redeem it, and so it must go."

She had almost said, "Victor, I am rich; let me redeem it," when she remembered that she was no longer more loyal to him than he was to Germany. All the while that he had been talking she had been thinking, almost against her will, of Shafto Hardress, and comparing him only too favourably with this man, who, however honourable his motives might seem to himself, was still a traitor and a spy. Instead of this, she said, rising and holding out her hand, "Well, Victor, so far as I can help you I will. We are going to Paris ourselves in a few days, and, by the way, that reminds me I had a letter from Sophie Valdemar only this morning, telling me that she and the count are going there too."

"Ah yes," replied Victor; "a mixture of diplomacy and pleasure, I've no doubt. I wonder what the fair Sophie would give to know what you and I know, Adelaide?"

"A good deal, no doubt," smiled Adelaide, as they shook hands. "Of one thing I'm quite certain; if Russia had the knowledge that you are going to give to France, Russia would find some means of making those storage works an impossibility."

"And that is exactly what I propose to persuade France to do, if possible; but we can talk that over better when we meet in Paris. And now, my Adelaide, good-night."

He clasped her hand and drew her towards him; for the fraction of a second she drew back, and then she yielded and submitted to his kiss; but when the door had closed behind him, she drew the palm of her hand across her lips with a gesture almost of disgust, and said:

"No, my Victor; that must be the last. You cannot afford a Princess of Bourbon now. I sold myself for statecraft which is craft no longer; and, besides, there is another now. Ah, well, I wonder what will happen in Paris? And Sophie Valdemar, too, and the count! Altogether, I think we shall make quite an interesting little party when we meet in la Ville Lumière."

## CHAPTER XI

Ten days had passed since Victor Fargeau's conversation with Adelaide de Condé in Vienna. He had adhered to the decision that he had come to so suddenly under the spell of her wonderful eyes.

He had no family ties now. His mother had died several years before. His two sisters had married Frenchmen, and migrated with their husbands into Normandy. The estate in Alsace, which should have been his own patrimony, was lost, and the German Jew, Weinthal, held not only that but the honour of his family, the good name of his dead father, in his hands. So he had decided to cut himself adrift from his native land until it had become once more a part of France.

He had written to Petersburg and resigned his position on the Diplomatic Staff, and he had also written to headquarters resigning his commission, and telling enough of his father's story to show that, since it was impossible for him now, as a man with a tarnished name, to hold his head up amongst his brother officers, there was nothing left for him but retirement into civil life.

A reply had come back, to the effect that the circumstances of his very painful case were under consideration, and that he need not report himself for duty until the general of the division to which he was attached had given his decision.

He knew that this was equivalent to an acceptance of his resignation. Even though he had asked for it, his dismissal galled him. He knew perfectly well that he had only entered the German army for the purposes of revenge, that in honest language he could only be described as a traitor and a spy—a man who had deliberately abused his position and the confidence of his superiors to get possession of plans of fortresses, details of manœuvres, lines of communication, available rolling-stock, and points of entry which had been selected for possible invasion.

He had, in fact, done more than even Dreyfus was ever accused of, and now, since everything else was lost, he was determined to take the last step. He would throw off his enforced allegiance to Germany; he would take the wreck of his fortunes with him to France, and he would offer her his services and his information. He knew well enough that they would not be rejected, as his father's priceless discovery had been.

What he possessed would be bought eagerly by any of the chancelleries of Europe. The French Ministry of War would not refuse his services as it had refused his father's.

Even now some means might be found to checkmate these English-Americans. Already a scheme, daring and yet practicable, was shaping itself in his mind, and if that succeeded he might still achieve the one desire of his life and call Adelaide de Condé his own. For the present, although she had said nothing at that last interview, he felt that a change had come into their relationship. Her words had been more formal and more measured, and her last kiss colder than before. He felt that he was on his trial; that if he did not achieve something great she was lost to him.

And then there was the other—this English-American—who had not only got the Great Secret, but the millions to put it into practice. He knew her high ambitions. He knew that if she had to choose between love for a man, and the fulfilment of a great project, the man would have but little chance. But he had loved her since he knew the meaning of the word, and he had resolved to risk everything that was left to him to win back what had once been within his grasp. If in the end he failed and the other man won—well, so much the worse for the other man.

And then there was Sophie Valdemar. Even if this English-American did take Adelaide from him——But that was another matter, the fragment of a possible destiny which still lay upon the knees of the gods. If the worst came to the worst, what would Russia not give to know all that he knew and all that was contained in the only legacy that his father had left him.

So thinking, he travelled to Paris, leaving his uniform behind him, and dressed just as an ordinary man about town, quietly, but with exquisite care and neatness.

As soon as he had settled himself in a modest hotel in one of the streets of the Avenue de l'Opé, he wrote a discreetly-worded note to one of the secretaries of the Ministry of War, a former schoolfellow of his, with whom he had had previous communications of a confidential sort, asking him to arrange a private interview for him with the Minister at the earliest possible date, and, if possible, to dine with him the next evening. The next morning he called to pay his respects to Madame de Bourbon and the marquise at the hotel they had taken in the Avenue Neuilly.

He met the marquise alone in the salon. She received him quietly and almost coldly—but this he had expected.

"So you have finally decided," she said. "I thought from your letter that you would do so. How very different you look *en civile*! Really, although we naturally hate the sight of

them, still, it must be admitted that those German uniforms do make a good-looking man look his best."

"Yes," replied Victor, choking down his chagrin as best he might; "to a certain extent it is true, after all, that the feathers make the bird, and so, of course, the clothes make the man. Still, I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to tolerate me for the future without my German plumage. As you say, I have made my decision. I have broken with Germany for ever. Henceforth, I am a son of France—and, Adelaide, I have come to ask a daughter of France to help me to serve her."

"Of France!" she echoed, drawing herself up, and looking at him with a half-angry glint in her eyes, "of what France? Of this nation of snobs and shopkeepers, ruled by a combination of stockbrokers, heavy-witted bourgeoisie and political adventurers? or the old France—my France—the France of my ancestors, as it was in the days when the great Louis said: 'L'état c'est moi'? The one is not worth saving; the other might be worth restoring."

"But this France of the bourgeoisie must first be saved, so that we may make out of it the foundation for the throne of the great Louis. If we succeed, Adelaide, as it is still possible that we may do, we shall be strong enough to abolish the salic law and to enthrone you as Empress of the French."

"Of France, if you please! My ancestors were Kings of France. Even the Corsican dared only style himself Emperor of the French. You seem to forget that I am a daughter of the Bourbons, a scion of the older line, and that therefore France is my personal heritage. But come," she went on, with a swift change of tone and manner, "it will be time enough to talk about that when I am nearer to my inheritance than I am now. You said that you wanted my help—how? What can I do now, left alone as I am?"

"Not quite alone, Adelaide," he said, half reproachfully. "Have I not given up everything, even, as some would say, sacrificed honour itself, to help you to win back that which is your own by every right? And you can help me as no one else can. I have a friend in the Ministry of War—Gaston Leraulx, one of the secretaries. We were school-fellows and college friends. He is to dine with me to-night, and he will arrange an interview with the Minister of War. I shall ask you to come with me to that interview."

"What do you say, Victor? You wish me, a princess of the House of Bourbons to enter the bureau of one of these ministers—these politicians who are ruling in the place of the old noblesse—men whom we might perhaps have employed as lacqueys?"

"That is true," he replied; "but remember, Adelaide, that time brings its differences. My ancestors were nobles when yours were kings. If the old order of things is to be restored we must use these people as means to an end. I ask you to come with me to the Minister of War, so that you may help me to convince him, from your own knowledge, of the terrible mistake that he made when he refused to entertain the project that my father placed before him.

"You can tell him that strange story of how my father in his despair committed his body and his secret to the sea; how the sea gave it up into the hands of our worst enemies—the enemies of yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow—England and America; and how, even now, they are spending their millions upon that upon which France would not even risk a few paltry thousands.

"When I place my papers before him he will see that they are identical with my father's, and I shall give him others which will make it impossible for him to doubt my faith; and you, you will be there to help me with your knowledge, with the prestige of your name, and with your beauty. The General may be all that you think him, but do not forget that he is a Frenchman, and that all Frenchmen who are not quite mad respect and admire at least two things——"

"And those are—what?" she said, taking a couple of steps towards him, and speaking in a low, earnest tone. "Am I to understand you to mean that this man—I know that he is one of the most able men that France can boast of—might perhaps be made an instrument of?"

"I mean," said Victor, taking her hand unresistingly, "that General Ducros is himself an aristocrat, a man whose forefathers served yours well; that he is a Frenchman whose spirit will recognise yours as being of similar lineage, whose eyes will not be blind, and whose ears will not be deaf. Surely, Adelaide, you see by this time what I mean: you see how, with you, I may succeed in everything, and, without you, I may fail. And, remember, if I fail there is an end of everything. This is our last hope. If it is not realised, these accursed English and Americans will be masters of the situation, masters of the world, indeed. Surely, Adelaide, for the sake of all that is past and all that may be to come you will not say no?"

"No, Victor; I will not," she replied, still allowing her hand to rest in his, and yet thinking the while of that other man, whose face was ever present to her eyes, and whose voice was ever echoing in her ears. "I will visit this Minister of yours with you. His name is good, and perhaps he may not be unworthy of it. At any rate, he is not disgraced by one of those new titles of the First or Second Empire. If I can help you I will; trust me

for that. When it is arranged send me a telegram and our carriage is at your disposal. Ah, who is this?"

At this moment the door opened, and the lacquey announced:

"Monsieur le Comte de Valdemar; Ma'm'selle la Comtesse de Valdemar."

Victor Fargeau saw at a glance that the count and Sophie were dressed in half-mourning, and instantly divined that their visit was one of condolence. This, of course, gave him a most excellent excuse to make his adieux.

There was just a glimmer of taunting mockery in Sophie's brilliant eyes as she recognised the dashing young cavalry officer in the sober garb of civil life, but it passed like a flash, and as they shook hands she said:

"A most unexpected meeting, captain!" And then, with a look of frank challenge, "No doubt it is most important business that has brought you to Paris *en civile*."

"It is not without importance, countess, at least to my own poor and presently insignificant self. Whether," he went on, with a swift involuntary glance at Adelaide, who was receiving the condolences of the count, "it will ever be of importance to others is one of the secrets of fate; and, if so, you, who are no doubt justly credited with knowing half the secrets of Europe, will probably be one of the first to discover the fact."

"I wonder whether that is intended for a compliment or the reverse," said Sophie, with a look of challenge coming back into her eyes. "You see, captain, there are two sorts of people who are supposed to know everything—diplomatists and spies."

Her voice dropped almost to a whisper as she spoke the last word.

Victor did his best to preserve his composure, but Sophie's watchful eyes saw that the shot had gone home; still, the next moment he replied, with the stiff wooden-doll bow of the German officer, and without a tremor in his voice:

"It would be quite impossible that mam'selle could be anything but one of the two."

As he raised his head she looked into his eyes again, and laughed outright.

"Well hit, captain! that was very nicely put. I think you and I would make better friends than enemies, and in proof of my belief, let me tell you a secret which is not of Europe. An Anglo-American syndicate has for some reason or other leased several square miles round the Magnetic Pole in Boothia Land, British North America."

"Really! And might I ask why? It doesn't seem to be a very profitable investment in landed property."

"Who knows?" said Sophie, with a little shrug of her shapely shoulders. "These English and Americans, you know, are always doing the maddest things. I shouldn't wonder if they intended to turn the *Aurora borealis* into electric light for Chicago."

"Nor I," said Victor. "And now, if you will permit me, I must say Au revoir."

"I wonder how much our ex-captain really knows, and if my dear friend Adelaide here knows anything or not," said Sophie, in her soul, when Victor had made his adieux and the door closed behind him.

## CHAPTER XII

It was not until four days later that Victor's friend in the Ministry of War was able to procure an appointment for him with General Ducros. Pressure of business was Captain Gaston Leraux' explanation, and it was an honest one. What he did not know was that on the evening of the day when Count Valdemar and his daughter paid their visit of condolence to Adelaide de Condé, General Ducros dined with them.

They had no other guest, for the best of reasons. Countess Sophie, the omniscient, by means of a happy accident, had got a fairly clear idea of the outlines of the Great Storage Scheme. The servants of the White Tzar are everywhere, known or unknown, generally the latter. A Russian trapper happened to meet a French-Canadian voyageur in Montreal when Shafto Hardress was making his negotiations with the Canadian Government. They had a few drinks and a talk over the extraordinary deal that he had made with the Canadian Government, a deal which had been reported and commented on by the Canadian and American journals with the usual luxuriance of speculative imagination. The same night the voyageur and the trapper, both men who were living on the products of their season's hunting and trapping, cabled practically the same details to Paris and Petersburg.

