

What is that, Shafto? It hasn't suddenly come on to blow, has it?"

"Oh no," he laughed. "We're making it blow. That's only the difference between about ten or eleven knots and twenty—and there's a bit of a breeze against us, about five miles an hour—so that makes it twenty-five miles an hour—in fact, even thirty—for knots are longer than miles."

"Now isn't that just gorgeous!" said Miss Chrysie, and she opened her mouth and filled her lungs with the strong salt breath of the sea—"and there goes my cap," she said, when she got her breath again.

The breeze had got under the peak of her yachting cap, and sent it flying aft. The pin dislocated the arrangement of her hair, and the next moment she was standing with the loosened shining coils streaming out behind her, unravelling into a shower of golden glory. Adelaide, with the instinct of a Frenchwoman, had drawn her shawl tight round her head. Hardress looked round at the moment, and, if his heart had ever wavered, in that moment the old allegiance was confirmed. There was no more comparison between the tall, deep-chested American girl, with her cheeks glowing, her eyes shining in the sheer joy of physical life, and her long gold-brown hair streaming away behind her, and the slight, shrinking figure of the daughter of the Bourbons, cowering behind the canvas of the bridge and gripping the shawl that covered her head, than there might have been between a sea-nymph of the old Grecian legends and a fine lady of to-day caught in an unexpected gust of wind.

Miss Chrysie looked natural and magnificent, breasting the gale and breathing it in as though she loved it. Adelaide de Condé, the exotic of the drawing-room, cowered before it, and looked pinched, and shivered. Lady Olive, with one hand on the top of her cap and the other holding the wrap she had thrown round her shoulders, gasped for a moment, and said:

"Yes, Chrysie; this is glorious. Twenty knots!—that's about twenty-four miles an hour, isn't it, a little bit faster than a South-Eastern express train?"

"I hope so," laughed Hardress; "if it wasn't we should be some time in getting to Halifax. And now, I suppose, you've got some coffee ready for us down in the saloon?"

"Oh yes, it will be quite ready now," said Lady Olive. "Mr Vandel and papa have started their chess already; Madame de Bourbon is still making lace with those wonderful eyes and fingers of hers; and so, if you want to exchange the storm for the calm, come along."

A little after eleven that night, when the *Nadine*, thrilling in every plate and plank, was tearing through the smooth water of the Atlantic at nearly twenty-one knots an hour, a council of three was being held in the smoking-room on deck. The doors and windows were closed, and a quarter-master was patrolling the deck on each side. Below in the saloon, Miss Chrysie, with a dainty little revolver in the pocket of her yachting skirt, was playing poker for beans with Madame de Bourbon, Lady Olive, and the marquise. In short, as Miss Chrysie herself would have expressed it, things were rapidly coming to a head on board the *Nadine*.

"It seems to me," said the president, "that, all things considered—thank you, viscount, I think I will take just one more peg—we have just got to take every possible precaution. I don't say that I am suspecting or accusing anybody; but, considering that we've got about the biggest thing on earth right here aboard this yacht, I don't think we should calculate on taking any risks. Take that telegram to start with. There can't be any doubt about that; and it doesn't matter whether the marquise or Ma'm'selle Felice sent it, there it is. Get it down to plain figures. This boat does twenty knots, and she started fifteen hours before her time. A telegram goes from Southampton to Cherbourg, as Chrysie's duplicate showed, clearly telling Count Valdemar, on the *Vlodoya* at Cherbourg, where he had no business to be, according to his programme, that we were sailing in the afternoon instead of the next morning, and it ended by telling him to make haste. Now, what does haste mean? We steam twenty knots, and the *Vlodoya*, we know, steams about sixteen. She started from Cherbourg, and we started from Southampton. The French and Russian Polar expeditions are perhaps under weigh now, and, from what we know, I reckon that they have a fairly good idea of what we're going across the Atlantic for. Now, how's a sixteen-knot boat going to catch a twenty-knot yacht anywhere between Southampton and Halifax?"

"And why should Count Valdemar receive that telegram at Cherbourg, as I suppose he did," said Lord Orrel, "instead of going on to the Baltic, when he said he was in such a hurry to get to Petersburg?"

"That, I think," said Hardress, "is the most suspicious fact in the whole business. Of course, I don't like to suspect our late or our present guests, but I must confess that I feel there's something wrong. What it is I can't exactly say; but still I do feel that everything is not as it ought to be."

"And that," said the president, "I think I can explain in a few words—not my own ideas altogether, because Chrysie has given me a good many points. You know, gentlemen, there are some things that a woman's eyes can see through a lot farther than a man's can, and Chrysie doesn't always keep her eyes down."

He lit a fresh cigar, took a sip of his whisky and soda, and went on:

"Why should a telegram be sent to the owner of a sixteen-knot boat, informing him of a change of sailing a twenty-knot boat, when the sixteen-knotter is supposed to be going up the Baltic, and the twenty-knotter is going across the Atlantic? It seems ridiculous, doesn't it? It would, even if they were both going across the Atlantic, as they might be. Now, those are hard facts; and there's a dead contradiction between them, just as you might say there is between positive and negative in electricity. Now, where's the spark that's going to connect them?"

There was silence at the table for a few moments, while the president blew two or three long whiffs of blue smoke from his lips; and then Hardress, remembering his thoughts on the bridge, and what he had seen from it, blurted out, almost involuntarily:

"Something wrong with the engines, I suppose?"

"You've got it in once, viscount," said the president, flicking the ash off his cigar. "Is there any other way that a sixteen-knotter could overtake a twenty-knotter? I don't want to say anything against anyone, but, you know, accidents to engines are easily managed, and we just can't afford to have any right here."

"I've seen to that already," said Hardress. "I don't think there's any fear of a mishap, accidental or otherwise."

"But," said the president, lighting another cigar, "if it should happen that the sixteen-knotter did overhaul the twenty-knotter, wouldn't it be just as well to get that gun mounted? They may have guns on that Russian boat, and they probably have; but I don't think they'll have anything that's a circumstance to our twelve-pounder Vandelite gun."

"Well, in case of accidents," said Lord Orrel, "I think, Shafto, that it wouldn't be a bad idea to get the gun mounted at once. If, in spite of any precautions, there is going to be an accident in the engine-room, it might as well be mounted as soon as possible."

"I quite agree with you, sir," said Hardress. "We will have it out of the hold, and mount it first thing to-morrow morning."

CHAPTER XX

On the morning of the second day out, when Adelaide came on deck, she was astonished, and not a little disquieted, to see nearly the whole of the yacht's crew, under the command of Mr M'Niven, the chief engineer, engaged in mounting a long,

light, slender gun, with a very massive breech, on the flush deck just forward of the foremast. Happening to look up at the bridge, she also saw that a light Maxim had been mounted at either end of it.

What did it mean? Guns were not mounted on a gentleman's private yacht, as a rule, unless she was making some dangerous expedition in perilous waters. As for doing such a thing on the most frequented ocean path in the world, it was utterly ridiculous, unless there was some very grave reason for it—and what reason could there be, save one? Had Sophie's scheme been betrayed? Had Felice told about the telegram, under the temptation of such a bribe as these millionaires could offer? Had Williams wavered at the last, and confessed? She knew, of course, that the *Vlodoya* carried guns, to compel surrender, if necessary. Was that a reason why these guns were being mounted?—and what would happen if the *Nadine* met force with force, and won? Everything would come out; the whole conspiracy, and her own share in it; and then, what would he think of her? She had entered into the plot mainly for the purpose of getting rid of this American rival of hers, so that she might pursue the advantage which she believed she had already gained, without opposition. The discovery would mean utter ruin for herself and all her hopes.

While these sinister thoughts were passing swiftly through her brain she heard a light step behind her, and a gay voice, saying:

"My, that looks good, doesn't it! Seems as if the viscount thought we were going to have a bit of a scrap before we got across. Yes, that's poppa's own dynamite gun; the viscount calls it his pocket-pistol. Oh, good-morning, marquise; you seem to be interested in the operations!"

"Good-morning, Ma'm'selle Chrysie," replied the marquise, sweetly. "How delightfully fresh you English and American girls always look after you've tubbed. Yes; I assure you I am very interested; indeed, I am astonished. I was not aware that it was customary to mount guns on a nobleman's yacht in times of peace."

"Well, no," laughed Miss Chrysie; "but then, you see, marquise, there is peace and peace. We are at peace with all the world, nearly, but, the fact is, this is a pretty important voyage, and, from what poppa tells me, it hasn't got to be interrupted under any circumstances."

"But surely there can be no fear of that," replied Adelaide, with a laugh which seemed to Chrysie a trifle artificial and uneasy; "the days of piracy are past."

"That's no reason why they shouldn't be revived on occasion," said Chrysie, turning round and looking her straight in the eyes; "in fact, it seems to me, from one or two

hints that poppa let drop, that someone is going to try and stop us getting across this time, and that's why these guns are here. That's a pretty-looking weapon, isn't it?"

"Really, Miss Vandel," replied the marquise, rather languidly, "I can assure you I know nothing about such things; and I take, if possible, even less interest in them."

"Well, marquise, I can assure you that that's a most interesting weapon. Poppa invented it. It's loaded with liquid gas instead of gunpowder, and a shell that holds twelve pounds of an improved sort of dynamite—Vandelite he calls it. Now, of course, you know that when liquid gas is allowed to become gasey gas, it makes things mighty cold round it. Well, this freezes the Vandelite so that it shan't explode in the gun. Then when the projectile hits anything, that develops heat and sets it off. Simple, isn't it? And yet that's a thing that inventors have been puzzling about for years. That gun will put twelve pounds of concentrated earthquake into a ship four miles away, and that would knock anything but an armour-clad into splinters. So I guess there'll be trouble for anything that tries to stop us this journey."

"Still, that could hardly be in these times," said the marquise, with excellently simulated nonchalance. "But, really, your knowledge of gunnery appears to be wonderful, Miss Vandel. I suppose you take a great interest in weapons of warfare?"

"Yes, I do," said Chrysie; "you see, we make all the best of them over our side. For instance," she went on, pulling an exquisitely-finished little Smith & Wesson five-shooter out of her pocket, "there's a dainty little bit of bric-a-brac. No, don't touch it, if you're not accustomed to shooters, because it's loaded. Doesn't look very dangerous, does it? But I can pick all the spots off a card at twenty paces with it."

"Dear me, how very wonderful! And how very interesting you young ladies of the New World are. Really, the fact of your carrying a loaded revolver in your skirt pocket seems to me quite as singular as mounting guns on a gentleman's yacht. So entirely unnecessary, I should have thought."

All Adelaide's powers of self-control did not suffice to keep a note of petulance and insincerity out of her voice. Miss Chrysie's quick ears caught it instantly. She slipped her arm through Adelaide's, and drew her away out of hearing of the men who were mounting the guns, and said in a low voice, which thrilled with something very like passion:

"I'm carrying this shooter, marquise, for the same reason that they're putting those guns up. I don't know what it is, but there's trouble ahead, and we're outside the law just now, the same as others may be soon; but the man I love is on board this ship,

and if there's any harm waiting for him, and quick and straight shooting will save him, I'm going to do my little level best."

It was impossible for Adelaide not to recognise the frank, direct challenge of her words. For the moment a passing impulse impelled her to snatch the weapon out of Chrysie's hand and shoot her; but another moment's thought showed her that such an act would have meant worse than ruin to all her hopes. After what Chrysie had said, she would dearly have loved to have done it. It was the first distinct avowal of her love for the man for whom she herself had deliberately engaged to sacrifice the honour of her stainless name, and there was a ring of deadly earnestness in Chrysie's tone as she handled the deadly toy, which meant even more than her words did; and so she exclaimed, with an innocent seeming archness which astonished Chrysie quite as much as her own words had astonished the marquise:

"Ah, so, Ma'm'selle, then my suspicions were correct. Well, well, accept my best wishes for the most delightful ending possible for your romance. Nothing could be better, or what the English call more suitable—yes, in every way. And as for me, though I do not know what I have done to deserve so great a confidence——"

"I don't know that I ought to let you thank me for it," said Chrysie, flushing a little; "I guess I told you more for your good than mine, and I thought it was only right that you should know just how matters stood, in case any mistakes were made later on that couldn't be rectified—and I think that's about all that need be said just here. There is the bell: and there is Lady Olive come to tell us that tea is ready. Suppose we go below, and change the subject."

Adelaide followed her down the companion way, her face radiant and smiling, and her heart hot and bitter with many thoughts which at present she dared not translate either into words or actions. If only the *Vlodoya* succeeded in her mission—if only the plot to which she had lent herself succeeded—ah, then there would be a difference! If not, well, the sea was deep and clear and cool, and life would have nothing left in it for her.

A little before midnight another council of war was being held in the smoking-room, guarded as usual by a quartermaster on either side of the deck, and Captain Burgess came out of his own cabin under the bridge and went to the starboard door. The quartermaster stopped and touched his cap.

"Robertson," he said, "tell his lordship that I want to speak to him at once."

"Ay, ay, sir," said the man, knocking at the door. There was a "click click" of the key turning in the lock, the door opened, and Hardress looked out.

"Oh, captain," he said, "that you? Any—do you wish to speak to me? Come in."

The captain went in, and the door was at once locked behind him.

"Sit down, captain," said Hardress, pointing to a seat. "What's the matter? You can speak quite freely. You know that there are some rather funny things going on; but you, of course, we trust absolutely."

"I hope so, my lord," said the skipper, with a touch of dignity in his tone. "I am sorry to say that just before seven bells, when we changed watch unexpectedly, as we are doing in the engine-room, one of the extra men we've put on watch detected Mr Williams in the act of sanding the driving rod of the low-pressure cylinder of the port engine."

"And what would have been the effect of that?" said Hardress, quite coolly, as though he expected the news.

The words had hardly left his lips before a slight jarring shudder ran along the port side of the ship, and they felt a distinct swerve as though she had swung suddenly out of her course.

"The scoundrel, he has gritted the shaft as well!" exclaimed the captain, jumping to his feet and running to the door. "Pardon, my lord," he cried, as he opened it. Then he said to the quartermaster:

"Robertson, skip up to the bridge and stop her. Mr M'Niven's there."

Then as the quartermaster vanished in the direction of the bridge he locked the door, and came back and said:

"My lord, I'm afraid it's worse than I thought. You know what grit means in the bearings of a screw shaft. It means stopping one engine for twenty-four hours, unbolting the bearings and the thrust-blocks, and cleaning the grit out."

"And I guess that's just about what was calculated upon by our friends the enemy," said President Vandel. "A delay like that would just send us waddling across the water like a duck with a lame foot; and that's how a sixteen-knotter's expected to overtake a twenty-knotter. What's happening to Mr Williams just now captain?"

"Under arrest in his room, sir," replied the captain; "he's a good sailor and a good officer, but I'm afraid he's guilty. I never saw a man look more miserable than he did when I sent for him to my room. I don't know who's been working on him, or what the reason of it is at all, but there it is. He didn't confess, but he might just as well have done, for his face did it for him."

"Then we are to understand, Captain Burgess," said Lord Orrel, "that, at the best, we shall be delayed at least twenty-four hours. That will make a serious difference to us, Shafto, under the circumstances."

"And it may be more than that, my lord," said the captain, "because we don't know yet how much harm's done. Mr M'Niven will, of course, examine the cylinder and the shafting at once and report to me, and if the worst comes to the worst, why, we may have to go to Halifax with one engine. If we hadn't twin screws we'd be disabled altogether. Yes, you see he's stopped the port engine, and that means we've dropped down to about eight knots."

"Yes, of course," said Hardress, "that's about what it comes to, father. Now, Captain Burgess, you will kindly keep Mr Williams in his cabin. Let him have no communication with anyone. You can let Robertson give him his food, and mount guard over him generally. We can trust him, if we can trust anyone. I don't want to see him, or accuse him of anything. Just keep him quiet, and isolated. Tell Mr M'Niven we'll run along as well as we can with the starboard engine, and put all available hands on to repairing the damage to the other. I'll give the engine-room staff another hundred pounds among them if they get it fixed up in twenty-four hours."

"Very well, my lord," said the captain, as he got up and went towards the door. "We shall, of course, do everything possible; and I hope that the damage is not so bad as it seems."

"It appears to me," said the president, as the captain closed the door and Hardress locked it, "that our deductions from those few facts are coming pretty correct. This job's going to keep us back twenty-four hours at least, if not thirty-six; and so, granted that the Russian yacht started pretty soon after that telegram got to Cherbourg, she won't be very far behind us to-morrow evening, and she'll probably overhaul us about by dawn the next day. Seems to me the question is now, what we're going to do if she does?"

"I say fight," said Hardress, between his teeth. "We can smash her into scrap-iron with that gun of yours before she can touch us, if she has guns; and if they do really mean foul play, as it seems they do, I fancy myself it would be better for all of us, women and all, to risk going down with the *Nadine* than to fall into the hands of a pack of Russian pirates, for that's about all they will be, if they try anything of that sort on."

"How would it be, Shafto," said Lord Orrel, "if, granted we could get the engines repaired, we were to play the lame duck, and turn the tables on them——"

"Thunder! You've just got it, Lord Orrel!" exclaimed the president, bringing his hand down on the table. "Whether the count and that pretty daughter of his are on board or not, I reckon they'll be a mightily dangerous crew to deal with, and I reckon they'll be safer as compulsory guests on board this boat than if they were free to knock around in their own ship. I feel pretty certain that they know a lot more about this scheme of ours than they would like to say; and if that's so, as I think it is, the less they run around loose about the earth the better for us."

"I quite agree with you, president," said Hardress. "That's the very thing to do, if we can do it: if it really is the *Vlodoya* that's on our track and she means taking or sinking us; well, we'll play 'possum. We'll have to let her fire on us first, I'm afraid; but I daresay she'll miss, for Russians are about the worst gunners in the world. Then we'll cripple her, take her distinguished passengers out of her, and make them our compulsory guests. After that we'll play pirate to pirate—empty her coal bunkers into ours, strip her of everything we want, and put the crew into the boats with plenty of water and provisions. They'll be certain to be picked up within a couple of days or so if they go south towards the steamer tracks. Then we'll smash his excellency's yacht into scrap-iron, and go straight to Boothia Land without stopping at Halifax at all."

"But, my dear Shafto," said the earl, "that would be a most flagrant act of piracy on the high seas, wouldn't it?"

"My dear dad," he replied, "you must remember that once we are in Boothia we are beyond and above the law, and if we like to indulge in a little piracy we can do so. The point really is to catch these people and take them there with us; so that we can be quite certain they're not going to do any more harm."

"That, viscount," said the president, "is right on the spot; and your idea of taking the coal out of the *Vlodoya* isn't any too bad. I reckon that's just what we've got to do. A little surprise party for our Russian friends right here in mid-ocean, and then straight away to the works. We'll show them some of the wonders from inside that they wanted to see from outside; and I guess we shall also be able to show them something pretty interesting if those two expeditions do happen to discover the Magnetic Pole instead of the North Pole. I reckon it'll be just about one of the most wonderful discoveries that Frenchmen or Russians ever did make."

CHAPTER XXI

Another two days had passed, during which the *Nadine*, instead of swirling through the water at twenty knots, had been waddling through it like a lame duck at eight.

