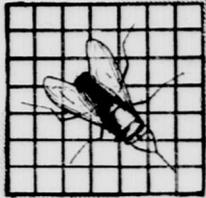


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of Russian life, and became an actor in it, with the result, poor chap, that he has paid for his indiscretion with his life."

"How do you know all this?" I demanded.

"How do you know—"

"That he was not in search of copy, but in pursuit of his private ends, when he deliberately placed himself in peril? Well, I do know it, and that is all I choose to say on this point. I warned him at the outset—as I need not have warned you—that he must exercise infinite tact and discretion in his relations with the police, and the bureaucracy which the police represent, and also with the people, the democracy; that he must, in fact, maintain a strictly impartial and impersonal attitude and viewpoint. Well, that's just what he failed to do. He became involved with some secret society. You know as well as I do—better, perhaps—that Russia is honeycombed with 'em. Probably in the first instance he was actuated by curiosity; but I have reason to believe that his connection with this society was a purely personal affair. There was a woman in it, of course. I can't tell you how he came to fall foul of his new associates; for I don't know. Perhaps they imagined he knew too much. Anyhow, he was found, as I have said, stabbed to the heart. There is no clue to the assassin, except that in Carson's clenched hand was found an artificial flower, a red geranium, which—"

I STARTED upright, clutching the arms of my chair. A red geranium! The bit of stuff dangling from Cassavetti's passkey; the hieroglyphic on the portrait; the flower Anne had given to Cassavetti, and to which he seemed to attach so much significance—all red geraniums! What did they mean?

"The police declare it to be the symbol of a formidable secret organization which they have hitherto failed to crush, one that has ramifications throughout the world," Southbourne continued. "Why, man, what's wrong with you?" he added hastily.

I suppose I must have looked ghastly; but I managed to steady my voice and answer curtly, "I'll tell you later. Go on, what about Carson?"

He rose and crossed to his desk before he answered, scrutinizing me with keen interest the while. "That's all, except that this was found in his breast pocket. I got it by to-night's mail. It's in a horrid state; the blood soaked through, of course."

He picked up a small oblong card, holding it gingerly in his fingertips, and handed it to me. I think I knew what it was, even before I looked at it. A photograph of Anne Pendennis, identical, save that it was unframed, with that in possession of the old Russian, even to the initials, the inscription, and the red symbol beneath it!

CHAPTER IV.

The River Steps

THIS was found in Carson's pocket?" I asked, steadying my voice with an effort. He nodded.

I affected to examine the portrait closely, to gain a moment's time. Should I tell him right now that I knew the original, tell him also of my strange visitant? No; I decided to keep silence, at least until after I had seen Anne and cross examined the old Russian again.

"Have you any clue to her identity?" I said, as I rose and replaced the bloodstained card on his desk.

"No. I've no doubt the Russian Secret Police know well enough who she is; but they don't give anything away, even to me."

"They sent you that promptly enough," I suggested, indicating the photograph with a fresh cigarette which I took up as I resumed my seat. I had managed to regain my composure, and have no doubt that Southbourne considered my late agitation was merely the outcome of my natural horror and astonishment at the news of poor Carson's tragic fate. And now I meant to ascertain all he knew or suspected about the affair, without revealing my personal interest in it.

"Not they! It came from Von Eckhardt. It was he who found poor Carson, and he took possession of that," he jerked his head toward the desk, "before the police came on the scene, and got it through."

I knew what that meant; that the thing had not been posted in Russia, but smuggled across the frontier. I had met Von Eckhardt, who was on the staff of an important German newspaper, and knew that he and Carson were old friends. They shared rooms at St. Petersburg.

"Now, why should Von Eckhardt run such a risk?" I asked.

"Can't say; wish I could."

"Where was he when poor Carson was done for?"

"At Vilna, he says; he'd been away for a week."

"Did he tell you about this society and its red symbol?"

"Pon my soul, you've missed your vocation, Wynn! You ought to have been a barrister," drawled Southbourne. "No, I knew all that before. As a matter of fact, I warned Carson against that very society—as I'm warning you. Von Eckhardt told me merely the bare facts, including that about the bit of geranium Carson was clutching. I drew my own inference. Here, you may read this note."

He tossed me a half-sheet of thin notepaper, covered on one side with Von Eckhardt's crabbed German script.

It was, as he had said, a mere statement of facts, and I determined to seize an early opportunity to interview Von Eckhardt when I arrived at Petersburg.