The voyageur's telegram had gone to General Ducros; and he, with the instinct of a soldier and a statesman, had instantly connected it with the greatest mistake that he had made in his life, his refusal to entertain the proposal which Doctor Emil Fargeau had laid before him. He saw that he had refused even to examine a scheme which this Anglo-American syndicate had somehow got hold of and thought it worth their while to spend thousands of pounds even in preliminary development. As he said to himself when the unwelcome news came to him, "I have committed a crime—for I have made a mistake, and for statesmen mistakes are something worse than crimes."

As soon as the Russian trapper's message had reached Count Valdemar, he immediately discussed it with his daughter, who over and over again had given proof of an almost clairvoyant insight into the most difficult and intricate concerns of international diplomacy. The moment she saw it her instinct led her back to the reception at the German Embassy in Petersburg.

"It was all very easy, after all, general," she said, when the dinner was over, and the coffee and liqueurs were on the table. "If you will pardon me saying so, it is in cases like this that the intuition of the woman outstrips the logical faculty of the man. You have asked me how I discovered the connection between the interview between yourself and Doctor Fargeau, which, as you say, ended somewhat unhappily for France, and this extraordinary purchase of a seemingly worthless landed property by Viscount Hardress."

"Ah yes," said the general, knocking the ash off his cigarette. "Statesmen are not supposed to make mistakes, but to you, Ma'm'selle, and Monsieur le Comte, I must confess, to my most intense chagrin, the man was an Alsatian, and had accepted the new order of things in the provinces, he was a German subject, and his son was a German officer on the general staff. What could I think?"

"My dear general," replied Sophie, after a long whiff at her yellow Russian cigarette, "your conclusions were perfectly just under the circumstances. But when you have had your interview with Captain Fargeau and my dear friend the marquise, I think you will find that, after all, they were erroneous. Do you not think so, papa?"

"I fancy," replied the count, slowly, "that when you have made your explanations to the general, he will agree with you."

"Very well, then, general, I will spin my little thread before you, and you shall see whether it holds together or not. First, there was that snatch of a conversation that I heard at the German Embassy reception in Petersburg. Captain Fargeau was talking with the late Prince de Condé, and he was called away by one of the servants. From another source I knew afterwards that he had received a telegram from Strassburg. He came back, and made a pretence of dancing with my very dear friend, Adelaide de Condé. They went out into the winter garden, just in front of myself and my partner. I heard him tell her that 'he' had succeeded, and gone to Paris.

"You have told me of his father's visit to you. The chief part of his scheme was the building of these works round the Magnetic Pole in Boothia Land. The prince and Adelaide go to a little out-of-the-way place in Germany, called Elsenau. The fashionable papers told us that. They also told us that Lord Orrel and his daughter

were there; and almost the same day arrives this Viscount Branston, Lord Orrel's son. The prince suddenly and mysteriously dies—as they say, from the bursting of a blood-vessel on the brain. Of course, all the papers tell us of that, and also that Viscount Branston goes to Vienna and brings back Madame de Bourbon, who is here now, in Paris, with Adelaide.

"Before this, you and my father have the telegrams from our good friends out yonder in Canada. Then the Canadian and American papers confirm this, and tell us that this same Viscount Branston has leased this very spot of seemingly worthless land, which was, as you tell us, essential to the carrying out of Emil Fargeau's scheme, and that a great Anglo-American syndicate has been formed to build an observatory there, or a central station for the control of wireless telegraphy throughout the world; and so on. No doubt the newspaper stories are as familiar to you as they are to us. Now, general, do you see the connection between that scrap of conversation I heard in Petersburg, and the purchase of that patch of snow-covered rock in Boothia Land?"

"Ma'm'selle," replied the general, "it is not a thread, but a chain, and there is not a weak link in it. It is perfectly plain now that there is a connection between this German officer, at present on leave in Paris, and these English and Americans who have somehow become possessed of the details of the scheme which I so unfortunately rejected. Still, until we have heard what Captain Fargeau and your friend the Marquise de Montpensier, whom I am to have the honour of receiving to-morrow, have to say, it would not, I think, be wise to conclude that they have entered into a conspiracy with those whom I may describe as our common enemies."

"That, general, I do not believe for a moment," said the count. "All their interests lie the other way. They have as much reason to dislike England and America as we have; and, until I know to the contrary, I shall prefer to believe that the Marquise de Montpensier, a daughter of the Bourbons, is a friend to France, and therefore, through France, to Russia."

"And I believe that too," said Sophie. "As far as England and America are concerned, the interests of France and Russia are identical. If these arrogant Anglo-Saxons are ever to be put into their proper place, Russia and France must do it: and, to begin with, by some means or other, this scheme must be frustrated. And now, general, I have given you a little information to-night, and I am going to ask a little favour in return."

"It shall be granted, if possible. Ma'm'selle has only to ask it."

"There is, I believe," said Sophie, putting her arms on the table, "a little apartment leading out of your own bureau at the Ministry of War?"

General Ducros could not help raising his eyelids a little, for he knew that neither Sophie nor her father had ever been in that room, but he dropped them again instantly, and said:

"That is perfectly true, ma'm'selle; it is a little apartment, devoted to my own private use. In fact, to tell you the truth, I am sometimes there when it is convenient for my secretary to prove by ocular demonstration to some more or less important personage that I am not at home, and that, in consequence of my unavoidable absence, an undesirable interview has to be postponed."

"Exactly," laughed Sophie. "Such things are not unknown elsewhere; and I am going to ask you, general, for the use of that room during your interview to-morrow with the Marquise de Montpensier and Captain Fargeau. In other words, I wish to be present at the interview without doing anything to interrupt the smooth course of the proceedings."

"Ma'm'selle knows so much already that there is no reason why she should not know more," replied the general, not very cordially; "but, of course, it is understood, as a matter of honour between ourselves, that in this matter we are allies, as our countries are."

"Undoubtedly," replied the count. "It would, indeed, be mutually impossible for it to be otherwise."

"Then," said Sophie, "we will consider that a bargain. My father and I will call shortly before the captain and Adelaide reach the Ministry, and afterwards——"

"And afterwards, my dear general, if you will allow me to interrupt you," said the count, "I would suggest that we should have a little dinner here, to which Sophie will invite Madame de Bourbon and the marquise, as well as Captain Fargeau; a dinner which, if you will permit me to say so, may possibly be of historic interest; an occasion upon which, perhaps, the alliance between France and Russia will be cemented by a mutual agreement and arrangement to outwit these English-Americans, and secure the world-empire for France and Russia."

General Ducros assented. He saw that, owing to the fatal mistake he had made when he rejected Emil Fargeau's scheme, he was now, thanks to the subtle intellect of Sophie Valdemar, forced to share the possibility of obtaining that world-empire with Russia, the ally whose friendship had already cost France so dearly, an ally to whom France had paid millions for a few empty assurances and one or two brilliant scenes in the international spectacular drama. No one knew better than he did how worthless this alliance really was to France, and that night he reproached himself bitterly for

letting slip the chance of making France independent of her blood-sucking ally. Still, by an extraordinary combination of chance and skill, Sophie Valdemar had got the necessary knowledge of the great secret, and, perforce, he had to share it with her and Russia.

Punctually at eleven o'clock the next morning Adelaide de Condé and Victor Fargeau were admitted to the bureau of the Minister of War. The interview was very different from the one that he had granted to the man whom his scepticism had practically driven to his death, and so placed the great secret in the hands of his country's enemies. It was also much shorter. When, at the outset, the general had addressed Victor as Captain Fargeau, he replied:

"Pardon, general, I am captain no longer, nor am I any longer a German. I have resigned. Henceforth I am a Frenchman in fact, as I have always been in heart. You would not believe that of my father, but I will prove it to you of myself."

"My dear sir," replied the general, "no one could be more delighted to hear such news as that than I; and I can promise you that, in that case, an appointment—not, of course, an acknowledged one, since you are not now legally a Frenchman—shall be placed at your disposal."

Adelaide turned her head away as he spoke, and her lips curled into a smile which made her look almost ugly. "So now he is to become a paid spy," she thought. "And he still considers that I am pledged to him. But what can I do till we have either succeeded or failed? Ah, if it were only the other one! If he were a Frenchman, or if only I could make him love me as I could—well, we shall see. After all, patriotism has its limits. France has broken its allegiance to my house. What do I owe it?"

General Ducros saw at a glance that the specifications which Victor handed to him were the duplicates of those which he had so unwisely and so unfortunately for himself and for France refused to accept from his father. If anything had been needed to convince him of the terrible error that he had made, Adelaide's story of the last night of her father's life would have done it.

"Monsieur," he said, laying his hand upon the papers, "I will confess that I have made a great mistake, even that I have committed a crime against France and your father. Alas, as we know now from the story that Ma'm'selle la Marquise has told us, he is dead; and it is I who, innocently and unknowingly, sent him to his death. I can do no more than admit my error, and promise you that every force at my command shall be used to repair it, if possible. These other documents, which you have been good

enough to hand to me, I take, of course, as an earnest of your good faith and your devotion to France."

"I wonder what they are," said Sophie Valdemar, in her soul, as the Minister's words reached her ear through the closed door of the little private room. "An Alsatian, a German officer, Military Attaché at Petersburg, he resigns his commission, goes back to his French allegiance, and gives the general something which proves his good faith! Ah, perhaps a scheme of campaign—sketches of routes—details of mobilisation—plans of fortresses! We must fight Germany soon. I wonder whether I could persuade the good general to let me have a look at them, if they are anything of that sort."

While these thoughts were flashing through Sophie's mind, the general was saying:

"And now, monsieur, you mentioned a short time ago that you had a scheme for repairing the error which I have confessed. May I ask for an outline of it? I need hardly say that, if it is only feasible, France will spare neither money nor men to accomplish the object, and to regain what I have so deplorably lost."

"My scheme, general," said Victor, "is exceedingly simple. These English-Americans are going to erect storage works round the Magnetic Pole, which, as of course you know, is situated in the far north, in a sort of No-man's Land, untrodden by human feet once in half-a-century. Let France fit out an Arctic expedition of two ships. Let them be old warships—as the *Alert* and *Discovery* were in the English expedition. Their mission will, of course, be a peaceful one, and their departure will cause no comment save in the scientific papers, but in their holds the ships will carry the most powerful guns they can mount, ammunition, and——"

"Excellent!" interrupted the general, rising from his seat. "My dear monsieur, I congratulate you upon a brilliant idea. Yes, the expedition shall be prepared with all speed; the newspapers shall describe the ships as old ones, but the Minister of Marine and myself will arrange that they shall carry the best guns and the most powerful explosives that we have. They shall be manned by picked crews, commanded by our best officers; they shall sail for the North Pole, or thereabouts, as all these expeditions do, and they shall make a friendly call at Boothia Land. It will not be possible now before next summer because of the ice; but the same cause will delay our friends in building the storage works; and when our ships call and the works are well in progress—well, then, we will see whether or not our friends will yield to logic; and, if not, to force majeure. Is that your idea?"

"Exactly," replied Victor. "We will wait till the works are finished, say this time next year, or two years or three years, it matters nothing, and then we will take them. The

expedition will carry men trained to do the work under my orders. I have the whole working of the apparatus in those papers. Once we possess the works we are masters of the world, because we shall be possessors of its very life. But before that there may be war—the nations of Europe fighting for the limbs of the Yellow Giant in the East. Germany, as you will see from those papers, is nearly ready. It is only a matter of a few months, and then she will make her first rush on France. England and America can be rendered helpless if we once seize the works, and Russia can, I presume, be trusted?"

"Without doubt," said the general. "Russia is our true and faithful ally."

"Yes," said Sophie again, in her soul; "provided she has a share in that Polar expedition, as she shall have."