Adelaide had professed the utmost wonder and concern at the accident, and Miss Chrysie, who now knew rather more than she did, watched her with unwinking steadiness from the time she came on deck in the morning till the time she retired with her aunt at night. Madame de Bourbon herself was completely in the dark as to everything that was taking place, and simply looked upon the breakdown of the port engine as one of the ordinary accidents of seafaring.

Adelaide had not slept for an hour continuously since she had seen the guns being mounted. That had convinced her that Hardress, whose suspicion she dreaded more than anything else, already suspected something. Williams had kept faith, and had been detected, thanks to the extraordinary precautions that had been taken in the engine-room, precautions which, so her instinct told her, could not possibly have been taken unless some design against the safety of the yacht had been either discovered or very strongly suspected.

Still, as she told herself when she was lying awake in her berth the night after the breakdown, to a certain extent, the plot had succeeded. Williams had done the work he was paid to do, and the *Nadine* had come down from her greyhound speed to the limping crawl of a wounded hare. The *Vlodoya* would certainly overtake her now—but, then, those guns!

She knew that the *Vlodoya* was prepared to fight if necessary, and so was the *Nadine*, and, now that the question of speed had been disposed of, it would be a question of guns. But, after all, guns would not be of much use without men to fire them or officers to direct the operations. Manifestly the time had come for her to play her part in the great game whose prize was to be, for her the man she loved, and for her allies the lordship of earth.

The next day just before lunch she was strolling up and down the deck with Hardress and Lady Olive, talking about all that they were going to do when they got to Halifax, and she had turned the conversation upon Canadian and American hotels and the difference between American and European cooking, when she said:

"Ah, Monsieur le Viscomte, that reminds me. Will you allow me to give you and also your poor men who have been working so hard at the broken engine a little treat?"

"With the greatest of pleasure, my dear marquise," said Hardress. "And what is it to be?"

"Oh, it is nothing very much," replied Adelaide, in her lightest and gayest tone; "it is only that my aunt happened to mention last night that she had found in her secretaire the authentic recipe of a punch—what do you call it?—a punch of wines and liqueurs

which they used to drink at the suppers at Versailles and the Trianon in the days of the Grand Monarque. Louis himself drank it, and so did that other unhappy ancestor and his queen——"

"Who," laughed Lady Olive, "is at present reincarnate on board the *Nadine*. I suppose you mean then to make up a punch some night after this recipe; that would be delightful, if we only have the proper ingredients on board."

"Oh, they are very simple," replied Adelaide; "it is certain that you will have them, indeed it seems from the recipe that the excellence of the punch does not depend so much on the variety of the ingredients as the proportions and the skill in making it."

"Very well," said Hardress, "as long as we've got the things on board, that is settled; and both ends of the ship shall drink to-night in the punch à *le Grand Monarque*, to the health of his latest and fairest descendant. M'Niven and his men really have been working like so many niggers at that engine, and they've done splendidly. In fact, Captain Burgess tells me we shall be ready for full speed ahead by daybreak to-morrow."

"Ah," said Adelaide in her soul, "then it is all the more necessary that we should have the punch à *le Grand Monarque*," and she went on aloud, "Well then, Monsieur le Viscomte, that is arranged. If you will tell your steward, your maître d'hôtel, as we call him on French ships, to provide me with the ingredients, I will make it this afternoon, and we will take it after dinner, eh?"

"Yes," said Lady Olive, "and I think, Shafto, under the circumstances, you might invite Captain Burgess and Mr M'Niven to dine with us."

"Certainly," replied her brother, "that's a capital idea, Olive. We will—in fact, we'll have Mr Vernon, too: he's worked just as hard as anyone else, and it can be arranged for the second officer to take charge of the bridge during dinner. And so, ma'm'selle," he went on, turning to the marquise, "if you will take the trouble, you may brew us two bowls, one for the cabin and a bigger one for the other end of the ship, and the steward shall put the whole of the ship's liquid stores at your disposal."

"Monsieur le Viscomte, I could desire nothing better," she replied, with her most dazzling smile, and more meanings than one.

The subject of the punch was mentioned during lunch, and during the afternoon Miss Chrysie got her father up into the bows, and, after a swift look round to see if anyone was within hearing distance, said:

"Poppa, are you going to take any of that punch to-night?"

"Why, certainly, Chrysie. Why not? What's the matter?"

"It may be matter or no matter," she replied, "but I'm not, and I guess it would be healthier for you not to. I'm more than ever certain that that Frenchwoman is in it. Yes; it's all very well looking like that, poppa, but—you think I hate this woman because she's in love with the viscount. Well, I suppose I do; and there'll most likely be trouble between us sometime soon; but I haven't quite lost all my senses because I happen to be in love with a man that another woman wants to get. Don't you see, we're going to have that punch just a few hours before we get the engines right and that other boat is to catch us?"

"But, great sakes, Chrysie, you don't mean the marquise is going to poison us?"

"It won't be poison," answered Chrysie, very curtly, "because she knows that he'll drink it. I guess some drug's a good deal more likely—something that'll make everybody at both ends of the ship pretty sleepy and stupid when the time for a fight comes around. You see, that's just the natural sequence to the plot to cripple the engine. Anyhow, that's what I think it is."

"Well, if it's as bad as that," said her father, "why not warn the viscount?"

"That wouldn't do much good," she replied, more curtly than before. "You see, I'd have to make a definite accusation against her, and I've nothing to go on except what he'd call mere suspicion and we call logical deduction. I'd give her a tremendous handle against me, especially with him; and if she had any suspicion that I suspected her—why, she might call me down pretty badly by not putting anything in the stuff at all. No, poppa, under the circumstances, we can't do anything except not drink that punch. I'm going to have a headache to-night and stop in my berth. You have some of your gastric trouble and drink hot milk or something of that sort: and if you get a show I think you might, as matters are coming to a head pretty quickly, just give a hint to Captain Burgess and Mr M'Niven to drink as little of that punch as they politely can."

"Well, Chrysie," replied her father, "you've been right so far, but I do hope you're wrong this time. It's a pretty large order, you know, drugging the whole ship's company."

"Yes; and a Frenchwoman with a lot to win is playing a game for pretty big dollars. Of course, there may be nothing in it at all, and I may be quite wrong, but I think this punch of hers has come along at the wrong time, and we can't take any risks. There's one thing, she'll have to drink some of it herself, and that old aunt of hers too. Still, she's pretty useless, and doesn't matter; but if anything does really happen, poppa, you'd better go straight and shake the viscount up. I'll have the steward make some pretty strong coffee to-night for me, and I'll keep it hot and you can give it him; and if

the doctor isn't dead, too, with the stuff, get a drop of prussic acid from him. That'll bring him round."

"It strikes me, Chrysie," said her father, looking down admiringly on her flushed and animated face, "as though you're getting ready to run this ship in case of trouble."

"It's just that, poppa," she said, with an impatient little tap of her foot on the deck; "that is, of course, with you. I don't say it's altogether disinterested, because it isn't; but I'd do that and a lot more to keep to windward of that Frenchwoman, and she knows it. You can work your gun and I can work a Maxim, so if there's only the two of us, we can do something with that Russian ship. And now I guess we'd better go to the other end and show how friendly we can be with our enemies."

"Chrysie," said her father, with a very tender note in a voice which could be as hard as the ring of steel, "I don't want you to be a bit different to what you are, but if you'd been a man you'd have been a great one."

"I'd sooner be a good woman and get what I want than be the biggest man on earth," laughed Chrysie. "When a woman gets all she wants she doesn't want to envy big men anything."

And with that they went aft and subsided into deck-chairs in a sort of irregular circle, in which Lord Orrel was fast asleep, Madame de Bourbon rapidly subsiding, and the marquise and Lady Olive making a pretence of reading with drooping eyelids.

The punch *à la Grand Monarque* was a great success that evening after dinner. It was delicious; and every one regretted that the president's attack of gastritis and Miss Chrysie's headache prevented them from sharing in its delights.

The marquise brewed a little pot of her aunt's special Russian tea for them, which the president declined with many apologies, and which Miss Chrysie, after accepting a cup from the hands of Felice, emptied out of the port-hole as soon as her ladyship's lady had left the cabin.

Captain Burgess and the chief had taken the president's hint almost as though they expected it, and the Scotsman had said significantly:

"I'm obliged to you, Mr Vandel, though I hope there's nothing in your suspicions; still, this is no time for us to be drinking foreign mixed drinks when I've got to keep my eyes open, looking, as you may say, out of both sides of my head. A drop of good old Scotch whisky is as good nourishment as a man can need. What I'm thinking about is the men. We can't forbid them to take it without either insulting his lordship or telling him all the suspicions, which, you say, can't be told him."

"No," added the captain; "but I'll see they have a pretty good shaking up at four o'clock, and the cook shall have plenty of strong coffee ready in case of accidents."

But for all that, the accident happened, almost, if not quite as well as the originator of it could have hoped. By eleven o'clock everyone who had drunk even a single glass of the marquise's punch, including herself and Madame de Bourbon, were dead asleep. Even the captain and the chief engineer, who had taken somewhat drastic measures to counteract the possible effects, did not wake until daybreak, and even then, strong as they were, they were both mentally and physically incapable for the time being of attending to the work of the ship. The sailors and engine-room hands, who had indulged rather more freely, were all sleeping like logs when the watch was called at four in the morning, and nothing could wake them until Mr Vernon, the chief officer, who never under any circumstances drank anything stronger than coffee, and who therefore escaped the general paralysis, with the help of the president and the two quartermasters, who had been forbidden to touch anything in the way of liquor during the night, brought them up on deck and turned the hose on them. This revived the majority of them sufficiently to enable them to drink a copious allowance of strong coffee, after which they were very ill, and then much better.

The captain and the chief engineer were then carried to bathrooms and treated in somewhat the same fashion, after which they were taken back to their rooms and given a good stiff brandy-and-soda.

"Ay, man!" said the chief engineer, as he began to get back his grip on things, "whatever was in that stuff it was deadly. No more of your foreign drinks for me. After that, good Scotch whisky is going to be good enough for me. It's a mercy she didn't poison the whole ship's crew. Captain, if there's any of the men anything like fit for duty you might give them a good strong tot, and let's get to work on that shaft. There's just the bearings and the thrust-blocks to adjust and oil, and then we'll be ready for full speed ahead in three hours."

"I'm afraid that would be a bit too late, sir," said Miss Chrysie, who had been sweeping the eastern horizon with her glasses. "Look yonder," she went on; "there's a steamer down yonder steaming for all she's worth, and I reckon she's a lot more likely to be the *Vlodoya* than an east-bound liner."

The chief took the glasses she offered him, and had a long look at the cloud of smoke that was rising from the ship.

"I'm afraid you're right, miss," he said, handing the glasses back. "That's no liner; she's not half big enough; she's a yacht. Still, her stern chase is a long one, even if we are like a seal with one flipper, and we may be ready for her even yet."

"I think we shall be able to dodge him, Miss Vandel," said the captain, who had just come out of his room, still looking pale and somewhat dazed. "Put every possible hand on to the shaft, M'Niven. Steam's up, and we can start the moment you're ready."

"And," added the president, "I'll see to the guns. If that's the *Vlodoya* they're not going to overtake us before we are ready."

CHAPTER XXII

While the captain and the chief engineer were mustering such men as were in any way fit to work the ship, or to help in getting the port engine into running order, Chrysie and her father paid a visit to the staterooms. Hardress and Lord Orrel were both sleeping as deeply as ever and breathing heavily. The president tried to rouse them, without avail. Their pulses were beating regularly, and, apart from their heavy breathing, there was nothing to show that they were not in a healthy sleep; but they were absolutely insensible to any outside influence; and Chrysie found Lady Olive, Adelaide, and Madame de Bourbon in exactly the same condition. Ma'm'selle Felice was in great distress about her two mistresses, but Chrysie cut her lamentations very short by saying:

"You look after your ladies, Felice, and don't worry about anything else; your place is down here, and don't you come on deck, whatever happens. There's a boat coming up that may be the same one you telegraphed to at Cherbourg from Southampton. If it is, you see this?" she went on, taking her revolver out of her pocket. "Yes, that'll do; I don't want any theatricals, but you go to your cabin and stop there. If you're wanted you'll be sent for."

Ma'm'selle Felice shrank away white and trembling, and Miss Chrysie went back on deck to get the Maxims ready for action. She met her father under the bridge, and said:

"I reckon, poppa, they're all pretty dead down there. We'll have to see this thing through on our own hands."

The chief and his men worked like heroes on the shaft, and a good head of steam was by some means kept up, but the other yacht crept rapidly up across the eastern horizon, and by breakfast time it was perfectly plain that she was the *Vlodoya*. Moreover, both Miss Chrysie and the captain from the bridge had been able to make out with their glasses that she was carrying a Maxim-Nordenfelt gun on her forecastle,

and two others which looked like one-pound quick-firers on either side, a little forward of the bridge. She was flying no flags, not even the pennant of the Imperial Yacht Squadron, to which she belonged. The *Nadine* was flying the Blue Ensign and the pennant of the Royal Yacht Squadron. When the *Vlodoya* was within about eight miles, heading directly for the *Nadine*, the president sent down to ask Mr M'Niven how long it would be before the port engine could be used, and the answer came back, "A good hour yet, but everything is going all right."

Just at this moment the captain was overtaken with another fit of sickness and dizziness, and had to go down to his room; and Mr Vernon remained in charge of the bridge with Miss Chrysie, who was walking up and down, with a strange look of almost masculine sternness on her pretty face, and the gleam of a distinctly wicked light in her eyes.

For her the minutes of that hour passed with terrible slowness as she watched the *Vlodoya* coming up mile after mile, with torrents of smoke pouring out of her funnels. She was evidently steaming every yard she could make. A quarter, half, and three-quarters of an hour passed, and still she kept on, looming up larger and larger astern, and Miss Chrysie looked more and more anxiously at the long gun on deck and the two Maxims on the bridge.

Again a message went down to the engine-room, and the answer came back—"Another twenty minutes." Just then a line of signal flags ran up to the *Vlodoya*'s main truck. The chief officer's glasses instantly went up to his eyes, but after a long look he shook his head and said to the president:

"That's no regular signal, Mr Vandel; it's evidently a private one, arranged beforehand, I should say."

"Then we won't answer it," said the president, "and we'll see what he'll do next. I guess, if he's what we think him, he'll have to declare himself right away."

They hadn't very long to wait, for about five minutes afterwards a puff of smoke rose from the *Vlodoya*'s forecastle, and a seven-pound shell came screaming and whistling across the water. It was the first time that Miss Chrysie had ever been shot at, but she took it without a shiver. The chief officer begged her to go below at once. But she only shut her teeth tighter, and said:

"No, thanks, Mr Vernon, I'm going to have a hand in this. I'm the only one on deck just now that knows how to run a Maxim, and I can shoot as straight with it as I can with my own little pepper-box; so if you just let Mr Robertson come and see to the serving of

the ammunition, I think we'll be able to give our Russian friends just about as good as we get."

"Say, poppa," she went on, leaning over the front of the bridge, "I reckon that shot broke the law of nations, didn't it? How would it be if you raised his bluff? Go him a few pounds of Vandelite better?"

"There's no hurry about that, Chrysie," said the president, who had got his gun loaded, and was squinting every now and then along the sights. "I guess he doesn't want to hit us; we've got too much precious cargo on board. You see, that was a seven-pound shell, and if it got under our water-line—well, we'd just go right down. If our friends are on board, they just want to scare us into surrender, that's all; so I think it would be better for us to wait further developments, and let Mr M'Niven get his work in on that shaft. I can make scrap-iron out of the *Vlodoya* just as soon as ever we want to do it; so don't worry about that."

At this moment another puff of steamy smoke rose from the deck of the Russian yacht, and this time a shell came screaming away over the *Nadine's* masts. Miss Chrysie shut her teeth a bit harder, and walked towards the Maxim on the port side, the one which she could at any time have brought to bear on the *Vlodoya*. The chief officer meanwhile stood anxiously by the engine-room telegraph. It was also his first experience of being shot at. He was just as cool as Miss Chrysie or her father, but he didn't like it. He had the Englishman's natural longing to be able to shoot back, but he recognised that, trying as it was, the president's strategy was the best. About ten more minutes passed, during which the *Vlodoya* drew up closer and closer, until Chrysie, after a good look through her glasses, was able to say:

"Why, yes; there's the count and Sophie on the bridge. Poppa, why don't you let 'em have just one little hint that we're not quite harmless?"

The last word had scarcely left her lips before another puff of steamy smoke rose from the fore-quarter of the Russian yacht, and a second or so after, a bright flash of flame blazed out, about fifty yards on the port side of the *Nadine*.

"That's a time shell," said Vernon. "They evidently mean business: I fancy they could hit us if they liked. Don't you think, Mr Vandel, that we might slow round and give them one from that gun of yours?"

"No, sir," said the president, looking up from his gun: "not till we've the legs on her. When Mr M'Niven——"

At this moment the chief came up on to the bridge, black and grimed from head to foot.

"All right, Mr Vernon, you can go full steam ahead now. We've got every bit of grit out, and she'll work as easy as ever she did."

"Then," said the president, "I reckon that's about all that we want. Full steam ahead, if you please, Mr Vernon; you can let her go both engines."

The chief officer pulled the telegraph handle over to full speed. The next moment two columns of boiling foam leapt out from under the *Nadine's* counters as she sprang forward from eight knots to sixteen, and then to twenty. Almost at the same instant the Maxim-Nordenfeldt from the *Vlodoya* forecastle spoke again, and a seven-pound shell, aimed low this time, came hurtling across the water, and missed the *Nadine's* stern by about ten yards.

"I reckon that means business," said the president. "Full speed ahead, if you please, Mr Vernon, and hard aport."

The *Nadine* made a splendid swerve through an arc of about a hundred and eighty degrees, and then began the naval duel, on the issue of which the future course of human history was to depend.

The *Vlodoya* fired three more shots in as many minutes, but they went wide, for she was steaming nearly seventeen knots and the *Nadine* twenty. Then as the *Nadine* swung round so that her bow pointed towards the *Vlodoya*, the president signed to the two men who were working the gun, a wheel was whirled round, and the muzzle swung slowly until he put his hand up and said:

"Stop her, if you please, Mr Vernon, and screw her round as hard as you can."

The engine telegraph rang, a sharp shudder ran through the fabric of the *Nadine*, the water which had been swirling astern mounted up ahead as her engines backed, and her bow came up, till the president raised his hand again to stop her. At the same moment another shell from the *Vlodoya* whistled over the deck at an elevation of only a few feet. In fact, it passed so near to Miss Chrysie that she involuntarily put her hand up to keep her hat on her head. Clifford Vandel saw it. He didn't say anything, but he set his teeth, squinted along the sights of his gun, and touched a button in the breech. Five seconds later a mountain of boiling foam rose up under the stern of the *Vlodoya*. She stopped like a stricken animal, and lay motionless on the water, lurching slowly down by the stern.

"Well hit, poppa!" cried Miss Chrysie, from the bridge. "I guess that's got him on a tender spot. The count won't have much screws to work with after that. Oh, they're going to shoot again. Suppose you gave them one forward this time."