"You needn't have troubled to question me," resumed Southbourne in his most nonchalant manner. "I meant to tell you the little I knew,

for your own protection. This society is one of those revolutionary organizations that abound in Russia; but more cleverly managed than most of them, and therefore all the more dangerous. Its members are said to be innumerable and of every class, and there are branches in every capital of Europe. A near neighbor of yours, by the way, is under surveillance at this very moment, though I believe nothing definite has been traced to him."

CASSAVETTI!" I exclaimed with, I am sure, an excellent assumption of surprise.

"You've guessed it first time; though his name's Vladimir Selinski. If you see him between now and Monday, when you must start, I advise you not to mention your destination to him, unless you've already done so. He was at the Savage Club dinner to-night, wasn't he?"

One of Southbourne's foibles was to pose as a kind of Sherlock Holmes; but I was not in the least impressed by this pretension to omniscience. He was a member of the club, and ought to have been at the dinner himself. If he had looked down the list of guests he must have seen "Miss Anne Pendennis," among the names, and yet I believed he had not the slightest suspicion that she was the original of that portrait.

"I saw him there," I said; "but I told him nothing of my movements, though we are on fairly good terms. Do you think I'm quite a fool, Lord Southbourne?"

He looked amused, and blew another ring before he answered enigmatically, "David said in his haste, 'All men are liars.' If he'd said at his leisure, 'All men are fools, when there's a woman in the case,' he'd have been nearer the mark."

"What do you mean?" I demanded, hotly enough.

"Well, I also dined at the Cecil to-night, though not with the 'Savages,' and I happened to hear that you and Cassavetti—we'll call him that—were looking daggers at each other, and that the lady, who was remarkably handsome, appeared to enjoy the situation. Who is she, Wynn? Do I know her?"

I watched him closely; but his face betrayed nothing. "I think your informant must have been a—journalist, Lord Southbourne," I said very quietly. "And we seem to have strayed pretty considerably from the point. I came here to take your instructions, and if I'm to start at nine Monday I shall not see you again."

He shrugged his shoulders. "All right, we'll get to business. Here's the new code. Get it off by heart between now and Monday, and destroy the copy. It's safer. Here's your passport, duly viséd, and a check. That's all, I think. I don't need to teach you your work. But I don't want you to meet with such a fate as Carson's; so I expect you to be warned by his example. And you are not to make any attempt to unravel the mystery of his death. I tell you that for your own safety. The matter has been taken up from the Embassy, and everything possible will be done to hunt the assassin down. Goodby and good luck!"

WE shook hands, and I went out into the night. It was now well past midnight, and the streets were even quieter than usual at that hour; for there had been a sharp storm while I was with Southbourne. I had heard the crash of thunder at intervals and the patter of heavy rain all the time. Now the storm was over, the air was cool and fresh, the sky clear. The wet street gleamed silvery in the moonlight and was all but deserted. The traffic had thinned down to an occasional hansom or private carriage, and there were few foot passengers abroad. I did not meet a soul along the whole of Whitehall, except the policemen, their wet mackintoshes glistening in the moonlight.

But, as I reached the corner of Parliament Square, I saw, just across the road, a man and a woman walking rapidly in the direction of Westminster Bridge. I glanced at them casually; then looked again more intently. The man looked like a sailor. He wore a pea-jacket and a peaked cap, while the woman was enveloped in a long dark cloak and had a black scarf over her head. I saw a gleam of jewelry as she shoe buckles as she picked her way daintily across the wet roadway to the farther corner by the houses of Parliament.

My heart seemed to stand still as I watched her. At any other time or place I should have sworn that I knew the tall, slender figure, the imperial poise of the head, the peculiarly graceful gait, swift but not hurried. I inwardly jeered at myself for my idiocy. My mind was full of Anne Pendennis that I must imagine every tall, graceful woman was she! This woman was doubtless a resident in the southern suburbs, detained by the storm, and now on her way to the all-night trains that start from the far side of Westminster Bridge. There was quite a suburban touch in a woman in evening dress being escorted by a man in a pea-jacket. She might be an artist, too poor to afford a carriage.

Nevertheless, while these thoughts ran through my mind, I was following the couple. They walked so swiftly that I did not decrease the distance between us. Halfway across the bridge I was intercepted by a beggar, who whined for the "price of a doss," and kept pace with me, till I got rid of him with the bestowal of a coin; but when I looked for the couple I was stalking they had disappeared.

I quickened my pace to a run, and at the farther end looked anxiously ahead; but could see no trace of them. There were more people stirring in Westminster Bridge Road here at this hour—street hawkers starting home with their sodden barrows, the usual disreputable knot of loungers gathered round a coffee stall—but those I looked for had vanished. Swiftly as they were walking, they could scarcely have traversed the distance between