### CHAPTER XIII

Nearly a year had passed since General Ducros had dined with Count Valdemar and Ma'm'selle Sophie in Paris. It was Cowes week, and there was quite a cosmopolitan party at Orrel Court. Adelaide de Condé and Madame de Bourbon were the best of friends with Count Valdemar and Sophie. Clifford Vandel and Miss Chrysie were good friends with everybody, the latter especially good friends with Hardress, whose work was now rapidly approaching completion. In short, it was as charming a cosmopolitan party as you could have found on the Hampshire shore, or anywhere else; and none of the other guests of Lord Orrel, and there were several of them not unskilled in diplomacy, ever dreamt that under the surface of the smooth-flowing conversation, whether round the dinner-table at the Court, on the *Nadine*, which ran down the Southampton Water every day that there was a good race on, or at Clifford Vandel's bungalow at Cowes, whose smoothly shaven lawn sloped down almost to the water's edge, lay undercurrents of plot and counterplot, the issue of which was the question whether the dominion of the world was to be committed to Anglo-Saxon or Franco-Slav hands.

One night—it was the evening after the great regatta—three conversations took place under the roof of Orrel Court, which the greatest newspapers of the two hemispheres would have given any amount of money to be able to report, since each of them was possibly pregnant with the fate of the world.

When Clifford Vandel came up from the smoking-room a little after eleven he found Miss Chrysie waiting for him in the sitting-room of the suite of apartments that had been given to them in the eastern wing of the old mansion.

"Don't you think you ought to be in bed, Chrysie, instead of sitting there smoking a cigarette, and—Why, what's the matter with you, girl?"

He had begun with something like a note of reproach in his voice, but the last words were spoken in a tone of tender concern.

She got up from her chair, went to the door, and shut it and locked it, and then, with her half-smoked cigarette poised between her fingers, her face pale, and her eyes aflame, she faced him and said, in low, quick-flowing tones:

"Poppa, can't you see what's the matter?—you, who can see things months before they happen, and make millions by gambling on them?—you who did up Morgan himself over that wireless telegraphy combine—can't you see what's going on right here just under your nose?"

"My dear Chrysie, what are you talking about? I've not noticed anything particular happening, except what's happened in the right way. What's the trouble?"

"The trouble's that Frenchwoman—that second edition of Marie Antoinette. Can't you see what she's doing every hour and day of her life? Can't you see that she's as beautiful as an angel, and—well, as clever as the other thing, and that she's just playing her hand for all she's worth to get the man I want—the man I half-promised myself to a year ago!"

"Perhaps I've been too busy about other matters, and perhaps I never expected anything of the sort," replied her father; "and anyhow, men are fools at seeing this kind of thing; but if that's so, and you really do want him, why not promise yourself altogether and fix things up? There's no man I'd sooner have for a son-in-law; and if you want him, and he wants you, why——"

"It's just there, poppa, that I'm feeling bad about it," she said, coming nearer to him, and speaking with a little break in her voice. "I'm not so sure that he does want me now—at least, not quite as badly as he did that time when he asked me first in Buffalo. Don't you see that Frenchwoman's bewitched him? And who could blame him, after all? What do all the society papers say about her? The most beautiful woman in Europe—the great-great-grand-daughter of Louis the Magnificent himself, with the noblest blood of France in her veins! How could any man with eyes in his head and blood in his heart resist her? Why, I could no more compare with her than——"

"Than a wild rose in one of these beautiful English lanes could compare with a special variety of an orchid in a hothouse; and I guess, Chrysie, that if I haven't made a great mistake about Shafto Hardress—if he does get a bit intoxicated with the scent of the orchid, if it comes to winning and wearing the flower, he'll take the wild rose. If he doesn't—well, I guess you'll do pretty well without him."

"But I just can't do without him, poppa. You are the only one I'd tell it to, but that's so; and before that Frenchwoman gets him I'd have her out and shoot her. Women in her country fight duels. And there's more to it than that," she went on, after a little pause.

"And what might that be, Miss Fire-eater?" said her father, half-laughing, half-seriously.

"I believe that she and that Russian girl, who goes languishing around Shafto when the marquise or myself isn't around, know more than they should do about this storage scheme. I don't say I've been listening—I wouldn't do it—no, not even for them; but sometimes you can't help hearing; and only the day before yesterday, out in the grounds there, I heard both of them, not to each other, but at different times to Count Valdemar, mention the name of Victor Fargeau; and you know who he is—son of the man whose remains Shafto picked up at sea—creator of this great scheme of yours—a Frenchman who was an officer in the German army. Now listen: both these women are friends of General Ducros, the French War Minister. France is sending out the Polar expedition this year that she has been preparing for months—you know that; so has Russia. Do you see what I mean now?"

"I guess you've got me on my own ground there, Chrysie," said her father, laying his hand across her shoulders, and drawing her towards him. "You were dead right when you said that a woman's intuition can sometimes see quicker and farther than a man's reason; but on that kind of ground I guess I can see as well as anyone. I admit that I have been wondering a bit why just this particular year France and Russia should be sending two Polar expeditions out; but it's pretty well sure that if you hadn't seen that this French marquise and the Russian countess were after the man you want—and the man you're going to get, too, if he's the man I think he is—I shouldn't have seen what I see now."

"And what's that, poppa?"

"They're not Polar expeditions at all, Chrysie; those ships are no more trying to go to the North Pole than they're trying to find the source of the Amazon. You got the key that opens the whole show when you heard them talking about Victor Fargeau. They're going to Boothia Land, that's where they're going to, and they're not going on what the Russians generally call a voyage of scientific discovery. I'd bet every dollar we've got in the Trust that those ships have guns on them, and there's going to be a fight for that Magnetic Pole after all. Anyhow, there's a cable going across to Doctor Lamson the first thing to-morrow morning. If there's anything like that going on, he can't be on guard any too soon. And now, little girl," he went on, raising his hand and putting it on her head, "you go to bed, and don't you worry about Frenchwomen or Russians."

Shafto Hardress comes of good old English and American stock, and he's just as clever as he can be without being altogether American. Don't you worry about him. There's not going to be any trouble in his mind when he has to choose between a clean-blooded, healthy American girl and anyone else, even if she has got all the blood of all the Bourbons in her veins, or even if she is the daughter of Count Valdemar of Russia, whose ancestors, I guess, were half savages when yours were gentlemen. Don't you worry about that, little girl; you just go to bed, and dream about the time when you'll be sitting on a throne that Marie Antoinette's wasn't a circumstance to. Now, I have told you, and that's so. Good-night. I'll have a talk with Lord Orrel to-morrow morning, and see to the business part of the affair."

As Chrysie crossed the long corridor to her own room she caught a glimpse of a tall, graceful figure which she had come to know only too well, and the sweep of a long, trailing skirt, vanishing through a door which she knew led into Count Valdemar's dressing-room.

"That's Sophie," she said. "I wonder if she saw me. She's been with the marquise, I suppose; and now she's going to have a talk with her father, something like mine with poppa. It's mean to listen, and I couldn't do it if I wanted to, but I'd like to give some of those dollars that poppa's going to make out of this scheme to hear what she's going to say, or what she's been saying to the marquise. I reckon I could make some history out of it if I knew; but anyhow, there's going to be trouble with that Frenchwoman. I don't think so much about the Russian. I believe she wants to marry either Lord Orrel or poppa; she's just about as mean as she is pretty and clever. I'd just like to say that English swear-word about her."

Miss Chrysie said that, and many other things, in her soul that night after she had laid her head on her pillow; and, even after the demands of physical fatigue upon a perfectly healthy physique had compelled slumber, she dreamt of herself as a modern Juno, usurping the throne of Jove, and wielding his lightnings, with the especial object of destroying utterly from the face of the earth two young ladies, with whom she was living on apparent terms of the most perfect friendship, and who were even then resting their pretty heads on pillows just like hers under the same roof.

#### CHAPTER XIV

Sophie opened the door in answer to her father's murmured "entrez," and closed it very gently behind her. She had not noticed Chrysie as she slipped into her own room, for her back was towards her, and, happily, she had no suspicion whatever of the conclusions which Chrysie's love-sharpened eyes had enabled her to reach. If she had, some skilfully-devised accident would probably have happened. For though but

two people among the guests at Orrel Court knew it, there were spies both inside and around the great house, unscrupulous agents of an unscrupulous government, who would have carried out their orders at all hazards. In fact, they had been brought there by Count Valdemar, at his daughter's suggestion, to assist in working out the most daring conspiracy that had ever been hatched at an English country house.

"Well, papa," said Sophie, in her soft Russian, as she took a cigarette, and dropped into an easy-chair with a motion that was almost voluptuous in its gracefulness, "now that these good people have gone to bed, we shall be able to have a little quiet talk. Are you still of opinion that the scheme that I sketched out is feasible?"

"Everything is feasible, my dear Sophie," replied her father, "provided only you have people of sufficient genius and boldness to carry it out. No doubt it would be possible with our own people, and those of the English sailors whom we have been able to bribe, to carry out that brilliant plan of yours, especially as you appear to have wrought such a magical transformation in the allegiance of this impressionable young engineer of yours on the *Nadine*. Are you quite sure of him?"

"Sure of him!" said Sophie, in a voice that was little above a whisper, and leaning forward and looking at her father with a smile which made even him think her beauty almost repulsive for the moment. "Edward Williams is as much in love as Boris Bernovitch was, and is—although he is where he is. I have promised, as usual. He has believed me, as usual, just like any other fool of his sex. Day after day I have met him and talked with him in what he calls my adorable foreign English. I have given him rendezvous which would have startled my Lord Orrel and all his belongings out of that abominable, habitual calm of theirs, and perhaps procured me a request to leave the house immediately. I have fooled him out of his seven senses, and to-night I have performed the supreme sacrifice for Russia, and let him kiss me."

The cruelly smiling lips changed into an expression of contemptuous disgust as she said this, and the count replied, coldly:

"Not a pleasant duty, Sophie; but for Holy Russia her servants must do everything. That, as I have tried to teach you almost as soon as you could speak, is our duty, almost our religion. Our fortune, our lives, our everything must be devoted to the emperor and to Holy Russia—soon now, I hope, to be mistress of the world. You as a woman, and a beautiful woman, have your weapons; I as a man, and a diplomatist, have mine. It is your duty to use yours with as little scruple as I use mine.

"And so you really think," he went on, after a little pause, "that it will be possible to capture the *Nadine*, with all her noble and gallant company on board, and compel her

to join our Russian expedition to Boothia Land. Certainly, it would be a brilliant triumph if we could. We should have all the heads of the great Trust at our mercy—Lord Orrel, his son, and this most objectionably straightforward Clifford Vandel, who, it would appear, has so vastly improved upon the original scheme. Then we should have the womankind too—Lady Olive, Miss Vandel, and the beautiful marquise herself, always dangerous power that might work against us. By the way, Sophie, has it struck you that the young viscount is wavering in his allegiance to the fair American under the influence of the beautiful daughter of the Condés?"

"As well ask me whether I am a woman, father," she replied, with a low, wicked-sounding laugh. "Have I no eyes in my head? Did not this fair American interfere with my plan for securing the noble Shafto to ourselves by making him fall in love with her before I saw him, and have I not done everything, all the thousand and one little things that a woman can do, to help my dear friend the marquise to the attainment of her very evident desires? In other words, have I forgotten the lessons that you have been teaching me since you began to train me to think myself not a girl with a heart and a soul, and living blood in her veins, but only a human machine, fair to look upon, animated by a brain which knows no other duty than the service of our Holy Russia? You know that if I had loved this man myself it would have been just the same. I should have done exactly as I have done,—at least, I believe so."

"Ah," laughed the count, softly, "that is the problem, my dear Sophie; and that, I tell you frankly, has always been my fear for you. You are young, brilliant, and beautiful; and I've always been a little afraid that out of some of all your admirers whom your smiles have brought to your feet there might be one whom you might love; and when a woman loves she pities, and pity and diplomacy have as much to do with each other as charity and business. Still, I am not without hopes that some day you will meet some worthy son of Russia; and remember, my Sophie, that, if we succeed in this, if we place the control of the elixir vitæ of the world in the hand of Russia, you might look even near the throne itself."

"And I most certainly should," said Sophie, throwing her head back. "I tell you frankly, papa, I'm not doing all this for nothing. I am not forgetting that I am a woman, with all a woman's natural feelings and inspirations, all her possible loves and hopes and pities, only for the sake of serving even Russia. If I succeed I shall have my reward, and it shall be a splendid one."

"And you will have well deserved it," said the count, looking with something more than fatherly pride on the beautiful daughter who had learnt the lessons of what he was pleased to call diplomacy so well. "Still, I cannot disguise from myself that this last

scheme of yours is, to say the least of it, a desperate one; for it amounts to nothing less than a kidnapping of one of the best-known noblemen and statesmen in England, his son and daughter, one of the wealthiest and best-known American financiers in the world and his daughter; to say nothing of one of the Ministers of the Tsar and his daughter. I need hardly remind you, of course, that the failure of such a venture would never be forgiven in Petersburg. I need not tell you that the Little Father never pardons mistakes, and, besides, my dear Sophie, have you quite satisfied yourself that such a very extreme measure is absolutely necessary?"