While she was speaking, the quick-firer had already been reloaded, the president moved the long barrel a couple of degrees, and touched the button again. The sharp hiss of the released air was followed by an intensely brilliant flash of light on the forecastle of the *Vlodoya*, and when the smoke had cleared away the Maxim-Nordenfeldt had vanished.

"I guess there's not much wrong with that automatic sighting arrangement of mine," said the president; "hits every time."

"Couldn't be better, poppa! I reckon they're pretty tired by this. Suppose Mr Vernon gives her full speed again, and we go along and have a talk with Ma'm'selle Sophie and the count. Shouldn't wonder if they knew by now that we've raised their bluff, and are ready to see them for all they've got."

The president re-charged his gun, and then, leaning his back up against the bridge, said:

"Well, yes, Chrysie, I think we can see them now, if Mr Vernon will give us full speed ahead for a few minutes."

The chief officer nodded, and pulled the handle of the telegraph over. The answering tinkle came back from the engine-room, in which the chief had retired after he had given his message, and the *Nadine* again sprang forward towards the crippled vessel that was now her prey. She described another magnificent curve, and as she rushed up alongside the Russian yacht at a distance of about two hundred yards, Miss Chrysie sat herself down on a camp-stool behind the Maxim, and sent half-a-dozen shots rattling through the rigging of the *Vlodoya*. Then, as the *Nadine* swung in closer, she depressed the barrel of the gun on to the bridge, on which she could now recognise the count and his daughter, and sang out, in a clear soprano:

"Hands up, please, or I'll shoot. My dear Countess Sophie, I never expected this of you."

Countess Sophie looked at her father, and bit a Russian curse in two between her tightly-clenched teeth, and said to her father who was standing beside her on the bridge:

"She has failed—she and the engineer too—and these accursed Americans have done it, I suppose. They have broken our propellers and disabled our gun. What are we to

do? It is exasperating, just when we thought that everything was going so well. What has happened to Adelaide?—has she turned traitor too? Surely that would be impossible."

"Impossible or not, my dear Sophie," replied the count, "there is now no choice between sinking and surrender. You see, that gun, one of these diabolical American inventions, I have no doubt, would sink us like a shot, and then——"

"And then we shall have to surrender, I suppose," said Sophie. "But it is still possible that I shall have a chance to shoot that American girl before this little international comedy is played out, and if I do——"

"Hands up, please, everyone on board, or I *will* shoot this time," came in clear tones across about fifty yards of water. Sophie looked round and saw Miss Chrysie looking along the sights of the Maxim, with her hand on the spring. Her face was hard set, and her eyes were burning. There was no mistaking her intention. In another moment a storm of bullets would be raining along the decks of the *Vlodoya*.

"We are beaten, papa, for the present," she said, as she got up from her chair, and put her hands over her head. The count looked at the grinning muzzle of the Maxim and did the same.

"Yes," he said, "we are beaten this time, and it is hardly good policy to be sunk in the middle of the Atlantic. Later on, perhaps, we may retrieve something; but it is strange how these Anglo-Saxons, stupid and all as they are to begin with, always seem to get the best of us at the end. Yes; we must surrender or sink, and, personally, I have no taste for the bottom of the Atlantic at present.

CHAPTER XXIII

The *Nadine* ranged alongside, Miss Chrysie still sitting at her Maxim, with Robertson beside her ready to see to the ammunition feed, and the president, leaning over the forward rail, said, as laconically as though he had been putting the most ordinary business proposition:

"Good-morning, excellency; I guess you and the countess had better come on board as soon as possible. If you'll lower the gangway I'll send a boat; but if there's any more shooting I shall sink you. I don't want to do anything unpleasant, you understand; but that high-toned friend of yours the marquise has half-poisoned most of us, and so the rest have to take charge. Are you badly hurt?"

Count Valdemar held a hurried consultation with the captain of the *Vlodoya*, and replied, as politely as he could:

"The fortune of war is with you, Mr Vandel, and there is no need for any further concealment. We are crippled, but the watertight compartments have been closed and we shall float. Meanwhile, we are helpless and entirely at your service. What do you wish us to do?"

In the meantime the *Nadine's* boat had been lowered, and was pulling round her stern to the gangway of the *Vlodoya*, which had been lowered, and the president replied:

"We'll have to ask your excellency and the countess to be our guests for a bit; so if you'll just come right on board and tell your people to get your baggage fixed up, we'll be able to save you a certain amount of unpleasantness. You will be a lot more comfortable on board here than you will there, because we're going to take what coal you've got and then sink you."

As the president said this the captain of the Russian yacht nodded towards a man standing by one of the one-pounders on the fore deck. He pulled the lanyard, there was a sharp bang, and a shell bored its way through the plates of the *Nadine* amidships, just missing the engines. The next moment Miss Chrysie's Maxim began to thud, spitting flame and smoke and lead, sweeping the decks of the *Vlodoya* from stem to stern. Only those on the bridge were spared. For a full three minutes the deadly hail continued, and there was not a man on deck who was not killed or maimed. The president had jumped back to the breech of his gun, the muzzle swung round till it bore directly on the part of the *Vlodoya* which contained her boilers. He held up his hand and Chrysie stopped the Maxim. Then she swung it on to the bridge, glanced along the sights and touched the spring. There was a crack and a puff of smoke and flame, and the captain of the *Vlodoya*, who was standing about a couple of feet away from Count Valdemar and Sophie, reeled half round and dropped with a bullet through his heart.

"I guess your excellency and the countess had better come on board right away," said the president, still looking along the sights of his gun. "That's a pretty unhealthy place you're in, and my daughter's only got the patience of an ordinary woman, you know."

Sophie looked across at the *Nadine's* bridge, and saw Chrysie's white face and burning eyes looking over the barrel of the Maxim. Her thumb was on the spring and there was death in her eyes. She took her father by the arm, and said:

"Come, papa, it's no use. That she-devil will shoot us like dogs if we don't go. Come."

And so they went down to the deck, strewn with corpses and splashed with blood, to the gangway ladder, at the bottom of which the *Nadine's* boat was waiting.

Miss Chrysie at once left the gun with which she had done such terrible execution, and went with the chief officer to receive them. To the utter astonishment of both the count and Sophie, she held out her hand as cordially as though the meeting had taken place on the terrace of Orrel Court, and said with a somewhat exaggerated drawl:

"Well, countess, and your excellency, I am real glad to see you. We sort of thought we should meet you somewhere about here, and I am sure his lordship and the viscount and Lady Olive, when they get better, will do all they can to make you comfortable. Now, here's the stewardess. As she didn't have any of the marquise's punch last night, she's ready to show you to your room. Mr Vernon, perhaps you'll be kind enough to attend to his excellency. Good-bye for the present: I guess we shall meet at lunch."

"Really, after the unpleasantness that has happened," said the count, "your kindness, and your hospitality are quite overwhelming."

"And," added Sophie, as the two prisoners of war passed into the charge of their respective custodians, "I must say that to me it is as mysterious as it is charming. If the conditions had been reversed, I should certainly have shot you."

"It wouldn't have been quite fair," replied Miss Chrysie, sweetly. "You see I had a gun, and you hadn't."

She watched them disappear down the companion way to the saloon, then she put her hands up to her eyes, groped her way half-blindly to a long wicker chair, dropped into it and incontinently fainted.

Just then the chief, washed, shaved, new-clad and thoroughly contented with the really splendid piece of work that had been done on one of his beloved engines, came on deck, looking as though nothing very particular had happened. He saw instantly what was the matter.

"The lassie has a wonderful nerve," he said to himself. "Ay, what a man she'd have made! But she's only a lassie after all, and we'd better get her below. I'll just take her down to Mrs Evans without troubling the president. He's got plenty to think about. Yes; Vernon's on the bridge, and he'll see to things."

Then he picked her up in his arms and carried her down to her own cabin and laid her in her berth, and gave her into the charge of the stewardess. Then he went up to the captain's room, and found him just recovering consciousness.

"What's the matter, M'Niven?" he said. "That infernal punch last night seems to have poisoned me. I seem to have been having nightmare after nightmare, with guns firing and——"

"That's all right, captain," replied the Scotsman; "if you'd taken less of that infernal punch and more honest whisky, as I did, you wouldn't have such an awful head on you as I suppose you have. Still, there's nothing much to trouble about. We've got the engine to rights again; we've met the Russian yacht, and fought her, and beaten her. Mr Vandel smashed her up with his gun, and Miss Vandel—a wonderful girl that, sir, a wonderful girl—she sat at her Maxim as if it had been a sewing-machine, and seemed to think no more of shots than stitches, and then, woman-like, she fainted, and I've just taken her below and handed her over to Mrs Evans.

"And now, captain, don't you think that a wee peg would do you good? Mr Vernon's on the bridge, the president's holding up the Russians with his gun, and the engines are working all right, but half the crew and all the company are still something like dead, with that Frenchwoman's drugs, whatever they were."

Captain Burgess took the chief engineer's hint, and a stiff brandy and soda. Then he dressed and went on deck, and had a brief conversation with the president, after which he took charge of the operations of clearing all the coal and stores out of the *Vlodoya* before she was sent to the bottom.

The president and Miss Chrysie had to entertain their involuntary guests at lunch, for although the rest of the *Nadine's* company were recovering consciousness, they were still under the doctor's care and unable to leave their berths; but at dinner that evening Lady Olive, the earl, and Hardress were able to welcome them, and they did so with a sardonic cordiality which compelled both his excellency and Sophie to admit that these Anglo-Saxons were, after all, not such bad diplomatists as Europeans were wont to think. Madame de Bourbon was still prostrate, and the marquise had the best of reasons for remaining in her own cabin.

It was perhaps as strange a dinner party as ever sat down afloat or ashore, and it was rendered doubly strange by the fact that the last time they had all sat together most of them suspected, and some of them knew, that this very conflict, which had ended in spite of all disadvantages so completely in favour of the *Nadine* and her company, was certain to take place, yet very few references were made to the state of active hostilities which had now been practically proclaimed.

Count Valdemar and Sophie were treated on board the *Nadine* exactly as they had been at Orrel Court. Lord Orrel and Lady Olive were just as they had been at Cowes, and in the Solent. Hardress, who had taken a somewhat perilously large dose of the fair Adelaide's punch, looked pale and seemed rather sleepy, until he had had two or three glasses of champagne, and then he seemed to brighten up, and began discussing international politics with a frankness and an intimate knowledge which

simply astounded their involuntary guests. So far as the party was concerned, there was now no further need for anything like concealment, and not only were the Storage Works discussed, in their full nature and purpose, but even the advent of the French and Russian expeditions at Boothia Land was anticipated with what the Count afterwards described to Sophie as brutally disgusting frankness.

Miss Chrysie, eating her strawberries at dessert as daintily as though her hands had never been within a mile of a Maxim gun, chatted and chaffed just as she had been wont to do at Orrel Court, and the president talked gunnery and machinery with the captain and Mr M'Niven, who had been invited to join the party; and finally, when even the marquise came into dessert on Lady Olive's pressing invitation, all that she heard about her deliberate attempt to drug the whole ship's company was from Lord Orrel, who rose as she entered, and said in just such a tone as he might have used in the drawing-room at Orrel Court:

"My dear marquise, I am delighted to see that you have recovered from the same mysterious indisposition that has affected all of us. I am really afraid that there must have been something wrong with the recipe for the punch à *le Grand Monarque*, or perhaps it was not intended for general use. However, as we are all happily recovered, we need not trouble ourselves any further about that."

Adelaide entered instantly into the spirit of the comedy that was being played, and she replied:

"Ah, my lord, it is so kind of you not to blame me! Believe me, I am desolated, and have been very nearly killed, and my poor aunt believes too that she is going to die. It is my last performance at punch-making, for I have torn the horrible recipe up and thrown it into the sea."

"I am rather sorry to hear that, marquise," said Hardress, looking at her with a cold, steady stare, which at once enraged and infinitely saddened her; for it proved that the empire, which until a few hours ago she had hoped to gain over him, and through him the world, was now only a dream never to be realised. Still, she kept herself under command marvellously, and greeted the count and Sophie just as though the *Nadine* had been lying off Cowes instead of being lashed to the *Vlodoya* in mid-Atlantic, with the steam winches rattling and roaring over their heads, emptying the Russian yacht's bunkers into the *Nadine's* as fast as her own crew and what was left of her enemy's could do it. In short, a most unexpectedly pleasant evening was spent by everybody.

Coffee and cigars and cigarettes were taken up into the smoking-room, which was well to windward of the coal dust. Adelaide went to the piano and played brilliantly. Then she accompanied Sophie in quaint and tenderly-touching Russian folk-songs. Then Miss Chrysie sang coon songs and accompanied herself; and Hardress, on her suggestion, made with a wicked humour in her dancing eyes, recite Kipling's "Rhyme of the Three Sealers" to her own piano accompaniment. They both did it very well, and more than one person in the cosy little smoking-room could have killed them for it.

Nothing occurred to give the count and Sophie or Adelaide and the innocent Madame de Bourbon any idea that they were really prisoners until they retired for the night. Then the chief steward knocked at the count's door and asked if he wanted anything more. Mrs Evans did the same for Sophie and the marquise, and then the doors of the staterooms were locked. They were unlocked again at seven the next morning, and, after baths and early coffee, Hardress invited his guests on to the bridge to watch the end of the *Vlodoya*.

During the night she had been completely stripped of everything that could be useful to her captor. Every pound of coal was taken out of her bunkers. The two little quick-firers had been transferred with all their ammunition to the *Nadine*. Her four boats, amply provisioned and watered, were comfortably filled with such of her officers and crew as Chrysie's Maxim volley had left alive. There was a southward breeze, and in forty-eight hours at the outside they were certain to be picked up, either by a liner or a cargo boat, and plenty of money had been given them to pay their passages either to Europe or America. When they had hoisted their sails and began to bear away towards the steamer-track, the *Nadine* cast off from the *Vlodoya*, her screws began to revolve, and the president got his gun loaded.

"I reckon we might have a little gun practice, and see how far this pea-shooter really will carry," he said, looking up at the bridge, with a smile in which neither Sophie nor her father found very much humour. "Will you make it five miles, captain?"

The captain rang for full speed.

The *Nadine* sprang forward with a readiness which showed how utterly futile the plot to cripple her had been, and in a few minutes the motionless hull of the *Vlodoya* was a white speck on the water. Then she stopped and swung round. The president adjusted his automatic sights, waited till she rose on the swell, and let go. There was a hiss and a whizz, and then, where the speck was a bright flash blazed out. Two more shells followed in quick succession, and as the last flash blazed out, Count Valdemar took his glasses down from his eyes and looked at Hardress, and said, with a touch of bitterness in his tone:

"She has gone! That is a wonderful gun, viscount."

"Yes," replied Hardress, dryly. "That is a twelve-pounder. We have some hundred-pounders at the works, as well as a new weapon which may interest your excellency very much. It destroys without striking. If the French and Russian North Polar Expedition should chance to pay us a visit, you may perhaps see them both in action."

"And now, president," he went on, "I suppose we may as well shape our course for Boothia Land."

"There is nothing more to wait for that I know of, viscount," he replied. And so the *Nadine's* head was swung round to the north-west, her engines were put to their full power, and so she began her voyage to that desolate spot of earth which was soon to become the seat of the world-empire.

CHAPTER XXIV

Within ten days of the sinking of the *Vlodoya* Europe was electrified by the news, published far and wide through the English and Continental press, of what amounted to a pitched battle between two armed private yachts in mid-Atlantic. As may well be imagined, the strange narrative of the officers and sailors of the *Vlodoya* lost nothing either in the telling to the interviewers or in the reproduction in the newspapers.

The boats' crews had been picked up, about thirty-six hours after the sinking of the Russian yacht, by a French liner, which took them to le Havre. The officers had taken the greatest precautions to prevent the men from speaking too freely, but it was no use. There were two journalists, one an Englishman and the other an American, on board the boat, and they agreed to divide the sensation between themselves and their two countries. Both were in the service of wealthy journals, and they bribed as freely as they did unscrupulously, with the result that, in addition to the general gossip of the ship, which was more or less accurate, they each possessed a fairly comprehensive narrative of what had happened on the high seas between the *Nadine* and the *Vlodoya*, both of which were speeding over the wires to America and Canada within half-an-hour of the liner's arrival at le Havre.

But the Englishman did even better than this, for he practically kidnapped the third engineer of the *Vlodoya*, who could speak very good French, chartered a special steamer to Southampton, pumped him absolutely dry on the passage, and turned up at midnight at the office of his paper with a column and a half of vividly-written description of the most sensational event that had taken place on the high seas since the affair of the *Trent* during the American war.

The presses were stopped, the matter was set up with lightning speed, and by the next morning that journalist had achieved the biggest scoop of the twentieth century. The news agencies immediately wired extracts all over the Continent, and meanwhile the news had been leaking out through other sources in France, for passengers will talk, and the captain was bound to make his formal report as to the picking up of the castaways; wherefore, within twenty-four hours the whole Continental press was teeming with interviews, more or less authentic, leading articles, and notes on the subject of this astounding occurrence. Two Russian newspapers published a few meagre details, and were promptly suppressed.

The *Globe*, in a leader on what it termed the "astonishing intelligence published by a morning contemporary," put the matter very concisely, and with its usual clearness and insight into foreign affairs.

"We have here," said the writer, "not only one of the most astonishing, but one of the most significant incidents of modern times—an incident which, almost incredible as it is, is nevertheless the more significant when taken in conjunction with other contemporary events, of which our readers have been kept constantly informed. It is not customary for either Russian or English private yachts to carry guns, and it is somewhat unusual for a Russian yacht, owned by a well-known Russian ex-Minister of State, to start, as we know the *Vlodoya* did, from Southampton on a cruise to the Baltic, stop at Cherbourg, and then turn up in the middle of the Atlantic. But what is the world to think when this yacht, the property of a nobleman high in favour at the Court of St Petersburg, deliberately opens fire on a yacht owned by an English nobleman, whose guest the owner of the *Vlodoya* had been but a few days before? Perhaps even more amazing is the fact that the English yacht replied in kind; crippled her opponent, took the owner and his daughter prisoners, set the crew adrift, sank her adversary, and vanished. Viscount Branston's yacht was, we understand, bound for Halifax, with two distinguished French ladies on board. A cable just to hand informs us that nothing has been heard of her, although she should have arrived there nearly a week ago. With some reluctance we feel compelled to ask whether there is any connection between this extraordinary occurrence and the mysterious electrical works which, as is well known, are being constructed, at enormous expense, by a syndicate of which both Viscount Branston and his father, the Earl of Orrel, are prominent members. There have been many strange and wild rumours current about this enterprise within the last few months, and we confess that this almost incredible incident appears to lend some countenance to them.

"In the same connection, it is necessary to call attention to the fact that, just as this enterprise was approaching completion, France and Russia both equipped a so -

called scientific expedition for the purpose of once more attempting to force a passage to the North Pole. We do not profess to have any inside knowledge as to these mysterious proceedings, but we confess that we should not be greatly surprised if it would not be more correct to read 'magnetic pole' for 'north pole'. It is impossible to see anything other than an international significance. Noblemen of different nationalities do not nowadays go out on to the high seas to fight naval duels to arrange their private differences; wherefore it appears that either the *Vlodoya* was a common pirate outside the law of nations, and yet owned by a Russian ex-Minister, who was on board when the act of piracy was committed, or she was a privateer acting under the licence of the Russian Government. We, in common with the whole civilised world, shall await with the utmost anxiety the immediate development of this wholly unparalleled state of affairs."

The world waited for about a week, and heard nothing. The British Foreign Office made its usual timid and tentative representation, and received the usual snub, to the effect that the Russian Government was investigating the matter as fully as possible, but had so far only arrived at the fact that the English yacht fired first.

But the plots and counterplots and the steady preparations which had been going on for the working out or the defeating of the great scheme were now about to bear fruit, and the world was not to be lacking in sensations such as it had never experienced before.

No sooner did the German Government learn the story of the duel between the *Nadine* and the *Vlodoya* than its secret agents began to put two and two together, and make their representations accordingly. Ex-Captain Victor Fargeau was known to have been an intimate friend of Adelaide de Condé, who was a guest on board the *Nadine*, and, further, to have been in close communication with Count Valdemar, the owner of the *Vlodoya*. He had left his country, taken up his residence in Paris, and had been proved to be in close touch with General Ducros. All this was significant enough, but when the cleverest of all the German agents in Paris found out that ex-Captain Victor Fargeau, late of the German Army, had been appointed to the scientific command of the French Polar Expedition, darkness became light, and a peremptory demand was sent from Berlin to Paris for his immediate extradition on the previous charge of high treason.

To this Paris returned a polite but uncompromising refusal, and Berlin promptly said that if the expedition sailed with ex-Captain Fargeau on board, a German squadron would stop it and take him off. To this France replied by mobilising the Northern Squadron and ordering the Admiral in command to escort the expedition to sea and

protect it against assault at all hazards. Paris also sent Berlin a curt Note intimating that if the threat were carried out it would be taken as a declaration of war.

Another Note arrived at Berlin about the same time from Petersburg, informing the German Kaiser that these French and Russian Polar Expeditions formed a joint enterprise on the part of the two countries, and that any act hostile to the one would be considered hostile to the other. The Note also plainly hinted that, considering the tremendous nature of the issues involved by a breach of the international peace, such a trivial matter as the extradition of a person accused of treason could not possibly under the circumstances afford a valid reason for what would be to all intents and purposes an act of war.

Within twenty-four hours a powerful French squadron was manœuvring off the mouth of the Kiel Canal, just out of range of the forts; the French Polar Expedition, with Victor Fargeau on board, was making its way at full speed down the English Channel; the Russian expedition, headed by the *Ivan the Terrible*, passed the North Cape on its way to the coast of Greenland; and four millions of Russians and Frenchmen of all arms were massed on the eastern and western frontier of Germany. At the same moment Kaiser Wilhelm called upon his brother sovereigns of Austria and Italy, and the Triple Alliance stood to arms by land and sea. In a word, the European powder-magazine was lying wide open, and the firing of a single shot would have turned it into a volcano.

Still the weeks dragged on, till the tension became almost unendurable. According to an old North of England saying, "One was afraid and t'other daren't start," the risks were so colossal.

Great Britain meanwhile kept her own counsel, and went on sweeping up the remnant of the rebel Boers in South Africa. The only precaution she had taken was to place every effective ship in the Navy in commission.

It was at this juncture that Europe experienced a new sensation. In one memorable week English, American, French, German, Austrian, and Italian liners from American ports brought packages of the strangest proclamation that ever was issued, and in the mail-bags of the same boats there were similar communications addressed to all the Chancelleries of Europe, and these were of a character to shake the official mind to its very foundations, as in fact they ultimately did.

The communications, both public and private, took the form of a modest circular dated from the offices of the International Electrical Power and Storage Trust, Buffalo, N.Y. Those which were addressed to the crowned heads of Europe were accompanied

by autograph letters respectfully requesting the personal attention of the monarch to the contents of the circular. The circular ran as follows:—

The Secretary of the International Electrical Power and Storage Trust is directed by his Board of Managers to inform the ruling sovereigns and peoples of Europe of the following facts, and to request their most serious attention to the same:—

A. The Directors of the Trust view with great concern the formidable military and naval preparations which have lately been made by the Powers of Europe. In their opinion, these preparations point to a near outbreak of hostilities on such an immense scale that not only must a vast expenditure of blood and money be inevitable, but the commerce of the world will be most injuriously affected.

B. This Trust is a business concern. Its Directors have no international sympathies whatever, and they don't want war. At the same time, if the Powers of Europe are determined to fight, the Trust will permit them to do so on payment of a capitation fee of the equivalent in the money of each respective country of one dollar per head of effective fighting men in the field per week—fees to be paid into the Bank of England within seven days after the commencement of hostilities. A liberal allowance will be made for killed and wounded if official returns are promptly sent to the London office of the Trust, 56b Old Broad Street, London, E.C.

C. Prompt attention to the foregoing paragraphs is earnestly requested for the following reasons:—(1) The Trust has acquired control of the electrical forces of the Northern Hemisphere, and is, therefore, in a position to make all the operations of civilised life, including warfare, possible or impossible, as its commercial arrangements may demand. (2) One week from the date above will be given for the Powers of Europe to settle their differences without fighting or to accede to the terms offered by the Trust. Failing this, the Northern Hemisphere, with certain exceptions, will be deprived of its electrical force. The consequences of this will be that cables and telegraphs will cease to work, and all machinery constructed of iron or steel will break down if operated. Railroads will become useless, and bridges of metallic construction will collapse as soon as any considerable weight is placed upon them.

D. Finally, I am directed to state that, in addition to these results, it is unhappily probable that the withdrawal of electrical force will very seriously affect the health of the populations of the Northern Hemisphere. Death-rates will very largely increase, and it is probable that a new disease unknown to medical science will make its appearance. It is expected to be fatal in every case, if the terms of the Trust are not complied with, but it will first affect the young and the weakly. It is, therefore, to be hoped that considerations of humanity, if not of policy, will induce the peoples and the

Governments of Europe to accede without delay to the conditions which I have the honour to submit.

As may well be imagined, this seemingly preposterous circular was received either with derision or contemptuous silence in every capital of Europe save Paris. There its import was only too well-known, but at the same time it was impossible for France alone among the nations to acknowledge herself the vassal of the Trust. In Petersburg something of the truth was known; but the Government, confident of the success of the two expeditions, just dropped the communication into the official waste-paper basket and went on with its naval and military preparations.

Everything depended upon the six vessels which were steaming towards Boothia Land reaching their goal and accomplishing their mission. If they succeeded, Europe would be plunged into the bloodiest war that had been fought since the days of Napoleon. If they failed, the war would be stopped by an invisible, but irresistible, force, and humanity would be astounded by the accomplishment of such a miracle of science as it had never seen before.

CHAPTER XXV

Every day after the issue of the circular the wire which connected the Storage Works with Winnipeg was kept hot with the news of what was going on in the far-away civilised world, but for some time all that was heard in that land of unsetting suns only amounted to this: Everywhere the Press of Europe had received the pronouncement of the Trust with incredulous derision. It had, in fact, provided professional humourists and caricaturists with quite a new field of industry.

The Governments, as had been expected, took not the slightest notice of it, and General Ducros and the French President, who alone knew what a terrible meaning lay in the plain business-like language of the circular, awaited more and more anxiously as the days went by the execution of the dread fiat of the World Masters.

The sinking of the *Vlodoya* and the disappearance of the *Nadine* had convinced the Minister for War and also the Russian Government that the plot to capture the controllers of the Storage Trust had failed, but they could do nothing without admitting that they knew and believed in the power of the Trust to do as it threatened. Moreover, they could not submit to the terms unless all the other Powers did, and they had not even deigned to notice the existence of the Trust. Meanwhile, the preparations for war went on, and on the day before the expiration of the time given by the general ultimatum to France, the French troops crossed the border at Verdun, Nancy, and Mulhausen, and the Northern Squadron, strongly reinforced, blockaded the mouth of

the Elbe and the Kiel Canal. The Russian Baltic Squadron, which had been going through its summer manœuvres, blocked the exits from the inland seas and threatened the northern coast of Germany, while the Russian army was concentrating in enormous numbers at several points along the Polish frontier.

When Austin Vandel took the dispatch containing this last news into the department at the works which was commonly called the board-room, the president passed it to Lord Orrel and Hardress, who were having a smoke and afternoon chat with him, and said:

"Well, I reckon the Powers mean business, and so, as they haven't had the politeness to answer that communication of ours, I reckon it's about time we showed them that we mean it, too. They'll be fighting by this time."

"I suppose so," replied Lord Orrel; "and of course it's no use waiting any longer under the circumstances."

"Not a bit," added Hardress; "in fact, as you know, my idea was to start a fortnight ago. If we'd done that they might have found it a bit difficult even to start."

"But after all, Shafto," said his father, "a fortnight matters nothing to us; and the object-lesson will be very much more striking if we allow hostilities to get into full swing, and then bring them to a dead stop. Still, we will begin at once, and I propose, president, that when everything is ready your daughter shall do us the honour of starting the engines."

"And if that wants any seconding," added Hardress, "I'll do it."

"I reckon that'll be about the proudest moment of Chrysie's life," laughed the president. "And seeing that our guests have pretty good reason to take an interest in the engines, perhaps it would only be polite to ask them to come and assist at the ceremony."

"Oh, certainly," said Lord Orrel. "There can't be any objection to that. Shafto, suppose you go and invite them. And it wouldn't be a bad idea if we had a little dinner together afterwards, just to celebrate the occasion. You might see Miss Chrysie also and request the honour of her services."

As Hardress left the room the president said to his nephew: "Austin, you can go and wire to our people here and over in England that the experiment begins to-night. Ask them to let us have all the news they can send, and especially to let us know whether any electric disturbances take place in our territories; and you might ask Doctor Lamson to come over for a few minutes."

From this conversation it will be seen that the momentous voyage of the *Nadine* had ended without any further mishap. Davis Straits and the Northern waters had been singularly clear of ice, and she had been able to steer the whole way to Port Adelaide without difficulty. Doctor Lamson had received them in the midst of his marvellous creation as quietly as though he had been receiving them in his own house at Hampstead. They had all admired and wondered at the sombre magnificence of what was certainly the most extraordinary structure on the face of the globe. But those who are permitted to see them have marvelled still more at the huge engines and the maze of intricately complicated apparatus which the magic of money and science had called into being in the midst of this desolate wilderness.

So far, the involuntary guests of the Trust had not been permitted to see anything more than the outsides of the engine-rooms and the apartments which they occupied. They had been politely but unmistakably given to understand that, after what had happened, it would be necessary to consider them as prisoners. They would be treated with every consideration—in fact, as guests. But at the same time, they would be closely watched, and any attempt to communicate with any officer or workman employed on the Works would be immediately punished by close confinement for all of them. For their part, they had accepted the strange situation with perfect philosophy, and awaited the coming of the expeditions with a great deal more confidence than they would have felt had they known the terrible nature of the defences with which Doctor Lamson had armed this fortress in the wilderness.

Within an hour after the president had pronounced the fiat which was to alter the history of the world, everything was in readiness for the making of the Great Experiment, and, for the first time since their arrival in Boothia, Count Valdemar, Sophie, and the marquise were admitted into the great engine-rooms which stood in the middle of each side of the quadrangle. They stared in frank astonishment at the colossal machinery, and the count said to the president as they entered No. 1, or the Northern engine-room:

"Our aims may not be the same, but I am compelled to confess that you have wrought a most astounding miracle in the midst of the ghastly desert."

"It's pretty good," he replied; "but, after all, it's just the sort of miracle that dollars and brains can work all the time. This is not the miracle, this is only what is going to work it. The real miracle will be what our friends in Europe see and feel. Well, now, doctor, are we ready?"

"Quite," replied Lamson. "Lady Olive, you will send the signal to the other rooms? A man is stationed in each of them, and if you touch that button when Miss Vandel pulls the lever you will start the other three engines."

Miss Chrysie, looking just a trifle pale and nervous, took hold of the lever and stood ready to perform the most momentous act ever done by the hand of woman. It had been decided to start the engines precisely at six, and the minute hand of the engine-room clock was getting very near the perpendicular.

"It seems a pretty awful thing to do, you know, poppa," she said, "just to pull this thing and set half the world dying."

"No; I think you are wrong there, Chrysie," said Hardress, who was standing beside her, and Adelaide's teeth gritted together as she heard the name for the first time from his lips. "When you pull that lever you will save life, not destroy it. Without us the war might go on for months or years and cost millions of lives: but ten days after you have pulled that lever the European war will be impossible."

"Then," said Miss Chrysie, tightening her grip on the handle, "I guess I'll pull!" At this moment the clock struck the first note of six, and at the third she drew the lever towards her.

The starting-engine gave a few short puffs and pants. Lady Olive touched the button, and the bells tinkled in the other engine-rooms. The huge cranks of the steel giants began to revolve. The mighty cylinders gasped and hissed, and the huge fly-wheels began to move, at first almost imperceptibly, and then faster and faster, till each was a whirling circle of bright steel. The hiss of the steam ceased, and the four giants settled down to their momentous work in silence, save for a low, purring hum, which was not to cease day or night until armed Europe had acknowledged their all-compelling power.

"It is very wonderful, but very weird," said Adelaide to Chrysie as they left the room, "if only it is all true. To think that you, by just bending your arm should set those mighty monsters to work—and such work! to steal the soul out of the world, to paralyse armies and fleets, perhaps to make Governments impossible—perhaps to reduce civilisation to chaos!"

"I reckon those engines will cause less chaos than your friends in Europe, marquise," she replied, shortly, but not unkindly; "but, anyhow, they should have taken poppa's terms; and if they will fight, they must pay for the luxury. Anyhow, we'd better not talk about that; it's no use getting unfriendly over subjects we can't agree upon. What do you say, countess?"

"I entirely agree with you," said Sophie, frankly. "You know, Adelaide, that for prisoners of war we are being treated exceedingly well. And for the present, at least, until our hosts are able to terminate their invitation, I think we might be as nearly friends as we can be."

"That's so," said Miss Chrysie, heartily, yet well knowing that they were both awaiting the moment when, as they believed, the arrival of the expeditions would make the present owners of the works prisoners of France and Russia, and that either of them would poison her or put a bullet through her without the slightest hesitation. "Yes; that's so. We've got to live here together for a bit, and I reckon we may as well do it as pleasantly as possible. And now, suppose we go to dinner."

All things considered, the dinner was really a most agreeable function. The principal topic of conversation was, of course, the effect which the starting of the works would produce on the Northern Hemisphere in general and the fleets and armies of Europe in particular. International politics, too, were discussed, not only with freedom, but with a knowledge which would have astonished many a European Minister; but one subject was tabooed by mutual consent, and that was the French and Russian Polar Expeditions, which, if they were really making for Boothia Land, ought to arrive in about a week's time.

The three involuntary guests knew perfectly well that their hosts were expecting them. Their hosts knew that they knew this, and, therefore, as a matter of politeness and mutual convenience, the words "Polar Expedition" were absolutely banished from their conversation. Meanwhile, Port Adelaide had been fast emptying for the time when the colliers and cargo boats could get back, for the time was limited. Only the *Nadine* and the *Washington*, a passenger boat capable of about sixteen knots, which had brought the staff up from Halifax, were kept, in addition to a couple of steam launches and a powerful tug sheathed and fitted as an icebreaker.

The *Nadine* and the *Washington* constantly patrolled the coast for twenty miles in each direction, on the lookout for the expeditions. Around and inside the works life went on as quietly as though nothing out of the common was happening. The unsetting sun rose and dipped on the southern horizon, and the great engines purred unceasingly, working out the dream of the man whose mangled body lay in a nameless grave on an alien soil.

They had been working for six days when Europe awoke to an uneasy suspicion that, after all, there must have been something in that preposterous circular which the Electrical Power and Storage Trust, of Buffalo, N.Y., had sent out some five weeks before.

On the evening of the fifth day after Miss Chrysie had pulled the lever over in No. 1 engine-room a series of unaccountable accidents happened in the engine-rooms of the French Northern Squadron, which was blockading the mouth of the Elbe. Do what they would, the engineers could not keep the engines working smoothly. Little accidents kept on happening with such frequency that the efforts of the whole staff could scarcely keep the engines in working order; and about the same time the officers on the bridges, noticed that the compasses were beginning to behave in a most extraordinary fashion. Even when the ships were quite stationary, they wavered two or three degrees on either side of north, and as the night wore on the variation increased.

The next morning there happened what, up to then, was the strangest incident in warfare. The *Charles Martel*, one of the most powerful ironclads in the French fleet, was cruising under easy steam, just out of range of the heavy guns on the canal forts, when the admiral commanding the squadron, who was on the bridge, heard a muffled grinding noise, and felt a shudder run through the vast fabric. The next moment an officer came up from the lower deck, saluted, and gasped:

"Admiral, the port shaft has broken, and we are only going quarter speed!"

He had hardly got the last words out of his mouth before there was another grinding shock, and a dull rattle away down in the vitals of the ship.

"Ah, there is something more!" cried the officer. "They tell me that the engines have been mad all night."

"Go and see what it is," said the admiral; "we must put out to sea with one engine." At that moment the chief engineer came up, looking white and scared, and said, in a low, shaking voice:

"Monsieur, the crank shaft of the starboard engine has splintered as though it had been made of glass. We are disabled!"

"Nom de Dieu!" exclaimed the admiral. "What is that you say?—disabled? and the tide setting in. Then we are lost. A few minutes will take us within range of the guns on the Canal and at Cuxhaven, and in an hour we may be ashore. There is no hope of repairs, I suppose?"

"Impossible, Monsieur l'Amiral. It would take weeks in the best dockyard in France to repair the damage."

"Then," said the admiral, turning to the commander, who was standing beside him, "we must do what we can. We will not be lost for nothing. Let everything be ready to return the fire of the forts as soon as we are within range."

By this time the German officers on the forts had noted with amazement, not unmixed with satisfaction, that some unaccountable accident had happened to the great French battleship. She was not under steam, she was not steering, she was simply drifting in with the tide as helplessly as a barrel. The tide was setting dead in towards the mouth of the Canal, and the commander of the great fort at Brunsbüttel, making certain of her surrender or destruction, ordered three of his heaviest guns, monsters capable of throwing a nine-hundred-pound shell to a distance of nearly fourteen miles, to prepare for action. They were mounted on disappearing carriages worked by hydraulic machinery.

The guns were already loaded, the mechanism was set in motion, and the giants rose slowly till their muzzles grinned over the glacis of the fort. Then, without any warning, the framework of one of the carriages cracked and splintered in all directions, the huge gun came back with a terrific crash on to the concrete floor of the emplacement, and, to the amazement of officers and gunners, broke into three pieces as if it had been made of glass instead of the finest steel that Krupp could produce.

Officers and men stared at each other in silent amazement. Were even the guns and their machinery affected by this strange languor which had been afflicting both men and animals for the last day or two? Instinctively they drew away from the other gun; but the *Charles Martel* was now well within range, and Colonel Von Altenau saw that it was his duty not to allow her to come any closer. In fact, he was almost surprised to see that she had not already opened fire upon the fort, so he ordered the centre gun to be trained on her and fired.