"My dear papa," said Sophie, getting up from her chair, and raising her voice ever so little, "in the first place, there will be—there can be no mistake about it; and, in the second place, I assure you that it is absolutely necessary if Russia is to have undisputed control of the Storage Works. You see, the outside world knows absolutely nothing about these works. There have been all sorts of stories circulated about them, but no one who has actually seen them has said or written a word about them. In fact, as far as we know, only two men have been there and come back—Viscount Branston and Mr Vandel; Dr Lamson is there still. How do we know what means of defence they've got? They might be able even now, from what Victor Fargeau and General Ducros told us, to demagnetise our ships, stop our engines from working and our guns from shooting; or, on the other hand, what would be almost as bad, this Lamson might blow up the works and shatter every plan we've got—perhaps ruin all prospects of the invasion, too, unless we have some means of persuading him not to use his power. What better means could we have than the possession of the heads of the concern?"

"I have heard hints, too, that he is not without hopes of winning the fair Lady Olive some day, when he becomes one of the masters of the world. Granted now that it is within our power to do what we please with all of them, or, if you like to put it diplomatically, with the heads of this gigantic conspiracy against the peace and security of the world, and plot to destroy the independence of the nations and the freedom of humanity, for it is nothing else, should we not be justified in using any and every means—yes," she went on, her voice hardening, "even to the very last means of all, to snatch this tremendous power out of the hands of these sordid English and Americans and give it into those of Holy Russia. It is kidnapping, piracy, invasion of friendly territory—everything, I grant you, that is criminal under the law of nations; but remember it is also a struggle for the command of the life-force of the world—which means practically the control of the world itself and all that therein is."

"And," said the count, smiling, "I suppose you would say that, as these people are our natural enemies, with whom we shall very soon be at war—'à la guerre comme à la guerre'—I suppose you mean that when we have got the *Nadine* and her noble

company we shall use them as hostages to prevent any accidents happening to our little Polar expedition. Really, my dear Sophie, your methods have suddenly become almost mediæval; still, if they are only successful, they will be none the less effective for that. Let me see now," he went on, leaning back in his chair and putting the tips of his fingers together, "I wonder if I can find any flaw in the arrangements. You know, it is quite essential, my dear Sophie, that there should not be any."

"My dear papa," she replied, smiling, and leaning her back against the old carved mantelpiece, "try, by all means. If you cannot find one, I don't think there can be much chance of its being anything but practically perfect."

"Very well," said the count, lighting a fresh cigarette. "In two or three days' time, when the regattas are over, the house-party at Orrel Court will break up, and a few days after that, say a week in all, Lord Orrel, with his son and daughter, and the American and his daughter, and Ma'm'selle la Marquise as Lady Olive's guest, are taking a trip across the Atlantic in the *Nadine*, partly in the course of business and partly on pleasure bent; Madame de Bourbon and her maids return to Paris; the *Vlodoya* puts into Southampton the day the *Nadine* sails, to take us on our trip to the Mediterranean. Your good friend the lieutenant has informed you that, although the *Nadine* can make twenty knots on an emergency, she will only take a leisurely summer trip across the Atlantic to Boston, at about twelve or fifteen. He has given you a chart of the course which she will take. He has also promised you that at a certain spot in mid-Atlantic there shall be a little accident to her engines which enable the *Vlodoya* to overtake her. The *Vlodoya*, commanded and well manned by good servants of the empire, with a couple of three-pounders and a Maxim in case of accident, will overhaul her and give her the alternative of surrender or sinking. That is where the piracy will begin, I suppose."

Sophie nodded, and, laughing, replied in English: "Yes, right there—as our American beauty, as Lord Hardress thinks her, would say. The *Nadine* is unarmed, and, of course, resistance will be useless; in fact, it would simply be the merest folly. His lordship will accept us and a portion of the *Vlodoya*'s crew as self-invited guests; we shall then steam away together, not to Boston, but to the rendezvous with our little expedition, and once we join forces—well, the thing is practically done."

"I agree so far," said her father; "still, there are one or two accidents that we have not yet taken into account. Suppose, for instance, one of these detestable British cruisers, which seem to be everywhere, should happen to be there just then; or that even one of the big liners should come in sight at the critical moment. It seems to me that, for the present at least, secrecy is above all things essential, for if the news of—

well, such an outrage, did get back to Europe, you know perfectly well that Russia would of necessity disown us, and that we and all on board the *Vlodoya* would simply be treated as common pirates."

"So I suppose," said Sophie, coolly; "but I have provided for that, because the day and place of rendezvous have been arranged so as to avoid the possibility of meeting any of the regular liners, and I have been careful to ascertain that no British warship will just then be under orders to cross the Atlantic, either from the North American station or from England. As for the piracy, I don't think we need trouble ourselves about that. Before many weeks France must forestall Germany's attack; Russia will, as we say, maintain the attitude of benevolent neutrality until she hears that we have got the works, then she will demand the surrender of the British concessions in China which conflict with her interests, and there will be war, and our actions, however drastic, will become legal under the law of war. In fact, my dear papa, as far as I can see, there is really only one possibility that I have not reckoned with, and that, as far as I can see, is an impossibility."

"And what is that? It is just as well we should see them all."

"It is the possibility that these English or Americans—you know how quick they are at all practical methods, pig-headed and all as they are at diplomacy—have, by some means or other, guessed that the French and Russian Polar expeditions have started at rather a suspicious time; I mean just when the Storage Works—these wonderful works, which are to light the world by electricity for a few pence an hour, and give us displays of the *Aurora borealis*, just as we have fireworks at public fêtes, and all the rest of it—have been completed. Now that, if you like, would be dangerous; for in such delicate work as ours success depends on surprise. Still, as I say, it is hardly possible."

"Practically impossible, I should agree with you, my dear Sophie," said the count, making the greatest mistake of his diplomatic career; "practically impossible. What do they know? What can they suspect?"

"Unless—unless," said Sophie, suddenly, clenching her hands, "our good friend Adelaide de Condé, who, I tell you, papa, is in love with Shafto Hardress, if woman ever was in love with man, unless she has hinted at the real meaning of these expeditions. Yes; that is a danger which, I admit, I have not counted."

"Yes, yes; I think I see what you mean," replied the count; "she is a Frenchwoman, but her only interest in the destiny of France consists in the restoration of the House of Bourbon to power; still, being a Frenchwoman, and in love, as you believe, she would also do anything for the sake of the man she loves, even to the ruin of her own hopes."

Finally, being on this supposition the rival of Miss Vandel, she would stop at nothing to prove her devotion to him; and, if she did as you suggest, Sophie, it would be a very formidable condition of affairs indeed."

"Then, papa," she replied, coming and laying her hand on his shoulder, "do you not see that that is all the greater reason why this scheme of ours must be carried through? You see that Adelaide de Condé may herself become a source of the greatest danger; but when we have not only her, but Miss Vandel and the man they are both in love with, as well as the two papas and Lady Olive, completely in our power, when, for example, we could land them all on one of those drifting ice-floes, to float away to somewhere where no one but the seals and bears would know what had become of them, the game would be in our hands to play as we please."

"My dear Sophie," said the count, laying his hand upon hers, "I am delighted to see that you have the courage of your convictions. And now, it is very late, or, rather, early, and I think you may as well go to bed and dream of success, for you have convinced me that failure is, to all intents and purposes, impossible."

As Sophie Valdemar stole quietly away to bed Clifford Vandel was finishing a long cable dispatch in cipher to Doctor Lamson, giving him a complete account, so far as he knew, of all that had been taking place in Europe during the last few weeks, and concluding with the words: "I have good reason to believe that the supposed French and Russian Polar expeditions, which will be in your latitude in a few weeks, are really intended for the capture or destruction of the Storage Works; so take every possible precaution against attack or surprise."

## CHAPTER XV

While all this plotting and counter-plotting had been going on in England and Europe, and France, thanks to what some might call the patriotic treachery of Victor Fargeau, was rapidly preparing for an invasion of Germany, which a magnificently-equipped army of nearly four million men meant to make a very different affair to the last one; while Russia was swiftly and secretly massing her huge military and very formidable naval forces in the near and far east, and England had, as usual, been muddling along, chattering over reforms on land and sea without getting them done; and while Germany, for once about to be taken unawares, was quietly getting ready for the inevitable struggle, a quiet, broad-browed, deep-eyed man had been at the head of an army of workmen, building up what was intended to be the real capital and governing centre of the world. In the midst of a broad, barren plain, broken by great masses of rock, many of them snow-capped and ice-crowned even in the middle of the northern summer, there rose the walls and chimneys of what looked like a commonplace

collection of factories, such as might be found in any of the manufacturing districts of Europe and America.

About four miles to the west, under a rocky promontory which the discoverer of this desolate land had named Cape Adelaide, little thinking what a connection it would have with another Adelaide, there was a small natural harbour, navigable for about five months in the year, constantly crowded with colliers. For over a year it had been packed with them. Before the previous winter set in they had been laden with coal and machinery and building materials, and throughout the long winter Doctor Lamson had relentlessly pushed the work on under rows of electric lights, which rivalled the *Aurora* itself.

The men were well housed and fed and lavishly paid, and so, in spite of the cold and darkness, they had worked well and cheerfully, well knowing that it was impossible for them to get back, save in the steamers that brought them. By the time the ice broke and the vessels were released another long line of them was already making its way up through the still half-frozen waters of Davis Strait and Lancaster Sound, laden with more coal, materials, and machinery. A telegraph line had been taken from Port Nelson across Hudson Bay over Rae Isthmus, and then through the Gulf of Boothia to the works, and this put Dr Lamson in direct communication with Winnipeg and the rest of the world.

At intervals of two hundred miles, across the icy desert of the north, groups of huge steel masts, three hundred feet high, had been erected, and these had been continued singly or in pairs over all the principal elevations of the North American Continent, and also over Greenland and Iceland to the north of Scotland, and thence to the rest of the British Islands. It was a miracle that could only have been wrought by millions, but the millions were spent without stint, in the full knowledge that they would be repaid in the days when it was possible to tax the world for the privilege of living.

The Storage Works were in the form of a square, measuring four hundred feet each way. In the exact centre of an interior square measuring fifty feet each way was that mysterious spot of earth where the needle of the compass points neither to north nor south nor east nor west, but straight down to the centre of the globe; and over it was built a great circular tower, forty feet in diameter and a hundred feet in height, which contained a gigantic reproduction of the instrument which had stood on Doctor Emil Fargeau's table in his laboratory at Strassburg on that memorable night when he had completed the work which was destined to lead to his own ruin and death and to the revolutionising of the world.

From this tower ran underground, in all directions, thousands of copper cables leading to the gigantic storage batteries with which the greater part of the buildings were filled. In the middle of each side of the great square a two thousand horse-power engine was ready to furnish the necessary electrical force in the absorber, as the great apparatus in the centre was called.

Everything was in order to commence work; in fact, Doctor Lamson had just decided that he would try his engines together for the first time, when Clifford Vandel's telegram reached him from Southampton.

His agent in Winnipeg had kept him well informed of the principal events going on in the world during his long isolation, and the sailing of the French and Russian Polar expeditions *via* Davis Straits had not escaped him. For a few minutes after he had read the dispatch he walked up and down the telegraph room, into which no one but himself and Austin Vandel, Clifford's nephew and his own general manager, could under any circumstances gain admission, since none but they knew the combinations of the lock which opened the steel door.

Austin was sitting at the table where he had received the message, and he broke the silence by saying:

"I guess, doctor, that looks a bit ugly. I suppose it's that Alsatian Frenchman and that pretty Frenchwoman you were telling me about that's fixed this up."

"There's not the slightest doubt about that," said Lamson, whose enthusiasm for the great scheme had quite overcome his earlier scruples. "If we had only known of that other set of specifications, and managed to get hold of them somehow—still that wouldn't have done much good, because even then the Frenchwoman, this beautiful daughter of the Bourbons as they call her, would have given it away as soon as she guessed what we were doing; and if she hadn't done so—well, Fargeau would have done so; so I suppose after all it's inevitable."

"Then you think we'll have to fight for it?" said Austin.

"If those expeditions are really armed forces, and their object is to take these works by hook or by crook, of course we must," replied Lamson. "Poor devils! I wonder what they'll feel like when we turn the disintegrators on them?"