As the lanyard was pulled, those on board the battleship saw a vivid burst of flame, and the roar of an explosion came dully across the water, but no shell followed it. The admiral immediately came to the conclusion that some accident had happened in the fort, and he ordered his two forward 13-inch guns to send a couple of shells into it. He went into the conning-tower, and as soon as he received the signal that the guns were ready and laid, he pressed the electric button which should have sent the sparks through the charges. Nothing happened, and the guns remained silent.

Then he called down the speaking-tube connecting the conning-tower with the barbette:

"The wire does not act. Let the guns be fired by hand."

He was obeyed, and the next moment the blast of a frightful explosion shook the whole fabric of the ship. Barbette and guns disappeared in a blinding blaze of flame. The solid steel crumbled to dust, the decks cracked like starred glass in all directions, and some forty brave fellows were blown over the edge of eternity without even knowing what had happened to them. Both guns had burst into thousands of fragments, just as the great German gun in the fort had done, killing every man within twenty yards of it. The guns had, in fact, behaved much as that little square of steel had done when Doctor Emil Fargeau hit it with a wooden mallet.

Thus the first shots of the war had resulted only in the slaying of those who had fired them. As the helpless *Charles Martel* drifted slowly towards the other forts, they attempted to open fire on her, but after two more big guns had blown themselves to atoms, and killed or maimed a hundred men, she was allowed to drift on until she found a resting-place on the Elbe mud.

On the other ships of the French Squadron disaster after disaster had been happening meanwhile. Engine after engine broke down, electric signals, as well as the electrical ammunition lifts, ceased to work. The compass cards swung about as aimlessly as though there was no such thing as a Magnetic Pole in existence, and as ship after ship became disabled with broken shafts, cracked cylinders, or splintered piston-rods, a score of the finest warships that France had ever put to sea drifted helplessly up with the tide under the eyes of an enemy that could not fire a shot at them.

The commander-in-chief of the Brunsbüttel station telegraphed to his colleague at Kiel to report the unaccountable disaster, but no answer was received. The message was repeated, and a lieutenant came in a few minutes later, clicked his heels together, and said:

"Herr Commandant, it is impossible to communicate with Kiel, the instruments have ceased to work. I have telephoned as well, but the wires are dead."

"But it is ridiculous—unaccountable!" exclaimed the commandant. "We must communicate. Have an engine made ready at once, Lieutenant, and go yourself. I will send a letter."

The lieutenant found a locomotive with steam up. He took the commandant's letter and started. Within fifty yards the engine broke down as completely as the machinery of the *Charles Martel* had done.

CHAPTER XXVI

Eight days out of the ten calculated by the president and Doctor Lamson for the progress of the Great Experiment had expired, and Europe presented the extraordinary spectacle of a continent armed to the teeth, possessing the mightiest weapons of destruction that human science and skill could invent and construct—and divided into two hostile camps which were practically unable to hurt each other.

Away in the far northern wilderness the giant engines purred on remorselessly, continually drawing away more and more of the vital earth-spirit from Europe and Asia. In Great Britain and North America nothing had happened, except a succession of abnormally violent thunderstorms, and certain other minor electrical disturbances which were only detected by instruments at the observatories; but all cables had ceased to work, and the only sea communication possible was by means of wooden sailing ships, for every steamer, whether warship, liner, or tramp, broke down when she got about fifteen miles from the English or American coasts. What was happening in the Southern Hemisphere no one knew till long afterwards.

Throughout Europe and Asia a most extraordinary condition of things was coming to pass. What had happened at Kiel happened also at all the great fortresses along the German frontier which were invested by the French and Russians. Guns of all calibres on both sides burst, killing those who used them, but doing no damage to the enemy. Quick-firing guns jammed or burst and became useless. If a man tried to fire a rifle, the breech-lock blew out and killed or maimed him, until French and Germans, Russians, Austrians, and Italians alike refused to fire a shot, and even on the rare occasions when bodies of men got near enough to each other for a cavalry or bayonet charge, lance-points, sabres, and bayonets cracked and splintered like so many icicles.

By the tenth day every officer and man in Europe had recognised that if the war was to go on at all it would have to be fought out with fists and feet. All modern weapons of warfare had suddenly become useless. Moreover, communication had become so difficult, that the feeding of the vast armies in the field was rapidly approaching impossibility, and the helpless, hostile battalions were beginning to starve in sight of each other. Locomotives broke down or blew up, bridges collapsed under the weight of the trains, and now horses and men had become afflicted with a deadly languor which made severe exertion an impossibility.

From the war lords of the nations to the raw conscripts and the camp-followers it was the same. Neither mind nor body would do its work. The soul of the world was leaving it—drawn out by those remorseless engines into the vast receivers of the Storage

Works—and men were beginning to find that without it they could neither think nor work any more than they could fight.

There was not a cable or a telegraph line in Europe or Asia that could be operated, not a stationary or locomotive engine that would work without breaking down or blowing up. Electric lighting and traction had for two or three days been things of the past. Throughout two continents industries and commerce, like war, were at a standstill; a sort of creeping paralysis had spread from the Straits of Dover to the Sea of Japan.

There were no exceptions, from the rulers of the highest civilisations down to the sampan men of Canton and the fur-clad Samoyeds of the northern wilderness. Great fleets and squadrons were either drifting about the ocean or lying helpless on rock or sand or mud-bank, like the silenced forts full of guns and ammunition and yet unable to fire a single shot either in attack or defence.

On the morning of the eleventh day the French President, who had been drawn along the useless railway from Paris to Calais by relays of horses harnessed to a light truck running on wheels of papier-maché, embarked for Dover on board a fishing-lugger. Twelve hours before the German Emperor had sailed from Cuxhaven, which he had reached by rail with infinite difficulty, and after a dozen breakdowns, for Harwich in a fast wood-built schooner-yacht.

During the last four or five days there had been very little communication between the Continent and England. All English steamers, including warships, had been forbidden to pass the three-mile limit. By a happy accident the Channel Fleet and the Home Defence Squadron had anchored in British waters after the manœuvres just before Miss Chrysie pulled that fatal lever. The Mediterranean Fleet was at Malta, powerless to move an engine or fire a gun. Communication across the narrow seas was still possible by wooden sailing craft, and it was the news which these had brought from England that had induced the Kaiser and the President to go and see the miracle for themselves.

The moment that they set foot on English soil, which they did almost about the same time, the growing lassitude of the last few days vanished.

"These are truly the Fortunate Isles just now," exclaimed the Kaiser, as he drew his first breath of the cool English air. "A few moments and I am a man again. Then that circular which we all laughed at so was true!" he went on, to himself. "Yes, everything seems going on as usual. They seem to be caring as little about the state of Europe as they did about the African war. Why, there's a train running as easily as though the railways of Europe were not strewn with wrecks."

Then he turned to the aide-de-camp who had accompanied him, and said:

"Von Kritzener, see if you can get me a special to London—but no, we had better keep incognito. Be good enough to go and see when there is a fast train to London, and then we will get something to eat."

The Emperor and his aide were both in ordinary yachting costume, and the points of the famous moustache had been drooped downwards. The aide came back to the yacht in a few minutes, saying that there was a fast train to London in forty minutes; so his majesty dined briefly but well at the Great Eastern Hotel, and presently found himself speeding swiftly and smoothly and with an unwonted sense of security towards London.

The French President experienced practically the same sensations when he landed at Dover and took the train to Charing Cross. Everything was going on just as usual. They were even doing target practice with the big guns from Dover Castle; and as he heard the boom of the cannon, he thought with a shudder of what had happened only a day or two before to the great French siege-guns before Metz and Strassburg.

All he noticed out of the common was what the Kaiser noticed too—lines of great steel masts along the coast and clumps of them on every elevation inland. From what he had already learnt from General Ducros, he half-guessed that these were the means through which the earth received the vast volumes of electricity given off from the works in Boothia Land, and that it was thus that the magnetic equilibrium was kept undisturbed.

In London nothing seemed altered. Everybody was going about his daily business as though no such continent as Europe existed; so the President and the Kaiser, wondering greatly, both went and put up at Claridge's, and there, to their mutual astonishment, recognised each other. Both were strictly incognito, both recognised that the state of affairs in Europe had reached the limits of the possible, and both guessed that they had come practically on the same errand. Wherefore Kaiser bowed to President and President bowed to Kaiser, after which they shook hands, took wine together, and, like a couple of good sportsmen, proceeded a little later on to discuss the situation in the Kaiser's private sitting-room.

The result of an interesting and momentous conversation was that the Kaiser sent his aide with an autograph letter to Marlborough House requesting the honour of an interview with King Edward for himself and the President.

The answer was a royal brougham and pair, and a cordial invitation to the two potentates whom fate and the great Storage Trust had brought so strangely together to sleep at Marlborough House.

Nearly the whole of the next day was occupied in interviews between the three rulers, and also with the Ministers of the great Powers who were still in London. The American Minister and the English manager of the Great Storage Trust were present at most of them. At the end of a lengthy discussion on the *status quo*, the Kaiser confessed, in his usual frank, manly fashion, that not only Germany, but Europe, was helpless in face of the invisible but tremendous force which the Trust had shown itself capable of exercising.

"We are beaten," he said, "and it would be only foolishness to hide the fact. Our ships are helpless hulks, most of them wrecks, our trains will not run, our machinery will not work, our guns will not shoot. Within three days we have gone back to the Middle Ages, or beyond them, for, even if we had armour, you could break it with your fist, and you would not even want a mailed one," he added, with a laugh at his own expense.

"There are over ten millions of men carrying arms they cannot use, and hundreds of thousands of these men are starving because the railways are useless and no food can be got to them. It would be absurd were it not so great a tragedy; but since we cannot fight, we must arrange our differences some other way. What do you say, Monsieur le President?"

"I say as your Majesty does," replied Monsieur Loubet, in his blunt, common-sense fashion; "and since these gentlemen of the Trust have shown us how helpless fleets and armies may be rendered, perhaps Europe may be induced to seek for some more reasonable method of arranging disputes than by the shedding of blood."

"I most sincerely hope so," said King Edward; "and if these gentlemen are prepared to endorse these sentiments on behalf of their august masters, I think there will be little difficulty in arranging matters satisfactorily and putting an end to what may be justly described as an intolerable and impossible condition of affairs. What do you say, gentlemen?" he went on, turning to the Ministers.

"I fear, your Majesty, it would be necessary for me to communicate with my imperial master before I could pledge him to any course resembling surrender."

"My dear count," said the Kaiser, turning towards him with a laugh, "I am afraid you hardly realise the position. It would take you at the very least three weeks, possibly six, to reach Petersburg. You forget that all the mechanical triumphs of civilisation are for the present things of the past. There are no cables, no telegraphs, no railways. Neither

horses nor men are capable of any great exertion, and their strength is becoming less every hour. Petersburg is farther from London to-day than Peking was a month ago."

"And even from Paris," added the President when the Emperor had finished, "I have been four days travelling. I came to Calais in a truck drawn by horses along the railway, and from Calais in a fishing boat. Gentlemen, if I may venture to advise, I would suggest that the best, nay, the only thing that Europe, in your persons, can do, is to place itself in the hands of His Majesty King Edward. We have been enemies, but he is the friend of all of us, and if any man on earth can and will do right it is he."

"I entirely agree with Monsieur le President," said the Kaiser. "We are helpless, and he can help us. For my own part, I place the interests of Germany unreservedly in his hands."

After this it was impossible for the Ministers of the other Powers to hold back, and so a joint-note was drawn up there and then, praying King Edward to accept the office of mediator between the signatory Powers and those uncrowned monarchs who, from their citadel in the midst of the far-off northern wilderness, had proved their title to sovereignty by demonstrating their power to render the nation helpless at their will.

The only communication that was now possible with Canada, and therefore with Boothia Land, was by means of aërographic messages transmitted from one station to another *via* the north of Scotland, The Faroes, Iceland, Greenland, and Newfoundland, where the cable was working as usual. It took nearly twelve hours for the messages to reach the works, and the president had scarcely communicated its contents to his colleagues when the *Nadine* came rushing full speed into Adelaide Bay with the news that the great Russian ice-breaker, with three other vessels in her wake, was steaming down from the northward about twenty miles away.

CHAPTER XXVII

The news of the coming of the expeditions was allowed to spread without comment through the works, and, to the intense surprise of the three involuntary guests of the Trust, no apparent precautions were taken to protect the works or the harbour in which the *Nadine* and the *Washington* were now lying against the coming of what everyone knew could be nothing but a hostile force. The two vessels having made their report, filled their bunkers and steamed out of the harbour again to the southward and westward. The great engines purred on, still draining Europe and Asia of their vital essence. An aërograph message was sent to King Edward and the President of the United States. The one to King Edward informed his Majesty that the president and board of trust, while insisting upon the terms of the circular they had addressed to the

Powers of Europe, and giving fair warning of what would happen if those terms were ignored, were perfectly content to leave everything else in His Majesty's hands.

The message to the President gave him all the news that there was to give, and informed him that as soon as the King's decision was announced the engines would be stopped, the insulators removed, and the electrical and magnetic currents allowed to flow back over their natural courses, the result of which would be that, in from twenty-four to thirty-six hours, normal conditions would be re-established, and the business of the world could go on as usual. All fighting, however, save under a war-tax of a dollar per head per week of men engaged in armies and fleets would be prohibited. If this condition, which the London manager of the Trust had been instructed to lay before His Majesty and the foreign Ministers in London, were violated, the engines would be started again, with the same results as before.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening of the same day, to put it in conventional terms, for the long summer twilight of Boothia Land knew no morning and no evening, that the huge shape of the Russian ice-breaker, followed by her three consorts, one a genuine wooden-built exploring ship and the others, to a nautical eye, unmistakably steel cruisers disguised with wooden sheathings, rounded Cape Adelaide into the bay. A couple of miles behind them came the three ships of the French expedition, an antiquated cruiser fitted with the best modern guns, and two obsolete coast-defence ships, slow but strong, and also armed with formidable guns.

"So your friends have come at last," said Miss Chrysie to Adelaide and Sophie as they were taking their evening promenade along one of the broad parapeted walls which formed the quadrangle of the works. "Somehow I always thought it was this pole they were going to look for, not the other one. I reckon they allowed there was a lot more to be found here than up north yonder."

"Of course they did," said Adelaide, with a low laugh that had a wicked ring in it. "There is no need for diplomacy now. Here is the world-throne, the seat of such power as man never wielded before. Here, within these four great walls, are contained the destinies of all the nations on earth. Here is everything; anywhere else nothing. Pah! is it not worth fighting for?"

"My dear marquise," said Sophie, "do you not think that you are letting your feelings run away with you? I grant you they are natural, but——"

"But I guess that's what she means all the same," said Chrysie; "and I don't like her any the less for saying it. Those scientific expeditions of yours have just come out here to take the works by storm, if they can, and run the show on their own. Well, that's war,

and we're not going to grumble at it. We've made war on Europe, and Europe's feeling pretty sick over it; but I'll tell you honestly that the sickness of Europe just now isn't a circumstance to what those expeditions are going to experience if they try to rush these works by force, and they won't get them any other way. Well, now I see that some of the people are going down to the steam launch. Shouldn't wonder if Lord Orrel and poppa were sending your friends an invitation to supper, or breakfast, or whatever you'd call it in this everlasting daylight. I reckon that would be quite an interesting little surprise-party, wouldn't it?"

"Delightful!" said Sophie, her quick wits already at work on the problem of how to turn such a surprise-party to the advantage of Russia. After all, when the supreme moment came, it might be possible. Victor Fargeau would be there on the French expedition, with all the information required to keep the works in operation, or to give the soul which they had stolen from the world back to it. Even at the last moment it was still possible to triumph.

Almost at the same instant similar thoughts were passing through Adelaide's brain. Here were both expeditions. They had arrived at the psychological moment. She knew that the ships were armed with the finest weapons that modern science could create. There were hundreds of trained sailors, gunners, and marines on board. The works were within easy range of the bay, where the Russian ships were even now coming to an anchor. Surely in the face of such a force—a force which could wreck even these tremendous works—the Masters of the World could do nothing but surrender. At the same time, she would have given a good deal to have had in her pocket the dainty little revolver which she knew Miss Chrysie had in hers.

While they were talking, the French expedition, of which one of the ships had broken down and been compelled to refit at Halifax, delaying both expeditions over a week, in addition to the coaling, rounded Cape Adelaide and proceeded to anchor. There were now six armed vessels in the bay, at a distance of about four miles from the works.

A glance through a pair of field-glasses from the walls made it plain that all disguise had now been thrown aside. The joint Polar expeditions were now frankly hostile squadrons. The great ice-breaker mounted two six-inch guns forward, one aft, and six twelve-pound quick-firers on each broadside. The wooden exploring ship carried no heavy metal, but the disguised cruisers had mounted all their guns; the French vessels, too, frankly bristled with weapons, from guns capable of throwing a 100-lb. shell down to one-pound quick-firers and Maxims. In short, if the works had been a hostile fortress no more unmistakable demonstration could have been made against them by a beleaguering squadron.

But although there was no mistaking the errand of the ships, and though it was plain that they had been expected, the guest-prisoners were astounded to find that, so far as they could see, not the slightest preparations were taken for defence. There was not a gun visible, and everyone, chiefs and workmen, went about their business without the slightest show of concern. The vast quadrangle stood amidst the rocks and sand of the wilderness, dark, silent, and inscrutable, and the huge engines purred on unceasingly, and Austin Vandel sat at his instruments in the telegraph-room, awaiting the word from the King of England, which alone could stop them.

"They are inscrutable, these people," said Sophie to Adelaide when Chrysie had left them on the wall to answer a message from her father. "They know that the guns on those ships could level even these huge walls with the ground in a few hours, wreck their machinery—though our friend Victor would scarcely allow them to do that if he could help it—and bring them to the choice between surrender and death; but here they are, going on with their work as usual, and not even taking any notice of the arrival of the fleet. Mr Vandel told papa that they have 100-lb. dynamite guns, but where are they?—there's not a weapon of any kind to be seen."

"That doesn't say that they are not here, my dear Sophie," replied Adelaide. "In fact, I confess that this very silence and apparent carelessness may hide some terrible possibilities. You know what an easy prey we thought we should find the *Nadine*, and you saw what happened to the *Vlodoya*. Frankly, I tell you I do not think that the success of the expeditions is at all certain. You never know what these diabolical people with their new inventions are going to do next. Look how that hateful American girl has outwitted us all along; and yet she's as friendly as possible all the time."

"Except when she was firing on the *Vlodoya* with that horrible gun of hers," added Sophie. "Don't you wish you had that revolver of hers?"

"I would give my soul for it," replied Adelaide, between her clenched teeth.

"And if you had it, what would you do with it?"

"Kill her first, and then him," came from between the marquise's clenched teeth.

"What!" said Sophie, with a vicious little laugh, "kill the man for whose sake you were willing to betray all our plans and perhaps lose us the control of the world? Why, your first condition was that no harm should come to him."

"I had hopes then, I have none now," she replied, in a tone that sounded like a snarl.

"He has found me out, and I have lost him; and when you have lost a man, why should he go on living? I have loved him; yes, perhaps I love him still in some strange way; but

you are woman enough and Russian enough, Sophie, to know that I would rather be a mourner at their funeral than a bridesmaid at their wedding."