"Don't talk about those," said Austin. "Time enough for that when we have to use them to save ourselves—which the Lord forbid. I sha'n't forget that experiment of yours on poor Hudson's body; but to see it turned on to a living man! Great Scott!"

"Yes; it won't be very pleasant," said Lamson, whose rather gentle and retiring nature had become completely transformed under the influence of the gigantic possibilities which were now at his disposal. "But suppose they get their ships up to Port Adelaide?—it's rather curious, by the way, that it should have the same name as that Frenchwoman, who, I suppose, is by this time about our most dangerous and determined enemy—but suppose they get them there, and begin knocking the works about with big guns. Suppose," he went on, with something like a shudder, "a shell bursts in the absorber, where are we? And, mind you, if they come they'll bring Fargeau with them; and if they took us prisoners or killed us, he would have material enough here to make another one—and he would know how to do it. No, no, Vandel; if I have to defend the works I'll do it. My whole life and soul are here now, and no Frenchman or Russian sets foot inside here while I'm alive, unless he comes as a prisoner."

"But look here," said Austin; "couldn't you paralyse 'em? Why not set the engines to work, and mop up this world's soul, or whatever you call it, right away, so that their engines should break down long before they got here, and just freeze them out."

"That, my dear Austin," replied the doctor, "is a rather more hasty remark than I should have expected you to make. Don't you see that if we were to start the engines, and cut off our American communications, as would be necessary, we should not only paralyse the expedition, we should also paralyse the whole of Canada and the United States, cut off our communications with England, and make it impossible for our friends to communicate with us, or for them to come here—as they are doing this month."

"Guess I spoke a bit too soon," said Austin. "That's so; and, of course, we couldn't do it."

The doctor continued his walk up and down the room for a few moments longer, then stopped and said suddenly, "No; but I'll tell you what we can and will do if there's going to be any of this sort of foul play about. The president and all our friends will be much safer here than in any other part of the world, for if we have to starve the world out they'll be all right here. Wire to your uncle; say that we have received his message and are acting upon it, and tell him to bring the whole party here with the utmost speed; call it a pleasure-trip or a tour of inspection, or what they please, but they must come at once, and, above all, they must get here before these so-called Polar expeditions."

"That's the talk, doctor," exclaimed Austin; "you've got right down on to it this time. I'll fix that up in the code and send it right away."

There is, of course, neither day nor night during June in Boothia Land, only a little deepening of the twilight towards midnight, but the message was despatched *via* Winnipeg a little after nine in the evening, according to conventional time, and so Clifford Vandel was able to decipher it in his sitting-room at Orrel Court before breakfast the next morning. The carriages were already waiting to take the party down to the *Nadine's* berth at Southampton Water as soon as possible after an early breakfast, for there was to be a race round the Isle of Wight for cruising yachts that day, and some of the finest yachts in the two hemispheres were going to compete, the *Nadine* and several other steam-yachts, including the *Vlodova*, belonging to the Grand Duke Ruric, were to follow the race, and the day was to wind up with supper at Clifford Vandel's bungalow at Cowes.

Therefore the moment he had finished translating the cipher, without waiting even for breakfast, he sent his man to ask Lord Orrel and his son for the favour of a few minutes' private conversation in his lordship's library. This man was the brother of the Countess Sophie's French maid—deaf, handy, silent, and wonderfully well up to his work. He had engaged him on the count's recommendation, after dismissing his English valet on the instant for, as he thought, trying to learn more than he ought to know from his correspondence. It is scarcely necessary to add that Ma'm'selle Sophie knew as much about the one as she did about the other; and, as a matter of fact, she had procured both appointments. This being so, it was only natural that within a very few minutes Count Valdemar and his daughter should have heard of the receipt of the telegram, and Clifford Vandel's request for an interview with Lord Orrel and his son. The immediate result was two interviews before breakfast instead of one.

"What can it mean, papa?" said Sophie, when she had softly locked her father's door. "Jules says that the dispatch was brought up from Southampton this morning. Before he gave it to Mr Vandel he, of course, steamed the envelope and looked at it. It was in cipher, as one might expect; but it came from Winnipeg, and Winnipeg is the one point of communication between Boothia and the rest of the world. Mr Vandel translated it at once, and immediately went to talk to Lord Orrel and the viscount about it. I wonder whether—but no, that's impossible. We couldn't have been overheard, and no one that knows anything of our plans could have any possible inducement to betray us. The marquise told me that she had a letter from Fargeau yesterday: I wonder if she has said anything."

"My dear Sophie," replied her father, "as I told you the night before last, a woman in love is a woman lost to all purposes of diplomacy, unless her interests and those of the man she is in love with are identical. Here they are diametrically opposed; a word

from her to the viscount would ruin everything—at least, so far as the expeditions are concerned."

"All the more reason then," said Sophie, clenching her hands, "that we—I mean that the *Vlodoya* should capture the *Nadine* with all these people on board her. If we have them at our mercy we have everything. I would give a good deal to know what there was in that dispatch that Clifford Vandel had this morning."

"And so would I," replied her father; "a great deal. Do you think that if your maid were to promise her brother, say, £500, for the transcription which Vandel must have made of it, there would be any chance of getting it?"

"We can only try," replied Sophie. "The old gentleman is very careful about his papers, they tell me; still, we will try."

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"Well, gentlemen," said Clifford Vandel, about the same moment in Lord Orrel's library, "I think you will agree with me that the doctor would not have sent a dispatch like this without pretty good reason; and if these people mean pushing matters to extremity, why, of course, it might be necessary for him to, as he says here, freeze them out, in which case they couldn't get there. And if they couldn't we couldn't; wherefore it seems good reasoning to say that we ought to be there first—if we're going to get there at all."

"My dear Vandel," replied his lordship, "it is the best of reasoning; and I am quite sure that Doctor Lamson would not have dreamt of sending such a dispatch without good reasons, and I think I am justified in telling you that this morning I received a confidential letter from an old colleague of mine in the Foreign Office, in which he says that, according to reports of our agents, both in France and Germany, an outbreak of hostilities may occur at any moment within the next few weeks, without warning—just as it did in 1870."

"Then," said Hardress, sharply, "if that is so, there simply must be some connection between that and the dispatch of these two expeditions. I don't often jump to conclusions, Mr Vandel, but I think now that Miss Chrysie was perfectly right. They're not going to try and get to the Pole at all. It's the Magnetic Pole they want, and they'll be there this summer if we don't find some way to stop them; and I quite agree that we ought to get there first. It may be necessary to show Europe that they can't get on without us, even in the matter of fighting."

"Very well, then," said Lord Orrel, "we'll call that settled; we'll make it a summer Arctic trip. How soon can you get us across the Atlantic, Hardress?"

"I can land you in Halifax in six days. We'll coal up there; and, if we're not too much crowded with ice, I'll get you to Rae Isthmus in six days more. Meanwhile I will telegraph to Lamson to have one of his steamers waiting for us on the other side of the Isthmus, and in another week, including the land travel, which may be difficult, we will be at the works. Or, if we find the sea fairly clear, we'll steam straight up to Fox Channel, Kury's Strait, and take you straight to Boothia Land. At any rate, the expeditions are only just starting, one from Havre and the other one from Riga, and, at that rate, we should certainly be there a clear month before them, even if they really are going."

"Then," said Clifford Vandel, slowly but gravely, "if that's so, I guess the best thing we can do is to get there as quickly as possible and start the circus as soon as we can. If Europe means fighting—well, we can't have a better way of proving our power, and showing France and Germany and the rest of them that it will pay them to deal with the Great Storage Trust, than by just making their own war impossible. When they find they can't even fight without our permission, I guess they'll pretty soon come to terms."

"I agree with you entirely, my dear Vandel," said Lord Orrel.

## CHAPTER XVI

That same morning, as it happened, Adelaide received a letter from Victor Fargeau, dated from Paris, telling her, among other things, that the two alleged Polar expeditions would be ready to start in a fortnight's time, and that he had been appointed to, as he put it, the scientific command of the French one. There had been a considerable amount of veiled friction between the French and Russian governments as soon as they had both been compelled to admit to each other the true object of the expeditions, and it was even suspected that the Russian government was secretly preparing a much more formidable scientific expedition of four vessels—including their celebrated ice-breaker *Ivan the Terrible*, a vessel built in an English yard for the purpose of breaking up the Baltic ice in winter, in order to keep the ports free and the Russian Baltic squadron always serviceable.

With such a vessel to lead it the Russian expedition would be quite certain of reaching Boothia Land whatever the condition of the ice might be, because she would be able to clear a course for her consorts through it. All the probabilities were, therefore, in favour of the Russian squadron getting to Boothia Land first. If they did that, and were

successful in getting possession of the works, it was not very likely that Russia would be inclined to share the dominion of the world with the ally she had already bled so freely, and in this case France would be once more robbed of the fruits of his father's discovery.

Soon after afternoon tea on the lawn of Clifford Vandel's bungalow, Adelaide said to Sophie, as they sat in their deck-chairs beside each other:

"I am given to understand that Russia is quite determined to reach the Pole, if possible, in this next expedition."

"The Pole?" laughed Sophie, with a swift glance under her half-lowered eyelids. "My dear marquise, surely you are joking with me a little unnecessarily. Which Pole?"

"Really, my dear countess, I am speaking quite seriously," she replied, turning her head on her cushion, and looking at her companion with somewhat languid eyes. "I presume, of course, it must be the North Pole—because I hear from a quite reliable source that your government is sending out the big ice-breaker—the *Ivan the Terrible*, you know; and that would hardly be necessary to get to the other Pole, the one that you perhaps mean, unless, of course, they wished to make certain of getting there as quickly as possible."

Sophie would have given a great deal to know the source of this information, which had only reached her father a day or so before, but it was, of course, impossible for her to ask, so she contented herself with saying, in slow, careless tones:

"Really, that is quite interesting. But then, of course, you know, when Russia takes anything like this in hand she generally does it thoroughly, and, of course, the ice may be late this year, as they call it, crowded up in the narrow places I suppose; and in that case, of course, the French expedition will find it accommodating to have a ship like that to break the way in advance—and out again if necessary. I suppose you have quite decided to take the trip across the Atlantic on the *Nadine*?"

"Oh yes; that is quite arranged. It will be my first visit to America—that wonderful land."

"America—wonderful? Well, I should say!" said Miss Chrysie, coming behind them at this instant, and putting her hands on the backs of their chairs, "It's a pity you can't come too, countess. I guess I could promise you both a pretty interesting time from Niagara right away to——"

"Suppose we say the Magnetic Pole?" murmured Sophie, turning her head back, and looking up at her with a glance that was lazy and yet full of challenge.

"Well, yes, that might be interesting, too," replied Miss Chrysie, looking steadily down into her eyes. "Those works that the viscount and poppa are getting fixed up there, whatever they mean them for, must be something pretty wonderful, for they're spending quite a lot of money on them. It might not be impossible that we'll be going up to see them some day, and if you'd come across, countess, I dare say I might be able to show you round."

"Really, that's more than kind of you, Miss Vandel; but I'm sorry to say that my father's official duties demand his presence at Petersburg, and we absolutely must leave when the house-party at Orrel Court breaks up; but excuse me, I see my father beckoning to me. I will leave you my seat, Miss Vandel."

She got up, and walked away forward to where her father was standing near the verandah. Miss Chrysie took possession of her seat, clasped her hands behind her head, stretched out her legs till a pair of dainty pointed toes peeped from under the hem of her dress, and said, with a sidelong glance at Adelaide, and in a slow drawl:

"Nice girl the countess, marquise, and very good-looking—very; but, somehow—well, perhaps you haven't noticed it, but I have—she seems to have a sort of way of talking at you instead of to you, and always meaning just something a bit different to what she says."

"It is quite possible," said Adelaide, slightly coldly, for Chrysie's words were just a little too frank to please her taste; "but, you see, she's a Russian; and the daughter of a diplomat. All Russians of good family are born diplomatists, and diplomacy, you know——"

"Why yes," laughed Chrysie; "diplomacy is the whole art and science of saying one thing and meaning another, and getting the other fellow to believe that you're telling the ironclad truth when you are lying like Ananias; and I guess the countess hasn't learnt her lessons very badly."

"In other words, Miss Vandel," said Adelaide, with a laugh that had a note of harshness in it, "you think the Countess Valdemar is, to put it into quite brutal English, a liar."