"My dear Adelaide," said Sophie, slipping her arm through hers, "that is an excellent sentiment excellently expressed. Now I see that you are with us entirely. We are really true allies now, and it rests with us and papa to make the success of the expedition a certainty. Will you promise me that if matters come to an extremity, as they certainly will do in a few hours, you really will shoot Ma'm'selle Chrysie and this absurd Englishman who has preferred an American hoyden to the most beautiful woman in Europe?"

"Yes; if I could, I would do it. I would swear that to you on a crucifix," replied Adelaide de Condé, in a low tone that had a hiss running through it.

"Then come down to my room and I will show you something," said Sophie. "I dare not do it here, for you never know what eyes are watching you."

When they reached Sophie's apartment she put her hand into the side-pocket of a long fur-trimmed cloak that she was wearing, and took out Miss Chrysie's revolver.

"There it is," she said, handing it to the marquise. "You have told me that you are a good shot, so you can use it better than I can. I hope you will use it at the right time and won't miss."

"But how?" exclaimed Adelaide, staring at her in amazement as she put out her hand for the dainty little weapon.

"How!" laughed Sophie. "My dearest Adelaide, we have to learn many things in such a service as ours. Miss Chrysie did not know that she was walking and talking just now with one of the most expert pickpockets in Europe. Why, I once stole an ambassador's letter-case while I was waltzing with him. He was terribly upset, poor man, and of course I sympathised with him; but it was never found, and the contents proved very useful."

"You are wonderful, Sophie!" exclaimed Adelaide, as she put the revolver into her pocket. "And, of course, all things are fair in love, war, and diplomacy. Well, you have no need to fear that I shall not use this."

At this moment there was a knock at the door, and the count came in.

"Well, papa," said Sophie, "have you any news? What are these people going to do? Have you been able to persuade them to surrender to the expedition?"

"On the contrary, my dear Sophie," he replied, "they are more inexplicable than ever. Would you believe it that Lord Orrel has actually asked me to go down with him to the port and ask the French and Russian leaders of the expedition to dinner, the invitation to include our excellent friend Victor Fargeau?"

"That is only a plot!" exclaimed the marquise; "a shallow plot to get them into the works and make them prisoners. Of course they will not be so idiotic as to come."

"It is difficult," said the count, "to see how they could refuse such a hospitable offer without at once declaring hostilities. We do not know how the works are defended, or what unknown means of destruction these people may possess, and, to be quite candid, I do not think that our hosts would be guilty of an act of treachery. You know these Anglo-Saxons are always chivalrous to the verge of imbecility. For instance, if the tables had been turned, should we have treated them as they have treated us? I think you will agree with me that we should not. No; I have no fears whatever on that score, and I shall support Lord Orrel's invitation with the most perfect confidence."

CHAPTER XXVIII

Lord Orrel and the count started from the little station just outside the western gate of the works in the private car used by the directors and drawn by a neat little electric engine, which was accustomed to do the four miles in ten minutes.

Meanwhile, Lady Olive had what might, by a stretch of imagination, be called afternoon tea, in that land where it was never quite afternoon or morning, on the western wall looking down towards the harbour. When Miss Chrysie sat down and threw back her afternoon wrap Adelaide and Sophie were disconcerted, if not altogether surprised, to see that she had a light, long-barrelled, wicked-looking pistol hanging by a couple of silver chains from her waist-band.

"My dear Chrysie," said Lady Olive, "what are you carrying that terrible-looking weapon for? You don't expect that you will have to use it, surely," she went on, with just a touch of sarcasm in her tone, "considering what very good friends we have all managed to keep so far?"

"Well, I hope not," said Miss Chrysie, looking round the tables with eyes which had both a laugh and a menace in them. "Of course, it is to be hoped that everything will go off smoothly, but poppa had a friend in the old times who said something that means a lot. He said, 'You don't want a gun often, but when you do want it you want it badly.' Isn't that so, poppa?"

"Just his words, Chrysie," said the president, "just his words; and he knew what he was talking about when he used them. I never met a man who could hold his temper longer or shoot quicker; and when he used a gun someone usually wanted a funeral pretty soon."

"But surely," said Sophie, "you don't suppose for a moment that our expected guests from the expedition will——"

"I don't know what they'll do, although I think I know what they'll want to do," she replied, quickly. "But somehow I managed to lose my other little pepper-box this morning. Where it's gone to or who's got it I don't know, so I got this instead. It's a pretty thing," she went on, playing with it as a woman might toy with a jewel, "seven-shooter and magazine action. If you hold the trigger back after you've fired the first shot, it shoots the other six in about three seconds."

"A very handy thing in a tight corner, I should say," said Hardress, smiling at her over the top of his tea-cup, "and in such hands I should think a very ugly thing to face."

Adelaide's fingers were itching to take out the revolver and shoot both of them when she saw the all-meaning glance which passed between them while he spoke, but instead of that she raised her tea-cup and touched it with her pretty lips, and as she put the cup down she said, with the sweetest of smiles, to the president:

"I think it is quite charming of you, Mr President, to ask the leaders of the expedition to dinner in such a friendly way. Surely it is not always usual to ask the enemy within the gates?"

"We have no enemies, marquise," he replied, gravely, "except those who stand in the way of our commercial undertaking, and with them, of course, business is business, and there is no sentiment in that. Of course we have a pretty good idea why these two expeditions have come to the magnetic pole instead of trying to get to the North Pole, but we've not been lying awake at nights worrying about that, and there's no particular reason why we shouldn't ask the scientific explorers to dinner. All the same, if they happen to have come with the idea that they have a better right to these works than we have, and they want any trouble—why, they can have it."

"And," added Hardress, still looking across at Chrysie, "I think they will find it the most extraordinary kind of trouble that mortal man ever ran up against."

"It's to be hoped," said Doctor Lamson, speaking for the first time since the little tea-party had begun, for he had been thinking hard, and every now and then raising his eyes as though to seek inspiration from Lady Olive's calm, patrician face, as calm

now, on the eve of a struggle which could scarcely end without bloodshed, and might end in ruin, as it would have been in a London drawing-room—"I most sincerely hope that it will not come to actual hostilities; it would be really too awful."

"I wonder if it would be permissible for a prisoner of war to ask what would be too awful, doctor," said Sophie, looking at him with a smile which somehow made him think of a beautiful tigress he had seen in the Thiergarten in Berlin.

"The means that we should be compelled to employ in such a case to reduce those two squadrons, or expeditions, or whatever they call themselves, to something about as unsubstantial as that," replied the doctor, blowing a puff of cigarette smoke into the air.

At this moment Austin Vandel came up on to the wall, and handed a piece of paper to his father.

"Just come through, dad," he said. "I reckon we've frozen that war clean out."

The president opened the paper and read aloud:

"Powers agree to stop war and settle matters of dispute by arbitration if you will restore electric equilibrium in Europe. Terms between you and Powers to be arranged at a council of Sovereigns and Ministers presided over by myself. If this is satisfactory, please reply, and stop your machinery. Conditions becoming very serious in Europe.—
(Signed) Edward R.I."

"Well," continued the president, "that means they've climbed down. Doctor, I reckon we can switch off the engines now, couple up the connections, and use the power for something else if it's wanted. What do you think, viscount?"

"Certainly," replied Hardress. "If the Powers have accepted King Edward's arbitration we can do nothing else; and, besides, if our not entirely unexpected visitors allow themselves to be tempted to commit any hostile act after that they will place themselves outside the law of nations, and we shall be at liberty to deal with them as we please."

"That's so," replied the president, looking lazily across the table at Sophie and Adelaide. "Austin, you can go and telegraph to St John's that we put ourselves entirely in King Edward's hands, and that the engines have stopped. They'll have a few thunderstorms most likely, but in twenty-four hours everything will be as it was before. You might also mention that the French and Russian expeditions are here, and that to-night we hope to have the leaders to dinner."

The dinner-party in the board-room of the works to which the guests sat down at 8 p.m. was quite the strangest that had ever been given in the Northern Hemisphere. It was a dinner given by the holders of a citadel which had been proved to be the veritable throne of the world-empire to four men who had come to the wilderness of Boothia Land with the now practically avowed object of taking it from them by force of arms.

For no other possible reason could these two peaceful expeditions have sailed from Riga and le Havre to go to the North Pole, or as near to it as might be, and arrive at the Magnetic Pole, bristling with weapons, and obviously prepared to attack the works, situated as they were on the territory of a friendly nation, as though they were a fortress on hostile soil. Yet Vice-Admiral Alexis Nazanoff, in command of the Russian expedition, came with Professor Josef Karnina in just such friendly style as did Vice-Admiral Dumont and ex-Captain Victor Fargeau, late of the German staff-corps.

They were all far too well versed in the ways of war or diplomacy not to be considerably surprised at the nature of their reception, even as they were at the colossal dimensions of the buildings which at the bidding of the magic of millions had arisen in the midst of this inhospitable wilderness. They had expected a fleet of guardships protecting the entrance to the harbour, and they would not have been surprised if their passage through the narrow Lankester Sound had been prevented by torpedos, or opposed by privateers equipped by the Trust; and for that reason they had mounted their guns and felt their way for days at the rate of two or three knots an hour through the narrow passages which led southward to Port Adelaide, but all they had seen was the fleeting shape of a white-painted yacht, the now world-famous *Nadine*, scouting on the horizon and then vanishing into the grey twilight of the long northern day.

Not only had they been permitted to anchor in the natural harbour which formed the only approach by sea to the works without the slightest notice being taken of them, but, most wonderful of all, Lord Orrel, the English nobleman who was one of the three directors of the Trust, had come down with Count Valdemar, who, with his daughter, had organised the Russian expedition, to invite them to dinner in just as friendly a fashion as they might have done if Boothia Land had been Paris, and the Great Storage Works the Hotel Bristol.

The situation was distinctly mystifying, and therefore not without its elements of uneasiness—even perhaps of something keener, and the uneasiness and the fear were amply shared by the friends whom they met so unexpectedly within the four walls of the great world-citadel.

But astonishment became wonder when the two admirals, clad in their full-dress uniforms, found themselves and their scientific colleagues ushered into first a luxuriously-appointed reception-room lighted by softly-shaded electric lamps, where the president of the Trust, the multi-millionaire magnate, the king of commerce, who played with millions as boys play with counters, dispensed cocktails from a bar which might have been spirited away from the Waldorf-Astoria, and the men and women, friends and enemies, received them in costumes which might have come straight from Poole's or Worth's.

Then, when the cocktails had been duly concocted and consumed, and Lord Orrel's own butler announced that dinner was served, Lady Olive, as châtelaine of the castle, took the Russian admiral's arm and led the way through the curtained archway into the softly-lighted dining-room, so perfectly appointed that it might well have been spirited from London or Paris or Petersburg to the wilderness of Boothia.

The French admiral followed with Countess Sophie, Count Valdemar with the marquise, and Lord Orrel with Miss Chrysie, the rest of the men bringing up the rear.

The dinner, as Admiral Dumont said afterwards to Admiral Nazanoff, was a gastronomic miracle. Wines, soup, fish, and so on, were perfect; it was a wonder in the wilderness. But even more wonderful still was the conversation which flowed so easily around the table. No one listening to it would have dreamt that the greatest war of modern times had been brought to a state of utter paralysis by the quiet-spoken men who were so lavishly entertaining enemies who had come to dispossess them of the throne of the world, any more than they would have dreamt that the elements of a possible revolution, greater than any that had yet shaken the foundations of the world, were gathered round that glittering, daintily-adorned dinner-table.

But when Lady Olive rose and led the way back to the drawing-room Lord Orrel began the serious business of the evening by asking Hardress and Doctor Lamson to pass a couple of decanters of '47 port, from the cellars of Orrel Court, to their guests. When the decanters had gone round and the glasses were filled, Lord Orrel raised his own glass, and said:

"Well, gentlemen, the time has come for me to formally and yet not the less cordially bid you welcome to Boothia Land. We understood before we left England that you were bound on a voyage of discovery to the North Pole; to that goal which so many brave men have tried to reach, and which has so far been unattainable."

Then his voice dropped to a sterner tone, and he went on:

"I wish to ask you, on behalf of my colleagues and myself, those who are working with me in the enterprise which you have to-day seen in concrete form, whether your visit is one of peace or war. Those, I am well aware, are grave words to use, yet, under the strange circumstances which have brought us together, I must ask you to believe me that it is necessary, even inevitable, that they should be used. If you have paid a visit to Boothia Land and the Storage Works only in the interests of science, I can assure you that we and our staff will spare no pains to show you everything that can be seen.

"Considering the slow rate at which you have been compelled by circumstances to travel from Halifax, it may not be within your knowledge that since you left Europe we have happily been able to stop a great European war. We have paralysed the fleets and armies of a continent, and the warships of Europe are now resting motionless in dockyards or lying as wrecks on the sands and rocks of the coasts. The great Powers have, in short, found it impossible to prosecute the war without our consent—for, as a matter of fact, their armies were starving to death in face of each other—and have consented to place their difference in the hands of King Edward. The German Emperor, the President of the French Republic, and the Ministers of all the Powers engaged have assented to this. Here is a transcript of a dispatch received from London to-day, which will, I hope, convince you that the world is, happily, once more at peace. Therefore it is, of course, impossible that your mission can be anything but a peaceful one."

The two admirals and Victor Fargeau had been looking at each other somewhat uneasily while Lord Orrel was speaking. They had no idea of the events which had been taking place in Europe during the last fortnight. What Lord Orrel had said might be true or simply a deliberate attempt to frighten them out of their purpose; but whether he was telling the truth or not, there were still the sealed orders with which both expeditions had sailed, and obedience is the first duty of a sailor. So when Lord Orrel continued:

"And, that being so, gentlemen, I hope you will be able to join me in a glass of wine and drink to continued peace to Europe, and prosperity to the enterprise which has so far been successfully carried through by those who have the honour to be your hosts to-night."

"My lord," said the Russian admiral, rising to his feet, but not taking his glass, "you have been honest with us, and we—I speak for my colleague, Admiral Dumont, as well—cannot be less than honest with you. It is not necessary for me to remind you that scientific Polar expeditions do not carry such guns as we do—guns which, great and all as these buildings are, could wreck them in a few hours. You have been frank

with us, we will be frank with you. We know nothing of this mysterious power by which, as your lordship says, you have stopped the war in Europe. As servants of our countries, we know only the orders we have received, and those are either to compel the surrender of these works into our hands, or destroy them. We accepted your hospitality in the hope that we might be able to make terms for a peaceable surrender."

"And that, sir," said Hardress, starting to his feet, "I may as well tell you at once, is impossible. You can no more take or destroy these works than the European armies could fight each other three days ago. You are our guests now, and therefore safe from all harm. You are at liberty to rejoin your ships at any time you please. If you choose to leave us in peace and take your way back you may go, and there will be an end of the matter. But it is only my duty to tell you that if a shot is fired with intent to injure any portion of these works, you and your ships will not only be destroyed, you will be annihilated."

CHAPTER XXIX

A dead silence of some moments' duration—during which hosts and guests looked at each other as men might before the outburst of a storm—then Victor Fargeau, after an exchange of glances with the French admiral, said, in a voice which trembled with angry emotion:

"Milords, I think I am speaking for my comrades as well as myself if I say that we have come too far to be frightened from the accomplishment of our purpose. For my own part, I may say that nothing, not even the fear of that annihilation which the viscount has just threatened, would turn me from my purpose, because I have come to take back that which is mine and France's. These works may be your property, gentlemen, because you have built them with your money and your labour, but the soul which animates them, which makes them a living organism instead of a lifeless mass of brick and stone, the power which you say has enabled you to paralyse the fleets and armies of Europe, that is mine: for I am the son of the man who created it. He left it to me as his last legacy. I have returned to my allegiance to France after doing her what service I could elsewhere. Though France at first rejected the fruit of my father's genius she has now accepted it, and in our persons she and her ally are here to demand restitution of that which has been stolen from her."

"I think you can hardly say stolen, Monsieur Fargeau," said Hardress, without rising. "The French Ministry of War very foolishly refused to have anything to do with your father's invention, and he may have given you one set of specifications, but he also threw himself into the sea with the other, and we picked him up. You can call it chance

or fate or anything you please, but it certainly wasn't theft. You see, we got this land and built these works while the French Government was thinking about it; and I must also remind you that they are built on British soil, and held under lease from a British Colonial Government.

"Russia, France, and Great Britain are at peace. The war in Europe is over, and therefore you will excuse me if I remind you and your colleagues that any attempt to attain your end by force would put you outside the pale of civilisation. In other words despite your uniforms and your commissions, you would simply be common pirates, with no claim to any of the rights of regular belligerents."

"But," said Victor Fargeau, speaking with a distinct snarl in his voice, "you forget, Monsieur le Vicomte, that we are in a position to compel surrender, and that, once masters of the works, we shall be, as you are, above the law. Granted all you say, it comes to this: Nothing can justify our mission but success, and we shall succeed."

"In that case," said the president, in his somewhat halting French, "it doesn't seem worth while to discuss the matter any further. We won't surrender the works, and the last man left alive in them would fire the mines and die in their ruins. These gentlemen think they can take them. We think they can't. It's no use talking about a proposition like that. It's got to be argued with guns and other things. It seems to me that the only question we've got to ask is, whether all these gentlemen are unanimous in their determination to take the works by force, if they can?"

Admiral Dumont exchanged a whispered word with his Russian colleague, and then he rose and said:

"Milords, I regret to say our orders leave us no other alternative, and our duty to our countries will compel us to take that action, most reluctantly as we shall do so. As Monsieur Fargeau has said, we believe that the vital principle of this system belongs to him and to France. We have been sent here to regain what was lost to us through an unfortunate mistake, and we must do so. Yet we do not wish to be precipitate. We will ask you to take until six o'clock to-morrow morning, that is to say, eight hours from now, to reconsider your decision as to surrender. And there is just one more point.

"You have certain guests, not entirely voluntary ones, in the works. If it should, unhappily, come to a struggle between us, it would, of course, be impossible for such chivalrous gentlemen to retain two ladies and a Russian nobleman and ex-Minister. We request that, in the unfortunate case of hostilities becoming inevitable, they shall be permitted to come on board one of our ships."

As the French admiral sat down, Lord Orrel got up and said:

"Gentlemen, I am exceedingly sorry that matters have come to such a pass as this. There can be no question of surrender, but our guests will be free to join your squadrons when they please. Therefore, for their convenience, and in order not to bring our little dinner to too abrupt a close, we will accept the truce till six o'clock. Perhaps by that time other and, I think, better counsels may have prevailed with you.

"I sincerely hope that they will; for I can assure you that my son was not speaking idly when he said that you would not only be destroyed, but annihilated. We have here means of destruction which have never yet been used in war. For your sakes, and for those of the brave men under your command, I trust that they never will be. And now, as further discussion would seem to be unprofitable, suppose we join the ladies. We may be friends, at anyrate, till six o'clock."

In the reception-room the mystified guests of the Trust found coffee and liqueurs, music and song and pleasant conversation, which touched on every possible subject, save battle, murder, and sudden death. Then came a stroll on the walls by the light of a brilliant *Aurora*, which made the sun, which was just touching the southern horizon, look like a pallid and exaggerated moon, and during this stroll Victor Fargeau managed to pass a small Lebel revolver and some cartridges to Sophie and the count in case of accidents. They had decided to go on board the *Ivan the Terrible* when the guests left the works, and Ma'm'selle Felice and the count's servant were already putting their baggage together. The train was to wait for them at midnight.