"Why no," replied Chrysie, looking straight down at her shapely toes; "just a diplomatist, or, I should say, the daughter of one. But we don't want to pull each other to pieces like this. What's the matter with changing the subject? What's your idea, marquise, about these two Polar expeditions being started off this year? Doesn't it strike you as just a bit curious that they should be going north up Davis Straits just when our Storage Works are getting finished? Shouldn't wonder if the countess gave herself away a bit when she spoke just now about the Magnetic Pole."

This was a kind of diplomacy that was entirely strange to Adelaide, and for a moment or two she hardly knew what to say; then she replied, rather languidly:

"Really, Miss Vandel, it is a matter that interests me very little. I believe this is the proper time for setting out on Polar expeditions, and you know the Russians are very fond of making these journeys in the interests of science and exploration."

"Mostly exploration of what's going to be new Russian territory," replied Miss Chrysie, with a snap of her eyes. "Ah, here's his lordship junior. Well, viscount, I've got to thank you for yet one more just entirely delightful day!"

Before Hardress could reply she turned another sidelong glance on Adelaide. In spite of all her self-control, Adelaide's cheeks flushed ever so slightly and her eyes lighted up as Hardress pulled a chair towards them.

And she hated her frankly and cordially for it; for she was a girl of absolutely honest feelings, and just as straightforward and thorough-going in her hates as in her loves.

"My dear Miss Vandel," replied Hardress, "it is quite the other way about; it is I who have to thank you for the pleasure of giving you pleasure."

"After that," laughed the marquise, turning her lovely eyes full on his, "let it never be said that an Englishman cannot turn a compliment."

Chrysie noticed that Hardress flushed a little and dropped his eyes slightly under that bewildering glance, and she hated the marquise more intensely than ever.

"It was no compliment, I can assure you," he said, looking up at Chrysie, "though what the marquise just said may have been. But, by the way, I came to tell you a rather serious piece of news, marquise; and something that may perhaps influence your aunt's plans."

"Ah, what is that?" said Adelaide.

"Well, from the telegram my father has just received, which will probably be in the papers to-night, there is going to be a tremendous military scandal in Germany, which may have very grave results indeed, even to the extent of an European war. The detectives of the military staff at Berlin have discovered a sort of Teutonic Dreyfus—a young fellow holding the rank of lieutenant, and employed as a sort of military under-secretary in the bureau of the Minister of War. To a certain extent it's the old story. He had ruined himself with gambling and horse-racing, and, not content with that, had got involved with a very pretty and equally unscrupulous French variety actress, who

bled him with apparently more consistency than she loved him. The agents of the French secret service in Germany got hold of him and he sold himself.

"So far the story is commonplace—that sort of thing happens every week in all countries—but the extraordinary thing about this is that when this young fellow was confronted with proofs, he not only made a clean breast of what he had done, but he told his chiefs that the man who had been mostly instrumental in getting him into trouble, and had, in fact, introduced him to the woman who ruined him, was a brother officer—a staff-captain and military attaché of a foreign court. This man, he confessed, had obtained, partly through him and partly through his own knowledge and other sources, a complete sketch of the German plans, both for invading France and resisting a French invasion, together with all the necessary details as to men, guns, transports, etc. Stranger still, a German staff-officer answering exactly to the description, resigned his commission nearly a year ago, and retired into private life. He was not a German, but an Alsatian. The German secret agents in Paris took up the scent, and found that this very man had been in close communication with the Minister of War and appeared to be holding some confidential position in the service of the Ministry. Now Germany, it is rumoured, has demanded his extradition on a charge of treason and desertion; for it seems that his resignation was never officially accepted, although he was allowed to go in consequence of some family trouble which brought disgrace upon his name. France has refused it, and—well, the situation may be described as distinctly strained."

"Well," said Miss Chrysie to herself, while he was speaking, "if that's not a pretty good sample of diplomacy, I've got a wrong idea of the word altogether." She had turned her head lazily on the cushion again, every now and then glancing at Adelaide's face. Hardress had, of course, done the same repeatedly during his narrative, which he had told just as though he were telling some absolutely fresh piece of news to a couple of listeners who would only take an outside interest in it. Since her father's death Adelaide had given no sign that he had told her anything on his deathbed, or that she was aware of the true nature of the Great Storage Scheme. Now she kept her composure admirably under the double scrutiny. Chrysie fancied that she changed colour ever so little at the mention of the German staff-officer who had resigned, and of the visits to the French Minister of War, but otherwise she gave no sign, she just sat and listened, every now and then drawing the point of her parasol across the grass at her feet, and occasionally looking out over the water dotted with a multitude of crafts coming to an anchor after the day's racing. Certainly neither of them found any reason so far to believe that the story had anything more than a general interest for her. When she spoke her voice was just as low and sweetly quiet as ever it was.

"Certainly that is very serious news," she said, looking straight at Hardress. "We know, of course, that there has been great tension between the two countries for some time, and if France refuses to give this man up there can hardly be anything but war; and yet if it is true that France possesses all the German plans, Germany would be at a terrible disadvantage, for it would be impossible to change them at the last minute. At any rate, I am very much obliged to you for your early information, viscount. Certainly I think it would be better for my aunt to remain in England for the present; and in that case, I am afraid it will be my duty to remain with her."

"Not at all, my dear marquise," said Hardress, with an eagerness which Chrysie did not at all appreciate. "You know your aunt was a great yachtswoman some years ago; she's a splendid sailor, and there's lots of room on board the *Nadine*. Let her come to Canada with us. The voyage would do her all the good in the world. We can land you with Miss Vandel and Olive at Halifax, and you can have a delightful run through Canada and the States under my father's protection, while the president and I pay our visit to the Storage Works."

"A thousand thanks, my dear viscount," replied the marquise; "but that, of course, will be a matter for my aunt alone to decide. For my part, I can only say that I shall be delighted if she says yes."

"I sha'n't," said Miss Chrysie, with great emphasis, in her soul.

Meanwhile another conversation on the same subject was going on in another part of the lawn. A messenger-boy had about half-an-hour before brought the count an envelope containing a lengthy telegram; and it was when he had read this that he had beckoned to Sophie, and she had scarcely joined him when one of the servants brought her a note which had been left by a man at the gate of the grounds. They left the verandah where the count had been standing, and strolled down towards the water.

"Well, papa," said Sophie, "I saw you had a telegram just now. Any news?"

"News? Yes," said the count; "and very serious, too. Briefly, the German government has discovered everything about Fargeau—that is to say, his treason and his connection with Ducros—and has demanded his extradition from the French government. France, having got the plans, will, of course, refuse, and then there will be war—probably in a week or two."

"And Russia?" queried Sophie, looking up at him.

"Russia, my dear, as you understand, will act as circumstances direct."

At this moment the note was put into Sophie's hands. She opened it, read it, dismissed the servant, and said in a low voice:

"Papa, here is even more serious news than yours. This is from my friend the engineer. He tells me that the viscount has suddenly altered his plans; that the *Nadine* is to be filled with coal to her utmost capacity, and all preparations made for crossing the Atlantic at full speed, instead of about twelve knots."

"And she can steam twenty knots," said the count. "I'm afraid, my dear Sophie, that completely upsets your nicely-arranged plan for a rendezvous in mid-ocean. The *Nadine* will be across the Atlantic before the *Vlodoya* can get there, for her best is only about sixteen."

"No, papa," said Sophie, "I've not failed yet. If my engineer is only faithful, and that accident to the machinery happens, we shall get them all the same. I will promise him anything and everything, and he will be faithful. And then I have another plan."

"Ah! And that?"

"The marquise—she will be on board—she's a Frenchwoman, she loves this Hardress, and hates this American girl. Sooner or later she knows that it must be war to the knife between them, and better sooner than later, for they say that he is already half-betrothed to Miss Vandel. At the same time, Hardress is by no means indifferent to her own fascinations. I will make her an ally—for the present, at least. She knows well enough that were the American conveniently disposed of she could soon console the viscount for his loss. I will show her how she may be got rid of, and how she, Adelaide de Condé, may marry the man who may, as she believes, soon be master of the world. A clever woman with a great end to gain will be of infinite service to us on board the yacht. At present she is half-hostile to us—for she has a suspicion that our expedition is meant to forestall the French one. Now I will make her wholly our friend by showing her how she may not only gain the desire of her heart, but also ensure the success of the French expedition; for, after all, you must remember that we are bound to co-operate with them to a certain extent, for they at least have been clever enough to keep the specification of the works to themselves, and till we get possession of them we can do nothing without Fargeau, even if we were masters of the works. Yes; I think, after all, Adelaide, since she must be either friend or enemy, will be a better friend than enemy: and friend she shall be before she sails on the *Nadine*."

## CHAPTER XVII

"And so, Ma'm'selle la Comtesse, it comes to this: you would have me reward hospitality with treachery? You would have me betray my host, my father's friend, and

his son, into the hands of Russia?—for that is what it would come to. No; I thank you for your kindness and condescension in taking me into your confidence, but I cannot consent to become your accomplice."

Adelaide de Condé had just been listening, in her own sitting-room at Orrel Court, to Sophie's cunningly-worded suggestion that she should go on board the *Nadine* as her friend and ally, and assist in the capture of the vessel by certain means which she pointed out, one of which was a liberal use of drugs on the passengers and crew when the critical moment was drawing near. A few months before she would have entered with repugnance, but without hesitation, into any scheme which bade fair to recover what she considered to be an inheritance which the fates had robbed her off; but since then she had learnt to love Shafto Hardress as she had never believed she could love any man; and love had wrought its usual miracle. She hated Chrysie Vandel with the whole-hearted hatred of her impetuous and masterful Bourbon spirit; she looked upon her as one of her ancestors would have looked upon an usurper or an invader—something to be abolished or suppressed, at any price and by any means. Her father, too, she thoroughly hated—not only through personal antipathy, but as one of those who possessed something that should have been hers. To Lord Orrel and Lady Olive she was practically indifferent; and, so far as they were concerned, she would have entered even willingly into any scheme which promised to take from them what they had taken from her. For the Franco-Russian alliance she cared little, yet she would infinitely prefer to see France sharing the control of the world with Russia than that it should be in the hands of an Anglo-American business syndicate. Moreover, was there not that promise made to her father long ago by an exalted personage, that, since Russia would prefer a monarchy to a republic as a friend and ally, she would not look unfavourably on the restoration of the House of Bourbon in the person of the prince, should circumstances—such, for instance, as a victorious war fought with Russia's aid—make such an event possible. Many a time, indeed, she had even been ready to curse this unfortunate love which had come into her life to shake her resolution and spoil her purpose. But for that how easy it would all be, especially with an ally—brilliant, daring, and unscrupulous—like Sophie Valdemar; and yet, how could she help to betray the man she loved, even to destroy her rival and get him for herself? So, after a long pause of thought, she repeated again, aloud:

"No, no; I couldn't do it. It would be too base."

"My dear Adelaide," replied Sophie, familiarly, and almost affectionately, "I hope you will forgive me if I suggest that the attitude you have taken up, dignified and virtuous as I admit it looks at first sight, is really a trifle absurd."

"Really, countess," replied Adelaide, frigidly, "if you are going to forget your manners, I think the conversation may as well end. You have sought to tempt me to an act of treachery, and because I refuse, you begin to forget your manners. You seem to have forgotten, also, that you have put it into my power to warn the viscount and his friends of the danger you have prepared for them."

This was, of course, a danger which Sophie had foreseen. It was a grave one; but she was accustomed to run risks, and she was ready for this one.

"My dear Adelaide," she replied, still with the most perfect good humour, "please don't get angry with me. We have always been very good friends, and I think this is the first time you have called me countess for years. Don't take the trouble to be formal any more, but just be sensible and listen. I am not tempting you at all. I am simply trying to help you against our common enemy, and I am asking you to help France and Russia in the great and good work of wresting the command of the world from these upstart Anglo-Saxons, and reducing them once for all to their proper place. You are not a friend to the Republic; neither am I, nor any of us, for the matter of that. But you are a Frenchwoman, who ought to be Queen of France, and, if all goes well with us, may be."

"What," exclaimed Adelaide, taken off her guard for a moment, "do you mean that, Sophie? Do you believe that Russia——"

"Would not rather have as an ally a monarchy—the old monarchy of France, ruled over by your most gracious majesty, than a republic, managed by a plebeian pack of stockjobbers and shopkeepers? Do you know why your lamented father the prince was such a welcome guest at the court of Petersburg?"

"Ah, then you know——"

"Yes," replied Sophie, taking the venture; "I do know, and I can assure you that your majesty, when the day comes, will find no stronger partisan than I shall be. My father, too, is one of your most devoted adherents, though, of course, he can say nothing about it now, and, as you know, there are other personages far more exalted."