Meanwhile, Doctor Lamson, who had left the party immediately after dinner, had been getting the defences of the works in order. The huge engines, disconnected now from the absorbers and storage batteries, from which the captured world-soul was now being released back into the earth, were still purring softly, and working as mightily as ever, but now their force was being used to a different end.

On each of the four towers at the corners of the quadrangle there had been mounted an apparatus which looked something like a huge searchlight, and underneath it were two real searchlights. On eight platforms, one on each side of the towers, but hidden by a circular wall of twelve-inch hardened steel, were mounted, on disappearing carriages, the president's big guns, enlarged copies of the one he had used so effectually on board the *Nadine*. Each would throw a shell containing a hundred pounds of Vandelite to a distance of eight miles. The great engines worked continuously, storing up liquid air in chambers under the gun platforms, but they were also doing other and, for the present, much more deadly work. The huge copper tubes above the searchlights on the towers were turned above the harbour. They made

neither light nor sound, but all the while they were accumulating destruction such as no mortal hand had yet dealt out to an enemy.

The evening passed, apparently in the most friendly and peaceful fashion, and no one suddenly introduced into the reception-room would have dreamt that the members of Lord Orrel's dinner-party were not on the very best of terms with themselves and each other. Not even Adelaide or Sophie, sitting there with their revolvers in the pockets of their dinner dresses, and thoughts of murder in their souls, had the remotest idea of how terribly it was destined to end.

Miss Chrysie had sung "The Old Folks at Home," and Adelaide one of the old chansons which had delighted the Grand Monarque in the Trianon. Then Sophie sat down at the piano, and the slow solemn strains of the Russian National Hymn waivered up in majestic chords from the instrument. There was something of defiance both in her touch and in her voice, but international courtesies were respected, and everyone in the room stood up. For Sophie Valdemar it was her swan-song—since she was never to sing another—and she sang it splendidly, with her whole soul in it. As the last line, "Give to us peace in our time, O Lord," left her lips, Lord Orrel went to her side, and said:

"Thank you, countess. A splendid hymn splendidly sung!" And then he turned to the French and Russian admirals, and said: "Gentlemen, is it not possible for you to answer, as you could answer, that prayer for peace? I can assure you, on my word of honour as an English gentleman, that this building in which you are now is impregnable to all forms of attack known to modern warfare. At a distance of five thousand miles we have paralysed the fleets and armies of Europe. Your ships are less than five miles from our walls: you are not courting defeat, you are courting annihilation. Can you not leave us in peace?"

"I was under the impression, milord," said Admiral Nazanoff, "that that subject was closed for the present. We have yet to be convinced as to these terrible powers which you claim to possess: but our orders are real, so too are our ships and guns; and since you have refused the terms we have offered we have no alternative but to put these boasted powers of yours to the test of war. I regret it most exceedingly, as I am sure my colleague, Admiral Dumont, does also, but that must be our last word."

The French admiral and Victor Fargeau both bowed assent as he spoke. And Lord Orrel answered:

"Well, gentlemen, since you are resolved, so be it. We will not discuss the matter further."

While he was speaking Lady Olive had gone to the piano, and, as he ceased, the opening chords of "Auld Lang Syne," floated through the room, and she began to sing the old Scotch song. The words had a strangely satirical meaning for Count Valdemar and his daughter and Adelaide, who had heard them several times at Orrel Court, and Lady Olive put such expression into them that both Sophie and Adelaide felt inclined to be a little ashamed of themselves. Then in the midst of the song the clock began to chime twelve, and Lady Olive, with a frank look of defiance in her eyes, switched off suddenly into "God Save the King," and began to sing the opening lines. At the end of the first verse she stopped and rose from the piano, and said to her father, who had been looking a little uneasy, as though he thought it was hardly good taste:

"I am very sorry, papa, if I have offended, but really I could not help it; it seemed inevitable."

"And why not?" said Adelaide. "Was not the same song sung in honour of the Grand Monarque by the ladies of Versailles? Well, now, Lady Olive, I suppose it is good-night and good-bye. A thousand thanks for all your kindness and hospitality."

"And a thousand thanks from me, too," said Sophie.

They held out their hands, but Lady Olive put hers behind her, and drew back.

"Thank you," she said, frigidly. "You are quite welcome to any kindness that I have been able to show you; but, really, I must ask you to pardon me if I decline to shake hands with you after you have definitely joined the enemies of my family."

"Perhaps you are right, Lady Olive," laughed Sophie. "Still, I hope that, at no very distant time, we shall have an opportunity of returning some, at least, of your kindness."

A few minutes later hosts and guests were standing outside the western gate, beside which the electric engine and the saloon carriage were waiting to take them to the harbour. The departing guests' luggage had been put on a little truck at the back.

"Ah, well, this is the end, I suppose," said Adelaide to Sophie as they stood in the dim twilight of the Northern midnight, exchanging their last formal salutations. "To-night peace; to-morrow war."

"But why not war now?" whispered Sophie. "Look! what a chance! Shall we ever have another like it? *À la guerre; comme à la guerre!*"

"Yes," whispered Adelaide in reply. "Ah, *sacré!* Look there!"

As she spoke, Chrysie left Lady Olive's side, went to Hardress, and slipped her arm through his, and looked up at him with an expression that there was no mistaking.

Then Adelaide de Condé's long pent-up passion broke loose, and the hot blood of hate began to sing in her head and burn in her eyes. Everything, so far, had failed. She had made herself a criminal, and had been punished by a silent, but humiliating, pardon. She had disgraced herself in the eyes of the man she would have sold her soul to get, and now—well, what did it matter? To-morrow—nay, within six hours, it would be war to the death, Why not begin now, as Sophie had whispered?

For the moment she was mad, or she would not have done what she did. But she was mad—mad with failure, hopeless love, and the hatred which only the "woman scorned" can feel. She pulled Chrysie's revolver out of her pocket, and snarled between her teeth:

"You have got him, but you shall not keep him!"

The revolver went up at the same moment, and she pulled the trigger. Three shots cracked in quick succession. Hardress went down with a broken thigh; Chrysie, in the act of drawing her own revolver, received a bullet in her arm, which was intended for her heart; and the third one went through the hood of her cloak, just touching the skin above the ear.

She tried to get out the revolver with her left hand; but, before she could do so, Sophie and Fargeau had opened fire, and at Sophie's first shot, she clasped her hand to her side, and went down beside Hardress. Lord Orrel had a bit of his left ear snipped off, and the president got a flesh wound just below the left shoulder.

The two admirals, who had already taken their seats in the car, with Madame de Bourbon and the Russian professor, sprang to their feet; but, before they could leave the car, a strange and awful thing happened. A blinding glare of light shone out from the southern tower, where Doctor Lamson had been watching the departure through his night-glasses. The thin ray wavered about until it fell on Sophie Valdemar and Adelaide de Condé, still standing close together, with Victor Fargeau just in front of them.

For a moment their faces showed white and ghastly in the blazing radiance; and then, to the amazement and horror of those who saw the strangest sight that human eye had ever gazed upon, down the ray of light, invisible, but all-destroying, flowed the terrible energy of the disintegrator on the top of the tower. Their hair crinkled up and disappeared, the flesh melted from their faces and hands. For an instant, two of the most beautiful countenances in Europe were transformed into living skulls, which

grinned out in unspeakable hideousness. Then their clothing shrivelled up into tinder, and all three dropped together in an indistinguishable heap of crumbling bones.

CHAPTER XXX

Almost at the moment that the man and the two women who, but a few moments ago, had been standing in the full pride of their youth and health and beauty, had dropped to the earth in little heaps of crumbling bones, whistles sounded inside the works, and a number of men came out of the western gate, some of them armed with rifles and revolvers, and others carrying stretchers. Hardress and Chrysie were lifted on to two of these, and Lady Olive went back into the works with them.

Lord Orrel and the president, after having their wounds hastily bandaged for the time being, went to the door of the saloon carriage, and Lord Orrel said, shortly and sternly:

"Madame de Bourbon, as you have seen, your niece has ceased to exist. Count Valdemar, the same is true of your daughter. And as for you, gentlemen," he went on, turning to the two admirals, "you have seen something of those means of defence of which I spoke to you after dinner.

"There," he went on, pointing to the little heap of mingled bones lying on the sand, "is the proof of it. Every human thing that tries to pass the limits of those rays will share the same fate. These people were enemies, but they were worse—they were traitors; and, as you have seen, they wished to be murderers. They have justly earned their fate. There is no reason why you should share it. Take my advice, I pray you, advice which I give from the bottom of my heart. Weigh anchor to-night, go back to Europe, and you will find that everything that we have told you is true."

"That, my Lord Orrel, is impossible," said Admiral Nazanoff, coming to the door of the car. "By what devilish means you have slain Captain Fargeau and those two ladies we know not, save that it must have been done through some material mechanism. To-morrow our guns shall try conclusions with it, whatever it is. Yes, even though you turned that murderous ray on us and killed us, as you did them, for our men have their orders. And now, I suppose, we had better get out and walk. We can hardly expect the use of your train after what has happened."

"You needn't worry about that, admiral," said the president; "we've promised you safe conduct to your ships, and you shall have it. But look here, count," he went on, pulling a heavy six-shooter out of his pocket, "don't you get fingering about that pocket as if you had a gun in it, or it'll be the last shooting-iron you ever did touch. We don't want any more shooting than we've had till we begin business in the morning."

Count Valdemar saw that he was covered, and he didn't like the look of the hard, steady, grey eyes behind the barrel of the long repeating pistol. He took his hand empty out of his pocket, clasped it with the left over his knees, and shrugged his shoulders. There was nothing to be said, and so he kept something of his dignity by holding his tongue, and the president went on:

"Well, that's better. You keep your hands where they are, and no harm will happen to you just now. But don't you think, gentlemen, that it would be better if Madame de Bourbon came back with us into the works, where she will be safe, anyhow safer than she would be on one of your ships, if you are still determined to fight it out."

"I am much obliged to you, Monsieur le President," replied the old lady, in her most autocratic manner; "but after what has happened, and what I have seen, I prefer to return with my own people."

"And," added Admiral Dumont, "you may be quite certain, monsieur, that before this most regrettable battle begins at six o'clock, one of the ships will have taken Madame de Bourbon beyond the reach of harm."

"With that, of course, we must be content," said Lord Orrel, coming back to the president's side. "And now, gentlemen, since, as you say, it is to be war between us, I have one more favour to ask: Here is the man," he went on, pointing to the second engineer of the *Nadine*, who had been brought out of the gate by a couple of stalwart quartermasters, "here is the man who allowed himself to be bribed by the late Countess Sophie Valdemar and the Marquise de Montpensier to wreck the engines of the *Nadine*, and so, as they thought, turn the course of fate in their favour. We have not punished him, but we have no further use for his services. He is a good engineer, whatever else he may be, and so perhaps you will be able to find him some employment on board one of your ships. Now, Robertson and Thompson, help Mr Williams into the car, please. These gentlemen want to get down to the harbour."

The two quartermasters picked up the handcuffed Williams, and flung him in through the open door of the saloon. Then the president said to the man at the engine, "Right away, driver, and come back when these gentlemen are safe on board. Salud, Señores," he went on to the two admirals, raising his hat with his unwounded arm. "Take my advice—clear out, and don't let us have any shooting in the morning. I reckon we've had quite trouble enough already."

At this moment the driver of the electric motor sounded his bell, the two admirals and the count raised their hats and stared out through the window with grim, immovable faces, and so went back to the ships, marvelling greatly at the wonderful horror they

had beheld. Madame de Bourbon was already in hysterics, succoured by Ma'm'selle Felice. Count Valdemar, though stricken to the heart by the frightful fate of the only human being that he had loved since his wife had died nearly twenty years before, was yet determined to use all his influence to compel the admirals to take the amplest possible revenge for her slaying. Certainly if the works were not battered into ruins within twelve hours, it would not be his fault; and then, as the little train drew out, he fell to wondering whether Hardress and Chrysie Vandel were killed or not.

"And are you still decided to fight, gentlemen?" he said to the admirals a few moments later, when the car was rattling over the narrow rails, "and, if so, what are you going to do with this thing?" He touched Mr Williams's still prostrate body with his toe as he said this.

"I need not tell you, count," replied Admiral Nazanoff, "as a Russian to a Russian, that orders are orders, and mine are to take those works or destroy them. I admit that what we saw to-night was very wonderful and very terrible, but when Holy Russia says 'Go and do,' then we must go and do, or die. The Little Father has no forgiveness for failure. That, in Russia, is the one unpardonable fault. Our guns will open at six in the morning. That man will take his chance with the rest of our men."

"And," said Admiral Dumont, "even if we cannot take the works and use them, we may destroy them, and so rid the world of this detestable commercial tyranny which would make war a matter of poll-tax. We shall open fire at six. Ah, here we are at the wharf. Now let us go and see that everything is ready. Admiral Nazanoff, I believe you are my senior in service; it will therefore be yours to fire the first shot. The *Caiman* shall fire the second."

"And I shall ask you, admiral," said the count to Nazanoff, "as a personal favour, and also, as I will say frankly, a matter of personal vengeance, to be allowed to fire that first gun."

"My dear count," replied the admiral, "with the greatest pleasure. It shall be laid by the best gunner on board the *Ivan*, and your hand shall send the shot, I hope, into the vitals of these accursed works. If we could only manage to drop a hundred-pound melinite shell into the right place, it would do a great deal."

CHAPTER XXXI

Until five o'clock there was silence both in the works and on the ships in the harbour. Then, as the southern sun began to climb on its upward curve, the eight searchlights on the towers blazed out, looking ghostly white in the twilight. They were arranged so that they formed two intersecting triangles on each face of the works.

From the top of the western gate flamed a huge star. It was a ten-million-candle-power light, and its radiance, cast directly upon the harbour, was so intense that while the ships were flooded with light, the dim, watery rays of the sun made twilight in comparison with it.

"That is well managed," said Admiral Nazanoff to the count as they were taking their early coffee on the bridge of the ice-breaker. "I suppose that devil-ray, or whatever they call it, is running along those lights, and so making a barrier that no living thing can pass without destruction. It is an amazing invention, whatever it is; but it is murder, not war. Still, if it comes to an assault, we must rush it. Meanwhile it is to be hoped that our guns will have destroyed their infernal apparatus.

"You see, we have six ships here in line abreast, and twelve guns, each throwing a melinite shell of not less than a hundred pounds, are trained on the face of the building. When your excellency has fired the first shot they will open, and, at the same time, fifty smaller quick-firers will sweep the walls in such a fashion that no living thing will exist for a moment, either on top of them or in front. In fact, once let us destroy the apparatus which generates that horrible devil-ray, I can give it no other name, and the works are ours."

"But the shooting will not be all on our side, admiral, I fear," said the count. "That is a very terrible little gun that they have on the *Nadine*. It was only a twelve-pounder, but a couple of shots sent the *Vlodoya* to the bottom, and this man Vandel—if the light had been better he would not have been living now—told me himself that they had guns ten times as powerful on the works."

"Most probably a little Yankee bluff, my dear count," said the admiral. "I dislike those searchlights much more than I fear the guns. You see, it is almost impossible to take an accurate aim against a searchlight, while it is perfectly easy to shoot from behind or below them. Still, all our guns are fortunately laid already. Yours, which is the starboard one down yonder, is trained on the gate in the centre. The shell will pierce that, and if it strikes the engine-house or whatever it is in the middle of the square it will probably disable the works. That, I believe, is the heart and centre of the whole system."

"It is very probable," said the count, who had already described what he had seen of the works to the admiral, "and I hope my shot will find it, for then my poor Sophie will be partly, at least, avenged. It was a terrible end for two such beautiful women, was it not, admiral? Fargeau did not matter so much; for, after all, he was only a half-turned traitor and spy."

"It was the most awful sight I have ever beheld," replied the admiral; "indeed I cannot think that human eyes could look upon anything more horrible. But by mid-day I hope our guns will have avenged them as completely as good shot and shell can do. And now, excellency, with your permission we must have our last council of war; I must see my captains and arrange the last details with Admiral Dumont, as it is getting near six. I took the trouble of setting my watch by the clock in the reception-room."

"And mine," said the count, taking out his repeater, "has been going with it for days. When this chimes six we may begin."

Within a few minutes the two admirals and the captains of the different vessels went, by appointment, to the cabin of the *Ivan*, and the last details were arranged. As the clock struck six every available gun was to open on the western face of the works, and the fire of the heaviest guns was to be concentrated on the towers and the central gate until the searchlights were extinguished and the deadly rays rendered impotent.

Meanwhile boats and steam-pinnaces were to be ready to land the sailors and marines with their machine-guns, and as soon as there was reason to believe that the rays were no longer operative, a general advance in force was to be made on the western gate. No quarter was to be given; no prisoners taken. Victor Fargeau had left his father's legacy and all necessary directions for operating the works with Admiral Dumont, and so there would be no necessity for any assistance from the prisoners, and therefore no need to take any.

At five minutes to six Count Valdemar and Admiral Nazanoff went down on to the fore-deck. At the same moment that they were making their last examination of the guns, a thin ray of electric light shone out from the top of a little rocky promontory to the north of the harbour, where there was a little white tower which the invaders had taken for a harmless and necessary lighthouse. The ray fell directly on the fore-deck of the *Ivan*.

"Ah," said the admiral, stepping back under the protection of the top works, "take care, your excellency, that is only about a hundred metres off, and they may have one of those infernal rays there."

"It is six o'clock," said the count, taking his watch in his left hand and the lanyard of the gun in his right. The beam of ghostly light wavered and fell on him as he stepped back to pull. The next instant the flesh of his uplifted hand melted away from the bones, the lanyard fell away. With a cry of agony he dropped his hand, and then the terrible ray fell on his face. The horror-stricken officers and men saw it change from a face to a skull, watched his fur cap shrivel up and vanish, the hair and flesh on his scalp

disappear. Then he dropped, and the bare skull struck the steel deck with a queer sharp click.

A sudden paralysis of horror fell upon officers and men alike, until the admiral roared out an order to turn the port gun on to the lighthouse. He was obeyed, and the gun was fired hurriedly; the shell struck the rock just below the lighthouse and exploded with a terrific report, but the living rock held good, and the deadly ray shone on. The gunner who had fired it was blasted to a skeleton in a moment, and the rest of the officers and men ran for shelter like so many frightened hares. They were ready to face any ordinary danger, but this was too awful for mortal courage.

Then the ray wandered over the fore-decks and bridges of the other ships till it reached the *Caiman*, on the bridge of which Admiral Dumont was standing, a horrified spectator of what had happened on the *Ivan*. He had a pistol in his hand; a shot was to be the signal for the French vessels to open fire. The ray fell on his hand as he raised it to fire, the hand shrivelled to bone before he could pull the trigger. But the gunners had seen the signal, and the guns roared out. Over fifty guns of all calibres roared and crackled for a minute or so, and a brief hurricane of shell swept across the stony plain between the harbour and the works.