"Yes, yes, I know," said Adelaide. "It was almost a promise."

"Help us, and you shall find that it was a promise," half guessing what the promise was. Then, pushing her advantage, she continued: "And, after all, you know, my dear Adelaide, is it not a little inconsistent for you to talk of treason or betrayal. Do you really think that you would now be a guest in Lord Orrel's house any more than I should if he knew of your connection with a certain ex-captain of Uhlans, or of that visit you paid with him to General Ducros? Really, you will forgive me if I say that your

suggestion as to warning the viscount about my little scheme is a trifle illogical, even if you wished to betray us, which I don't suppose you would seriously dream of. How could you do it without betraying yourself? You would have to accuse me and papa, and, through us, Russia, of an act of contemplated piracy. We should be compelled, in self-defence, to prove that you know just as much of the true nature of the Storage Works as we do, and that you and your ex-captain are the real authors of the French expedition—in short, that you are every whit as bitter an enemy of the Trust, and all concerned in it, as we are. I fully admit that you will spoil our scheme for the time being; but, instead of being a guest of the *Nadine*, the guest of the man you love, with the power in your hand of abolishing the woman who will certainly marry him, if you don't, you would suffer the indignity of being ordered out of his house as a spy and a traitress."

The logic was as exact as it was pitiless, and Adelaide de Condé saw that Sophie Valdemar was, for the time being at least, mistress of the situation. She had come to Orrel Court as a guest, with the full intention of playing a double part. She had played it until one day she had chanced to overhear a few half-tender, half-chaffing words pass between Chrysie Vandel and Hardress. Then she had awakened to the full certainty of what, in her inmost soul, she had long suspected—that she loved this man with all the strength of a strong and imperious nature; and since then she had been living in constant dread that he should by some means come to know her as she was.

Now the crisis had come. Sophie Valdemar had woven toils round her from which there was no escape; she must play the double part she had chosen to the end. It was the only possible chance of gratifying at once her love and her hate, and of perhaps attaining the object of her ambitions after all. She moved slowly once or twice across the room, with her hands clasped behind her back. Sophie waited and watched her with a half-smile on her lips and a gleam of triumph in her eyes. She knew that she had won, for she could read every thought that was passing in Adelaide de Condé's soul. Then Adelaide stopped in the middle of the room and faced her, with her head slightly thrown back, and said slowly:

"Yes, Sophie; I see, after all, that you are right. I should be no more a traitor on board the yacht than I have been here, and one should help one's friends and allies rather than one's enemies. It will, of course, be an enormous advantage to our cause if this yacht can be seized. No doubt, too, there will be ciphers on board, which will enable us to communicate with the works, and if there are, that will be an immense gain to us. It shall be part of my business to find that out. Yes; I will go, and I will help you as far as I can; but there is one compact, Sophie, that you must make with me."

"My dear Adelaide," replied Sophie, warmly, and coming forward with both hands outstretched, "after what you have said I will make any compact you please that does not injure the cause of Holy Russia. She is the only God, and her service is the only religion I have, and if I make the compact, I swear to you by Holy Russia that I will keep it. What is it?"

"Then you must swear to me," said Adelaide, taking her hand, "that, whatever happens, whether we succeed or fail, no evil shall come to the viscount or his father and sister, either in person or property. If we get possession of the works, and the alliance conquers England and America after it has disposed of Germany, they shall be considered and treated as friends, not enemies; for you must remember that until I reign as queen in Paris I propose to reign as mistress at Orrel Court. As for the American woman and her father, and all the rest of them, the sooner you get them out of the way the better pleased I shall be."

"My dear Adelaide," replied Sophie, "you looked adorable as you said those last words. Yes; of course, it shall be so; not a hair of their heads, not a centime of their property shall be touched. They shall be yours, and, as yours, sacred against all ills. That I swear and promise you in the name of Holy Russia."

"Then," replied Adelaide, looking straight into her eyes, now brilliant with the light of triumph, "I am with you to the end, whether it be good or bad, success or failure, life or death."

"And for Holy Russia and the old régime of France!" added Sophie, almost solemnly. "And now, suppose we go and join these good people on the lawn?"

As they went out, arm-in-arm, laughing and chatting as though they hadn't a care on their minds, no one would have dreamt that these two beautiful women had been a moment before plotting the ruin, not only of those whose hospitality they were enjoying, but of their country and people as well; but as Miss Chrysie saw them, her pretty brows came together for an instant, she turned aside, and said to her father in a low tone:

"That Frenchwoman and the Russian girl have been together ever since breakfast—hatching some mischief, I'll bet. I don't like it, poppa—any more than I like the Frenchwoman coming across on the yacht. She's coming for no good, I'm sure; but the viscount's about as blind as a wall-eyed mule where that woman's concerned. Anyhow, I'll watch her pretty closely; she can bet all her titles and ancient lineage on that."

"That's right, Chrysie; and I reckon I sha'n't be sleeping much while she's around," replied her father.

## CHAPTER XVIII

Cowes week was over, and the house party at Orrel Court had broken up. Madame de Bourbon had yielded to her niece's earnest persuasions, and consented to become a guest on the *Nadine*. Count Valdemar and Sophie had sailed on board the *Vlodoya*, en route for the Baltic and Petersburg. The news which Hardress had told to the marquise and Chrysie on the lawn at Cowes had duly leaked out into the channels of the Press, and had been condensed and expanded, embroidered and commented upon with the usual luxuriant facility of the journalistic imagination.

Meanwhile the *Times* had published a lengthy and weighty communication from M. de Blowitz, which, while proving many wrong and some right, pointed unmistakably to a very grave state of affairs in Western and Central Europe. The communication also hinted, indirectly but unmistakably, at other developments which might possibly produce results as astounding as they would be unexpected.

"De Blowitz has somehow managed to get on to the secret of those two so-called Polar expeditions," said Hardress to his father at breakfast on the morning before the *Nadine* was to sail.

The marquise and Madame de Bourbon were having breakfast in their own room that morning else he would not have said this. Only Chrysie and her father were at the table. "He's a wonderful fellow for getting hold of news. That allusion to events proceeding in a far-distant portion of the globe is distinctly significant."

"That's so," said Clifford Vandel, "and I reckon that, under the circumstances, the sooner we respond personally to Doctor Lamson's telegram the better it will be for all immediately concerned. To tell you the square truth, Lord Orrel," he went on, looking up from his plate, "I don't quite like the turn things seem to be taking generally."

"Why, what do you mean, my dear Vandel?" asked his lordship; "you've not heard anything unpleasant, have you?"

"I've heard something, and I've seen a bit more," he replied. "I don't want to speak disrespectfully of any of your guests, but I'm bound to say I don't altogether like the cordiality that's seemed to work up during the last few days between our Russian friends and the distinguished lady who is going to honour us by her company across the Atlantic."

"Oh, come now, Mr Vandel," interrupted Hardress, in a tone which Miss Chrysie did not exactly appreciate, "surely you're not going to accuse the marquise, the daughter of my father's old friend, of anything like plotting and scheming with Russia."

"I'm not making any accusations, viscount; I'm just trying to put two and two together and make four of them. We know that if Doctor Fargeau's discovery had not fallen into our hands, or, I should say that if it had not been thrown into our hands by the stupidity of the French government, this young lady's father would most likely have become king of France instead of dying, of what we will call mental shock, down at Elsenau; and we haven't yet got on to whether she knows anything or nothing about the scheme yet."

"Anyhow, she was in Paris at the time when this Fargeau, the son of the man whose remains we picked up, had his interviews with General Ducros, and these Russians were there at the same time. I guess that makes about two. Right after that France and Russia decide to send two Polar expeditions, both by the same route—the only one on this side that leads to the Storage Works—and both about timed to get there when we are ready to spring our little scheme on the world. I reckon that makes two more; and if you put them together you'll get about four."

"I should say five, poppa," exclaimed Miss Chrysie, putting her fish-knife down somewhat sharply on her plate. "It strikes me the whole thing's timed to fix in with this war that they're talking about. France and Russia want to get hold of the works when the war starts. If they do they'll just run creation and halve the world between them; and I reckon that makes five. What do you think, viscount?" she went on, raising her eyes and looking straight at him across the table.

"I agree entirely with Mr Vandel that we ought to get across the Atlantic as quickly as we can," he replied, rather more deliberately than she liked. "I hope, and still believe, that your suspicions are without foundation, but, at the same time, of course, we can't afford to take any risks in a matter like this; and as everything is ready, and as it is always wise to do the unexpected in matters like this, the *Nadine* shall start to-night instead of to-morrow morning. That will give us thirteen to fifteen hours' start; and if, as you seem to think, our friends are the enemy, it may help somewhat to disconcert their plans. But, under any circumstances, it won't do any harm."

"I think, Shafto, that's a very good idea," said Lord Orrel. "In view of what is taking place in Europe and of Doctor Lamson's telegram, I really don't think we ought to lose an hour in getting across the Atlantic as quickly as possible. Of course, it is impossible for me to entertain suspicions of the character of people who have been my guests without the most absolute proof, but at any rate it is impossible that anything could

happen between here and Halifax, where we shall land Madame de Bourbon and the marquise. There we shall get more definite news from Lamson, and the telegram will give us good excuse for leaving them there; but that, of course, will depend upon the nature of the news that we get there. If there is anything really serious—well, we shall have to commit them to the care of the universal Cook, who will, of course, provide a special courier for them, and say good-bye as politely as possible."

At this moment the door opened and Adelaide came in. Lord Orrel had a somewhat high-pitched voice, and as she was opening the door, in the slow, silent way which society approves, she distinctly heard his last sentence.

"Ah," he continued, "here is the marquise herself. Ma'm'selle, we find that the yacht is ready, and that there is no objection, unless you and Madame de Bourbon have any, to starting this afternoon instead of to-morrow morning. Both Mr Vandel and myself have somewhat urgent affairs on the other side of the Atlantic."

"My dear Lord Orrel," replied Adelaide, with a radiant smile, "pray say nothing more; the arrangement will suit my aunt and myself perfectly—and, after all, we are at your service. It is you who are accommodating us. For my part, I think it is always pleasant the first night at sea, especially in summer. One wakes up the next morning to find the sun shining, and the water dancing, and the strong salt breeze ready to give one a most glorious appetite for breakfast. What more would you? The packing, as you call it, is done. For us it is only a question of putting our hats on and going on board—and, voila, c'est fait."

She said this with such a delightful air of insouciance, and with such a radiant smile, that Miss Chrysie felt that she could have shot her there and then. Under the circumstances, she just finished her coffee and said:

"Well, Olive, if that's so, I reckon we'd better go and get fixed up too. I quite agree with the marquise that it's better to start out at night on a voyage and wake up nice and fresh next morning, especially if you don't eat too liberal a dinner before you start."

"Oh yes," said Lady Olive; "I can be quite ready by this afternoon if you can, and if it's anything like the lovely moonlight night it was last night, we shall have a perfectly delicious run through the Solent and past the Needles."

"And along the coast," added Hardress; "the moonlight will last us a bit farther than that. We shall be well away to Portland before you want to go to bed I expect.

The *Nadine's* got to do her best this time, and we've coaled up for a run across the Atlantic at twenty knots. That will be somewhat of an experience for you, marquise, will it not?"

"Yes, viscount," she said, with one of those smiles which Miss Chrysie hated so; "it is a very wonderful speed that, and of course it will be an experience."

"Then that's settled," said Lady Olive, rising, "we shall start this evening. Now let us go and pack."

The *Nadine*, spick and span, and clean as a new pin, was lying alongside the ocean quay at Southampton, her bunkers and half her hold crammed with the finest steaming coal that money could buy, and the steam whistling softly in her pipes.

Her second engineer, an exceedingly clever young fellow of twenty-five, whose good-looking face was marred by a pair of too-closely-set greenish-blue eyes, was leaning on the rail a little forward of the foremast, smoking a pipe and gazing down the water with eyes that saw nothing material. Edward Williams was as good a marine engineer as ever went afloat, but unfortunately he was possessed by the idea, too common among his class, that he possessed a creative and inventive genius as well as real cleverness in his profession.

He had invented what he considered to be improvement after improvement in marine machinery, and Lord Orrel had at first helped him generously to put them into practical form; but as he did not possess the genius, he believed he had, they had one after another failed to stand the test of practice, and at length both Lord Orrel and his son had closed their pockets and given him to understand that he had better devote himself to his profession and leave inventing alone. This produced the usual effect on such a mind as his. He forgot all that they had done for him, and looked upon them as wealthy men whose selfishness deliberately barred his way to the fame and fortune which ought to be his.