Then it stopped. Every gun was silent, for not a man dared go near it. Every officer and man who had shown himself in the open had been reduced to a heap of bones before he could get back under shelter. Then those who were out of reach of the terrible death-rays saw six long guns rise from the masked batteries beside the two towers and over the central gate. There was no flash or report, but the next moment six hundred-pound shells, charged with Vandelite, had struck the French and Russian vessels, and, as a fighting force, the expeditions had practically ceased to exist.

Every ship was hit either in her hull or her top works. The steel structures crumpled up and collapsed under the terrible energy of the explosion. The steel-walled casemates were cracked and ripped open as though they had been built of common deal, and every man on deck within twenty yards of the explosion dropped dead or insensible. Both admirals were killed almost at the same moment.

The guns sank back and rose again, and again the explosions crashed out on board the doomed ships. The death-ray played continuously over their decks and every man who showed himself fell dead with the flesh withered from his face and skull. The terrible bombardment lasted for about a quarter of an hour, and then when only the *Caiman* and *Ivan* were left afloat, and the crews of the other vessels had either gone down with them or had swum or scrambled ashore in the boats, the guns ceased, and the rays were shut off.

This ended the fight, if, indeed, fight it could be called. Several of the shells had struck the walls and blown out large portions of the facings, but no vital spot had been touched, thanks to the difficulty of taking aim in the blinding glare of the searchlights. The little lighthouse on the north point, which had proved such a veritable tower of strength, was still unharmed, although the rocks about it were splintered and pulverised by shell-fire.

Only about a dozen petty officers and a couple of hundred sailors and stokers escaped, and most of them were half-mad with fear. They were ordered back on board the *Ivan*, which, thanks to her enormously strong construction, had stood the terrible bombardment better than the *Caiman*. Her topworks were smashed out of all shape, and her decks were ripped and rent in all directions, but her hull was still sound, and a few days' work at her engines would make them serviceable. And in her the survivors of the ill-fated expedition ultimately went back to Europe with a formal message from the directors of the Trust to the governments of France and Russia, expressing their regret that so much damage and loss of life had resulted from the act of piracy committed by those who had mistaken the Magnetic for the North Pole.

The *Corneille*, the old wooden ship which had conveyed Madame de Bourbon out of the range of the guns and the death-ray, was brought back the next morning by the *Nadine* and the *Washington*, whose business it had been to stop the escape of any French or Russian vessel from the waters of Boothia, and as she was immediately available for the service, she carried Madame de Bourbon back to France. With her she took a small box of oak, which contained all that the death-ray had left of Adelaide de Condé, Marquise de Montpensier, the last, save herself, of the daughters of the old line of the Bourbons.

A similar casket containing the bones of Sophie Valdemar and her father were sent under her care to the count's brother, whose place in Petersburg was less than a hundred yards distant from the German Embassy, the scene of the reception where what was now but dry bones, dust, and ashes, had been life and beauty and subtly working brains, plotting for the possession of the world-empire, whose throne was not now in any of the splendid capitals of Europe, or of the east, or west, but within the four-square limits—measuring four hundred feet each way—within which the World Masters reigned impregnable and supreme.

EPILOGUE

The short Northern summer was drawing rapidly to its close when Chrysie and Hardress were pronounced fit to travel. Hardress had had a very narrow shave, for one

of the count's bullets had grazed the right lung, and the wound had brought on an acute attack of pleural inflammation.

Chrysie's wounds had healed within a fortnight, and as soon as she was able to get about she did her best to supplant Lady Olive as nurse in the sickroom.

"You may be his sister," she said, in answer to a strong protest from Lady Olive, "and you're just as good a sister as a man wants to have; but I hope I'm going to be something more than a sister; and so, if he's going to be mine and I'm going to be his, I want to do the rest. After all, you see it's only a sort of looking after one's own property."

Just at this moment Hardress woke up and turned a languid head and a pair of weary and yet eager eyes upon the two girls.

"Chrysie," he said, in a thick, hoarse whisper, and yet through smiling lips, "in the speech of your own country, you've got it in once. There's just one thing I want now to make me well. You know what it is. Come and give it me."

"Why, you mean thing!" said Chrysie, going towards the bed, "I believe you've heard everything we've been saying."

"Some of it," he whispered. "What about that reserve—that territory, you know, that I was supposed to have an option on in Buffalo?"

"Buffalo's not Boothia, Shafto," she replied, using his Christian name for the first time since they had known each other; "but the reserve's all right. I guess you've only got to take up your option when you want it."

"Then I'll take it now," he whispered again, looking weariedly and yet with an infinite longing into her eyes.

"And so you shall," she said, leaning down over the bed. "You have done the work—you and Lord Orrel and poppa. You've done everything that you said you would; you're masters of the world, and, as far as mortals can be, controllers of human destiny—you and Doctor Lamson. He began it, didn't he? If it hadn't been for him and his knowledge you'd have done nothing at all. And he's got his reward too. That's so; isn't it, Olive? Yes; you can tell the story afterwards, but you and I are going to marry two of the world masters, and we're each of us going to have a world master for father, and—well, I guess that's about all there is in it. And now I'm going to seal the contract."

She bent her head and kissed Hardress's pale but still smiling lips, and just at that moment there was a knock at the door. Lady Olive almost involuntarily said, "Come

in," and Doctor Lamson, who had, next to Emil Fargeau, been the working genius of the whole vast scheme which the dead savant had worked out in his laboratory at Strassburg, came in.

Miss Chrysie, flushing and bright-eyed, straightened herself up, looking most innocently guilty. Doctor Lamson looked at her for a moment and then at Lady Olive. His own clear, deep-set grey eyes lit up with a flash, and his clean-cut lips curved into a smile, as he said:

"I hope I'm not intruding, as a much more distinguished person than myself once said; but, as Hardress is so much better, having apparently found a most potent, though unqualified, physician, I thought you would like to hear the latest news from Europe. The Powers have surrendered at discretion. As they can't fight, they are willing to make peace. They have accepted King Edward as arbitrator, and he, like the good sportsman that he is, has decided that in future, if a country wants to fight another, it shall submit the *casus belli* to a committee of the Powers not concerned in the quarrel. If they are all concerned in it, the tribunal is to consist of the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Archimandrite of the Greek Church. If either of the belligerents refuse arbitration after the dispute has been thoroughly gone through, or begins fighting before the decision is delivered, it will have the same experiences as Europe had in the late war—which, of course, was no war."

"Because we stopped it," said Lady Olive, looking straight across the room into Doctor Lamson's eyes.

"Well, yes, we," said Chrysie, standing up beside the bed. "I reckon, all things considered, we four have had about as much to do with stopping this war and teaching the nations to behave decently as anybody else on earth. We are here on the throne of the world, kings and queens from pole to pole!"

"But, my dear Chrysie," exclaimed Lady Olive, flushing from her shapely chin to her temples, and making a move towards the door, "surely you don't mean——"

"I don't mean any more than we all mean in our hearts," interrupted Chrysie, taking Hardress's hand in hers. "What's the use of world masters and world mistresses trying to hide things from each other? We four people here in this room run the world. I want to run this man, and you want to run that one; and they, of course, think they'll run us, which they won't! Anyhow, we're all willing to try that, and I think the best thing we can do is to sign, seal, and deliver the contract of the offensive and defensive alliance right here and now. You kiss, and we'll kiss, and that's all there is to it."

And they kissed.

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Index to Titles of Books

	PAGE
Ada Vernham,	14
African Treasure, An,	10
All the Winners,	6, 19
All They Went Through,	14
Angel of Chance, The,	13
Anna Lombard,	11
Appearances, How to Keep Them Up,	23
Arcadians, The,	3, 12
As Cæsar's Wife,	13
Australia at the Front,	21
Avenging of Ruthanna, The,	10
Barbara West,	13
Bâton Sinister, The,	6, 13
Beautiful Rebel, A,	13, 28
Beneath the Veil,	4, 14
Bettina,	9
Bishop's Secret, The,	17, 27
Bitter Fruit,	9, 27
Blue Bonnets Up,	14
Boer in Peace and War,	24

Boer Ride, The,	26
Boffin's Find,	13
Bohemian Girls, The,	27
Bread of Tears, The,	12
Burden of Her Youth, The,	6, 16
By Jumna's Banks,	18
By Thames and Tiber,	3, 13
Cabinet Secret, A,	11, 27
Car of Phœbus, The,	4, 15
Castle Oriol,	16
Charming Miss Kyrle, The,	12
Cicely Vaughan,	15
Confessions of a Court Milliner,	16
Consumptive, Care of a,	7, 25
Corner in Ballybeg, A,	18
Court of Destiny, The,	13
Courtship of Sarah, The,	10
Craze of Christina, The,	9, 27
Crime in the Wood, The,	17
Crimson Cryptogram, The,	17, 27
Crimson Lilies,	2, 9
Crowning of Gloria, The,	15

Curios,	14, 27
Curse of Eden, The,	13
Dame of the Fine Green Kirtle, The,	19
Daughter of England, A,	9
Dead Certainties,	19
Demon of the Wind, The,	26
Desired Haven, The,	18
Diamond of Evil, The,	13
Didums,	18
Difficult Matter, A,	9, 18, 27
Diva, The,	13
Dramatic Criticism,	24
Dream of Fame, A,	18
Dwellers by the River,	13
Etiquette and Entertaining,	25
Experiment of Dr. Nevill, The,	15
Eye of Istar, The,	27
Father Anthony,	15, 18, 27
Fair Fraud, A,	9
Fair Rosalind,	14

Fighter in Khaki, A,	18
Fooling of Don Jaime, The,	16
For a God Dishonoured,	15
Forbidden Paths,	17
Frank Redland, Recruit,	10
Friendship and Folly,	14
From the Land of the Wombat,	17
Fugitive Anne,	2, 13
Future of Phyllis, The,	14
George and Son,	16
Girl with Feet of Clay, The,	15
Glimpses from Wonderland,	14
Golden Spur, The,	12
Golden Wang-Ho, The,	10
Green Turbans, The,	10
Happiness: Its Pursuit and Attainment,	23
Harvesters, The,	2
Heretic, The,	15
His Little Bill of Sale,	19
His Master Purpose,	5, 15
His 'Prentice Hand,	15

History of the Temple,	24
Hospital Secret, The,	16
House of Commons, The,	22
House of Hardale, The,	15
Houses of Ignorance,	11
I'd Crowns Resign,	10
Ill Wind, An,	9, 28
Indiscretion of Gladys, The,	5, 12
Infelix,	18
In Heaven's Porch,	24
In Summer Shade,	16
In the Blood,	11
In the Dark,	11
In the Days of Goldsmith,	5, 15
In the Shadow of the Purple,	13
Investigators, The,	12
Irish Holidays,	13
Island Interlude, An,	18
Italian Wife, His,	12
Ivory Bride, The,	14
Jade Eye, The,	4, 10

Jean Keir of Craigneil,	10
Juggler and the Soul, The,	19, 28
Juggling Fortune,	17
Kingdom of Mammon, The,	16
King's Race-Horses, The,	8, 22
Kinsah,	9
Kitty's Engagement,	27
Last Foray, The,	4, 16
Last of the Climbing Boys,	23
Letters to Dolly,	17
Life's Little Comedies,	26
Logan's Loyalty,	10
Lords of Life, The,	14
Love Affairs of a Curate, The,	17
Lovely Mrs. Pemberton, The,	11, 28
Love of a Former Life, The,	16
Luck of a Lowland Laddie, The,	9
Machinations of Janet, The,	4, 10
Magnetic Girl, The,	5, 14
Malice of Grace Wentworth, The,	14

Man of Iron, A,	16
Man of To-Day, A,	19, 27
Mary Bray, X Her Mark,	18
Master Sinner, The,	17
Men of Marlowe's,	14
Merciless Love,	15
Message of the Masters, The,	26
Midsummer Madness,	9
Mill of Silence, The,	13
Mission of Margaret, The,	14
Miss Nanse,	19
Miss Pauncefort's Peril,	14
Mistletoe Manor,	16
Mrs. Musgrave and Her Husband,	17, 27
Mystery of Dudley Horne, The,	27
Native Born,	11
Nightshade and Poppies,	26
Nobler than Revenge,	11
No. 3, The Square,	6, 11
No Vindication,	10
Once Too Often,	11

On Parole,	18
On the War Path,	21
Operatic Problem, The,	24
Oswald Steele,	6
Other Mrs. Jacobs, The,	6, 13
Our Widow,	27
Outsider's Year, An,	2, 11
Papa Limited,	18
Parish Doctor, The,	3, 13
Partners Three,	6, 9
Passing Fancy, A,	9, 27
Paths of the Dead,	18
Paul Le Maistre,	1
Paul the Optimist,	15
Pick-Me-Ups,	19
Plato's Hand-Maiden,	12
Progress of Pauline Kessler, The,	11, 27
Purple of the Orient, The,	12
Pursued by the Law,	10
Real Christian, The,	12
Realization of Justus Moran,	11

Remembrance,	5, 9
Robert Orange,	27
Royal Sisters, The,	13
Rural Life,	22
Scarlet Seal, The,	15
Sea of Love, The,	19
Second Lieutenant Celia,	19
Sent to Coventry,	11
Shadow of Allah, The,	14
Shutters of Silence, The,	3, 12
Side Lights on Convict Life,	7, 25
Silent House of Pimlico, The,	17, 27
Sin of Hagar, The,	16, 28
Sin of Jasper Standish, The,	27
Social Life in the British Army,	20
Social Pretender, A,	14
Something in the City,	11
Son of Mammon, A,	12
Sport of Circumstance, The,	17
Story of a Campaign Estate,	13
Story of Lois, The,	15
Straight Shoes,	13

Strength of Straw, The,	11
Sweet "Doll" of Haddon Hall,	5, 14
Thraldom,	4, 16
Three Days' Terror, The,	12, 27
Through the Mists,	15
Traitor in London, A,	10, 27
Transplanted,	18
Trewinnot of Guy's,	10, 18
Trust Trappers, The,	6, 16
Turnpike House, The,	10
Unconquerable Colony, The,	25
Unwise Virgin, An,	3, 10
Up To-morrow,	6, 18
Veiled Man, The,	27
Veronica Verdant,	12
Virgin Gold,	11
Ward of the King, A,	15
Way Out, The,	12
Weaver of Runes, A,	16

When Love is Kind,	16
When the Mopoke Calls,	17
Wicked Rosamond,	12
Wilful Woman, A,	12
Wise in His Generation,	15
With Bought Swords,	19
Woman-Derelict, A,	9
Woman in the City, A,	5, 15
Woman's Checkmate, A,	14
Woman's No, A,	9
Woman—the Sphinx,	10, 28
Women Must Weep,	10
Wooing of Monica, The,	7
World Masters, The,	3, 15
Wounded Pride,	16
Yolande the Parisienne,	12
Youth at the Prow,	19
Zealandia's Guerdon,	11

Index of Names of Authors

	PAGE
Amity, John,	18
Armstrong, Mrs. L. Heaton,	25
Bayliss, Helen,	5, 15
Beaman, Emeric Hulme,	15
Bedwell, Hugh,	26
Berkley, Eibbon,	16
Bindloss, Harold,	5, 15
Bodkin, M. McD., K.C.,	5, 15
Boothby, Guy,	11, 27
Buchanan, Robert,	15, 18, 27
Burgin, G. B.,	3, 12
Burrard, W. Dutton,	16
Cairnes, Capt. W. E.,	20
Cameron, Mrs. Lovett,	5, 7, 9, 18, 27, 28
Capes, Bernard,	13
Carrel, Frederic,	11, 27
Chatterton, G. G.,	13, 17
Cleeve, Lucas,	5, 12
Clement, Hugh,	24
Cobban, J. MacLaren,	10

Cocbrane, James Henry,	25
Compton, James,	16
Cook, Alec,	3, 13
Cooper, Edward H.,	16
Crommelin, May,	2, 9
Cross, Victoria,	11
Culley, J. D. Leather-, Mrs.,	21
Davenant, Philip,	15
Davidson, Campbell L.,	19
Delaire, Jean,	18
Dill, Bessie,	14
Dodge, Walter Phelps,	19
Donovan, Dick,	15
Dothie, W. P.,	15
Doyle, Mina,	18
Dudeney, Mrs. Henry,	14
Duntze, Lady,	18
Elson, George,	23
Esler, E. Rentoul,	19
Fletcher, J. S.,	3, 12, 27

Forster, R. H.,	4, 16
Fowler, Harry,	19
Galloway, William Johnson,	24
Garnett, William Terrel	16
Gearey, Caroline,	22
Gilbert, George,	6, 13
Gowing, Mrs. Aylmer,	3, 13
Glanville, Ernest,	13, 28
Graham, Winifred,	14
Grein, J. T.,	24
Griffith, George,	3, 7, 15, 25
Groot, J. Morgan de,	16
Gubbins, Nathaniel,	6, 19
Halcombe, C. J. H.,	16
Hannan, Charles,	16
Heppenstall, R. H.,	14
Hinkson, H. A.,	16
Hobbes, John Oliver,	27
Howard, Isabel,	16
Howard, Keble,	17
Hume, Fergus,	4, 7, 10, 17, 27, 28

Ingold, John,	14
Jackson, G. Hunt,	26
Kelly, W. J., The Revd.,	23
Kernahan, Mrs. Coulson,	3, 10
Lees, Robert James,	4, 15
Lewis, G. Pitt, K.C.,	24
Lewis, Helen Prothero,	4, 16
MacLeod, Torquil,	19
Macpherson, Jean,	18
MacQuoid, Katherine S.,	15
Mann, Mary E.,	16
Markham, Paul,	18
Marsh, Richard,	5, 14, 17, 27
Martin, Mrs. Charles,	14
Mathers, Helen,	7, 16, 19, 27, 28
Mathew, Frank,	13
Meade, L. T.,	6, 16, 27
Moore, Dugald,	26

Muddock, J. E.,	5, 14
Murphy, Nicholas P.,	18
Nisbet, Hume,	6, 16, 18
O'Donnell, F. Hugh,	26
Perkins, Rose,	15
Phelps, Sydney,	15
Pinkerton, Thomas,	14
Platts, W. Carter,	6, 18
Pool, Maria Louise,	14
Praed, Mrs. Campbell,	2, 6, 13
Praga, Mrs. Alfred,	23
Queux, William Le,	27
Reardon, Richard,	15
Reay, Marcus,	17
Rita,	27
Roberts, Morley,	14
Robinson, F. W.,	14
Rodd, Ralph,	18

Sandeman, Mina,	12
Sergeant, Adeline,	4, 14
Short, Frank,	26
Snowden, Keighley,	13
Speight, T. W.,	17
Spencer, Edward,	8, 22
Stuart, Esmè,	11
Tayler, Jenner,	18
Temple, Sir Richard, Bart.,	22
Thomas, Annie (Mrs. Pender Cudlip),	13
Thynne, Robert,	13
Turner, Edgar,	15
Tweedale, Violet,	16
Tytler, Sarah,	4, 10, 19
Walker, William S. ("Coo-ee"),	11, 17
Warden, Florence,	2, 6, 7, 11, 27, 28
Whishaw, Fred,	6, 11
Wilkinson, Frank,	21
Williams, Mrs. M. Forrest,	7, 25

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Vanity Fair.—"Mrs. Lovett Cameron needs no introduction to the novel reader, and, indeed, has her public ready to her hand as soon as her books come out."