Only a month before he had gone to Hardress with the plans of a new type of submarine boat, which he, of course, firmly believed would revolutionise naval warfare. It would only have cost a few hundred pounds to build a model and demonstrate the truth of his theory, but Hardress had kindly but firmly refused to do it. This refusal had soured him utterly, and put him in exactly the frame of mind readiest to succumb to the temptation to commit the only crime of his life.

Sophie had heard something of this in conversations at the Court and on board the yacht, and she instantly divined that if she was to find an instrument to work out her scheme she would find it in the disappointed inventor—and she was right.

Like every man who believes himself to be a genius, and is not, Edward Williams was intensely vain, and when the beautiful and brilliant countess one day asked him to show her over the engines and explain their working he naturally felt intensely

flattered. Then Sophie had skilfully led the conversation to his own inventions, sympathised with him very sweetly, and assured him that in Russia such genius as his would certainly not go unrecognised. "But these English," she said, "are always the last to accept new ideas or properly reward their clever men."

After that he had been as wax in her skilful hands. She had even led him to believe she was not indifferent to him personally. After this she had infatuated him still further by giving him appointments in secluded parts of the Court grounds; and so she had gradually led up to the proposal which he had now definitely accepted.

For reasons of state, it was all-important that the *Nadine* should never reach America. Not the slightest harm was to come to anyone on board her: they would simply be brought back and landed in France, free to get home as they pleased. All that was wanted was a delay of a couple of days or so. Therefore, if the engines of the *Nadine* broke down at a certain spot in the Atlantic, and remained helpless until the *Vlodoya* overtook her, he was to receive five thousand pounds in gold and a lucrative dockyard appointment in Russia, which would give him every opportunity of working out his inventions.

To such a man, embittered by disappointment and soured by a sense of imaginary wrongs, such a dazzling temptation was irresistible; and that was why Edward Williams was leaning over the rail of the *Nadine* a couple of hours before she was to start, dreaming dreams of revenge on those who had wronged him, and of fortune and fame among his country's enemies.

The party from Orrel Court drove down to Southampton immediately after lunch to enable the ladies to do a little final shopping before going on board.

In the course of the afternoon Chrysie and Lady Olive went into the telegraph office to send off a few farewell wires to friends. As they entered, Miss Chrysie's quick eyes at once caught sight of Felice, the marquise's maid, leaning over one of the compartments. She touched Lady Olive's hand and nodded towards her, and said:

"I guess I'd like to see that telegram."

And then, in the most unprincipled fashion, she strolled along the compartments as though she were looking for a form, stopped a moment and looked over the maid's shoulder. Then she came back and did it again. Meanwhile the other compartments had been occupied; so she just stood about until Felice had finished, and then took her place.

As it happened, Felice had been compelled to use one of those adamantine post-office pencils which you have to almost dig through the paper before you can get a legible impression; consequently on the next form on the pad there was a distinct tracing of several words. This Miss Chrysie tore off and appropriated. Then she wrote her own message and went to the counter with it.

When they got out into the street Lady Olive said, a trifle frigidly:

"My dear Chrysie, don't you think you did a rather improper thing in there? I distinctly saw you look over Felice's shoulder. You know, here, we consider a telegram as sacred as a letter."

"Why, certainly!" replied Chrysie, flushing a little at the rebuke: "and so we do over our side: but still, all's fair in—well—in love and war, and I guess you won't think me quite so wicked when I tell you who that telegram's addressed to."

"Really, Chrysie, I don't wish to know, and I don't think you ought to know," said Lady Olive, still more stiffly.

"Well," replied Chrysie, defiantly, "I am sorry I riled you, but I do know it; and honestly, Olive, it's what's you and I and all of us ought to know."

At this Lady Olive's curiosity appealed very strongly to her sense of the proprieties, and she said more amiably:

"Do you really mean, Chrysie, that there's something serious in it—that, for instance, it has anything to do with the works?"

"I don't know yet," said Chrysie, "but I've got a pretty good copy of it in my satchel, thanks to those awful pencils they give you to use in British telegraph offices. Anyhow, it was addressed to Count Valdemar, *Yacht Vlodoya*, Cherbourg; and Cherbourg's not on the way to the Baltic, is it? Let's go and have an ice and some cakes somewhere, so that I can read what is written."

"That's very strange," said Lady Olive, "and the Count professed to be in such a hurry to get back to Petersburg. What on earth can he be doing at Cherbourg?"

"I reckon poppa and the viscount would give something to know that, too," said Chrysie, as they turned into a confectioner's. They ordered ices, and Chrysie took the telegram form out of her satchel and unfolded it gingerly. Her pretty brows puckered over it for a few moments, as she slanted it this way and that to get the light on it. Then she put her elbows on the little marble table, and said in a low tone:

"It's in French, and it tells the Count that the *Nadine* starts this evening instead of tomorrow morning. The last word is 'Dépêchez,' and that's French for 'Make haste,' isn't it? Now, do you think I was right in doing a very improper thing—which, of course, it was?"

"I'm afraid you were, Chrysie," said Lady Olive. "It's certainly very mysterious. How is the telegram signed?"

"There isn't any signature," replied Chrysie. "Our friend's a bit too cute for that."

"What on earth do you mean, Chrysie?" said Lady Olive, with a note of alarm in her voice. "What friend?"

Chrysie looked up and said, with a snap of her eyes: "What other friend than M'am'selle Felice's mistress—the noble Adelaide de Condé?"

Lady Olive started. To her straightforward English sense of honour it seemed impossible that a woman so gently bred as Adelaide de Condé could accept her father's hospitality, and yet send such a message as this to those who might before long be the enemies of his country.

"Chrysie," she said, "I could not believe that for a moment. It is utterly incredible that the marquise could be guilty of anything of the sort. I admit that it is very suspicious that the *Vlodoya* should be at Cherbourg instead of on her way to the Baltic, and that Adelaide's maid should send such a message; but it seems to me much more likely that Felice is in the pay of these Russians, and that her mistress knows nothing about it."

"Well," said Chrysie, rising, "we shall see. Now I guess we'd better be getting down on board. I shall give this to the viscount, and he can have a council of war on it."

"The viscount!" smiled Lady Olive, as they went out into the street. "How very formal we are, Chrysie. Why don't you call him Shafto?"

"Because I won't let him call me Chrysie—yet," was the reply.

## CHAPTER XIX

When the *Nadine* left her moorings, at about four o'clock on a lovely June afternoon, she sauntered easily down to the Needles at about twelve knots. For reasons of his own her owner had never put her to full speed in crowded waters, or, in fact, where any other craft was near enough to see what she could do. On deck the principal actors in the tragedy that was to come were sitting in deck-chairs or strolling about, chatting in the most friendly fashion possible, just as though the graceful little vessel

was not practically carrying the fate of the world as she slipped so smoothly and swiftly through the swirling water that ran along her white sides.

Until nightfall she continued at the same speed; but when dinner was over, and the lights were up, Hardress lit a cigar and went on to the bridge, and said to the commander:

"Captain Burgess, I think you can let her go now. Full speed ahead, right away to Halifax. As I have told you, it is most urgent that we should be there in between five and six days. Of course, everything depends on the engines, and I think it would be well to work the engine-room staff in treble shifts, just to see that nothing goes wrong. Any accident in the engine-room would mean a good deal to me. So you may tell the stokers and engineers that if everything goes smoothly, and we get to Halifax by the 15th—that's giving you five days and a bit from now—there will be a hundred pounds extra to be divided among them when we've coaled up again at Halifax. You understand, I want those engines looked after as though they were a lady's watch."

"Certainly, my lord," replied the captain. "I hope, sir, you don't think that anything of that sort is necessary for the working of the *Nadine*; but, of course, the engine-room staff will be very glad to accept your lordship's generosity."

The captain blew his whistle, and the head and shoulders of a quartermaster appeared on the ladder, looking up to the bridge.

"Quartermaster, who is on duty in the engine-room?"

"Mr Williams, sir," replied the quartermaster, touching his cap.

"Ask him to be good enough to step up here for a moment."

"Ay, ay, sir," and the head and shoulders disappeared.

A few moments later Edward Williams came up on to the bridge. Apart from the work of his profession he was an intensely nervous man, and his imagination had instantly construed the sudden and unwonted summons into a suspicion of his contemplated guilt, and his close-set, greenish-blue eyes shifted anxiously from the captain to Hardress in a way that at once inspired Hardress with vague undefined suspicions, which somehow brought him back to one or two interviews on the subject of Williams's patents—which had ended in a way which would have prompted a less generous man to have dismissed him on the spot. It was only a suspicion. Still, in another sense, it was the intuition of a keen and highly-trained intellect, and somehow, by some process which Hardress himself could not have explained,

Williams's manner as he came on the bridge, and that sudden shifty glance, inspired him with the thought that this was a man to be watched.

"Mr Williams," said the captain, "his lordship has just informed me that it is most important we should get to Halifax in the quickest possible time; and, as you have most of the routine work to do, under Mr M'Niven, and are, perhaps, more in touch with the men than he is, I wish you to tell the men that from here to Halifax the engineers and stokers will work in treble shifts. It'll be a bit harder work, but not for long. And his lordship has kindly promised a hundred pounds to be divided among the engineer's staff at Halifax. Now, that's not bad extra pay for five or six days work, and I hope you'll see that it's earned."

"Very well, sir," replied the engineer, doing his best to keep his voice steady, and not quite succeeding. "It is, I am sure, most generous of his lordship, and I am quite certain that the men will do everything in their power to deserve it."

"And," said Hardress, noting the break in his voice, "you understand, Mr Williams, I shall expect the officers to do the same. We can take no risks this trip, and there must be no accidents or breakdowns. Time is too precious; you understand me, of course. I will see Mr M'Niven later on. That will do, thank you."

Mr Williams touched the peak of his cap, and disappeared down the ladder, feeling, in his inmost soul as though his contemplated treachery had already been discovered. And yet, if he had seen the matter from another point of view, he might have known that the precautions which Hardress had taken were, under the circumstances, just what any man carrying such enormous responsibilities as he did would have taken, for, as he had said, everything depended on the *Nadine's* engines. It was, therefore, the most natural thing in the world that everything possible should be done to ensure their perfect working. In fact, if he had not had the burden of a contemplated treachery on his soul, he would have considered the orders to be not only natural, but necessary.

As he reached the deck, it happened that the marquise was strolling forward towards the bridge. Williams raised his cap, and by the light of one of the electric deck-lamps, Hardress saw from the bridge that she looked hard at him for a moment, and that he replied with an almost imperceptible shake of the head. His brows came together for a moment, and he shut his teeth. His keen intellect saw what his half-intoxicated senses would not have seen. Under any normal circumstances, it was impossible that his guest, Adelaide de Condé, could have even the remotest relations with his second engineer, and yet there was no mistaking what he had seen as she passed under the electric light.

"Captain Burgess," he said, suddenly, in a low voice, "I don't quite like the look of Mr Williams. I have nothing against him, but I know he has a bit of a grudge against me about those patents of his, and——"

"Surely you don't think, my lord, that he would do anything?"

"No," interrupted Hardress; "I say nothing, except that we're taking no risks this voyage; but I shall ask Mr M'Niven to have a very sharp watch kept on the engines."

"May I come up on to the sacred territory?" said a sweet, pleading voice from half-way up the bridge stairs.

"And may we too?" said the voice of Miss Chrysie just behind.

"By all means, marquise," said Hardress; "and you too, Olive, and Miss Chrysie, certainly; only I hope you've got your caps pinned on securely, because we're going to quicken up."

"Ah," said Adelaide, coming up on to the bridge with her head half-enveloped in a fleecy shawl, "quicken up. Does that mean what you call full speed?"

"Something like it, I reckon," said Miss Chrysie, coming up close behind her, followed by Lady Olive, both with white yachting caps pinned more or less securely on to their abundant tresses.

"Yes," said Hardress, with a note in his voice that Adelaide had not heard before; "it is full speed. Now, hold on to your headgear and you'll see."

As he spoke he put his hand on the handle of the engine telegraph and pulled it over from half to full speed. They heard a tinkle in the engine-room, and presently the bridge began to throb and thump under their feet. The sharp prow of the *Nadine* had so far been cleaving the water with scarcely a ripple. Now it seemed to leap forward into it, and raised a long creased swirl to left and right. A sudden blast of wind struck their faces, hands instinctively went up to heads, and Lady Olive exclaimed: