



CHAPTER XX.

With a sensation of being crushed and suffocated by the encompassing dark mystery, she nervously herself against a protracted vigil. The obscurity on every hand seemed alive with stealthy footsteps, whisperings, murmurings, the passage of shrouded shapes of silence and of menace. Her eyes ached, her throat and temples throbbled, her skin crept, her scalp tingled. She seemed to hear a thousand different notes of alarm.

The only sounds she did not seem to hear were those—if any—that accompanied Lanyard's departure and return. Had he not been thoughtful enough, when a few feet distant, to give warning with the light she might well have greeted with a cry of fright the consciousness of a presence near her, so silently he moved about. As it was, she was startled, apprehensive of some misadventure, to find him back so soon, for he had not gone three minutes, long though her nervousness had made that period seem.

"It's quite all right," he announced in hushed accents—no longer whispering. "There are just five people in the house aside from ourselves—all servants, asleep in the rear wing. We've a clear field—if no excuse for taking foolish chances! However, we'll be finished and off again within ten minutes. This way."

Their destination proved to be a huge and gloomy library at one extreme of a chain of magnificent salons that formed a veritable treasure-gallery of exquisite furnishings and authentic old masters. As they moved slowly through these chambers Lanyard kept his flashlight busy; involuntarily, now and again, he would check the girl before some splendid canvas of extraordinary antique.

"I've always meant to happen in some day with a moving-van and loot this place properly!" he confessed with a little sigh. "Considered from the viewpoint of an expert practitioner in my—ah—lete profession, it's a sin and a shame to let all this go neglected when it's so safeguarded. The old lady—Madam Omber, you know—has all the money there is, approximately, and what she does all these beautiful things do for the Louvre, for she's without a cent!"

"But how did she manage to accumulate them all?" the girl wondered.

"It's the accretion of generations of passagions collectors," he informed her. "The late M. Omber was the last of his dynasty; he and his forbears brought together the paintings and the furniture; Madame added the Oriental galleries by her first husband and her own collection of antique jewelry and precious stones. That's her particular field. Here we are!"

An instant later the light of the flashlight was dimmed out. An instant later the girl heard a little clashing noise of curtain rings sliding along a pole, and this was three repeated. Then, following a brief pause, a switch clicked, and, streaming from the hood of a portable electric desk lamp, a pool of light flooded the heart of a vast place of shadows.

Reviewing it swiftly, the girl found herself in an apartment whose doors and windows alike were cloaked with heavy draperies hanging from floor to ceiling in long, shining folds. Immense black bookcases lined the walls, their shelves crowded with volumes in rich bindings; from their tops pallid, sculptured masks peered down inquisitively, leering and scowling at the intruders.

A huge mantelpiece of carved marble, supporting a great, dark mirror, occupied the best of one wall; beneath it a wide, deep fireplace yawned, insufficiently shielded by a screen of wrought brass and crystal. In the middle of the room stood a library table of mahogany; huge leather chairs and couches encumbered the remainder of its space. And one corner, that to the right of the fireplace, was shut off by a high Japanese screen of cinnabar and gold.

To this Lanyard moved confidently, carrying the lamp. Placing it on the floor, he grasped one wing of the screen with both hands, and at cost of considerable effort swung it aside, uncovering the face of a huge, old-style safe, of which the body was buried in the wall.

For several seconds—but not for many—Lanyard studied this problem intently, standing quite motionless, head lowered and thrust forward, hands resting on his hips. Then, turning, he nodded an invitation to come nearer.

"My last job," he said, with a smiling countenance oddly lighted by the lamp at his feet—"and my easiest, I fancy. Sorry, too, for I'd rather have liked to show off a bit! But this old-fashioned tin bank gives no excuse for spectacular methods!"

"But," the girl objected, "you've brought no tools!"

"Oh, but I have!" And fumbling in

a pocket, Lanyard produced a pencil. "Behold!" he laughed, brandishing it. She knitted thoughtful brows. "I don't understand."

"All I need—except this."

Crossing to the desk, he found a sheet of note paper and, folding it, returned.

"Now," he said, "give me five minutes."

Kneeling, he gave the combination-knob a smart preliminary twist, then rested a shoulder against the sheet of painted iron, his cheek to its smooth, cold cheek, his ear close beside the dial, and with the practiced fingers of a master locksmith and an authority on strong-box construction, began to manipulate the knob.

Gently, tirelessly, to and fro he twisted, turned, and checked the combination, caressing it, humoring it, wheeling it, inexorably questioning it in the dumb language his fingers spoke so deftly. And in his ear the click and whir and thump of shifting wards and tumblers murmured articulate response in the terms of their cryptic code.

Now and again, releasing the knob and sitting back on his heels, he would bend graye scrutiny to the dial, note the position of the combination, and with his pencil jot memoranda on the folded sheet of paper. This happened perhaps a dozen times, spaced by intervals of irregular duration.

He worked diligently, in a phase of concentration that apparently excluded from his consciousness the near proximity of the girl, who stood—or rather stooped, half kneeling—less than a pace from his shoulder, watching the process with interest hardly less keen than his own.

Yet when one faint, odd sound broke the stumorous silence of the salon, instantly he swung around and stood erect in a single movement, gaze to the curtains.

But it had only been a premonitory rumble in the inward of a tall old clock, about to strike in the reception hall. And as its sonorous chimes heralded two doctored strokes Lanyard laughed quietly, intimately, into the girl's startled eyes had sank back before the safe.

And now his task was nearly finished. Within another minute he sat back with two agonies, uttered a hushed exclamation of satisfaction, stifled his memoranda for a space, then swiftly and with exact movements threw the knob and set into the several turning positions of mechanism, grasped the lever handle, turned it smartly and swung the door wide open.

"Simple, eh?" he chuckled, with a glance aside at the girl's eager face, bewitchingly flushed and shadowed by the lamp's upturned glow—"when one knows the tricks, of course! And now—if one were not an honest man—a fortune's ours for the taking!"

A wave of his hand indicated the rack of pinholes with which the cavity of the safe was fitted—wide spaces and deep, stored tight with an extraordinary array of leather jewel cases, packets of stout paper bound with tape and sealed, and boxes of wood and pasteboard of every shape and size.

"They were only her finest pieces, her personal jewels, that Madam Omber took with her to England," he explained; "she's mad about them—never separated from them. Perhaps the finest collection of precious stones in the world for size and purity of water. She had the heart to leave these—all this!"

Lifting a hand, he chose at random, dislodged two leather cases, placed them on the floor, and with a blade of his penknife forced their fastenings.

From the first the light smote radiance in blinding, coruscant welter; here was nothing but diamond jewelry, mostly in antique settings.

He took up a piece and offered it to the girl. She drew back her hand involuntarily.

"No!" she protested in a whisper that sounded like one of fright.

"But just look!" he urged. "There's no danger—and you'll never see the like of this again!"

from his pocket that other case which he had brought from London, opened it, and held it aside, beneath the light, for the girl's inspection.

He looked not once either at its contents or at her, fearing lest his countenance betray the truth, that he had not yet succeeded completely in exercising that cautious spirit, the Lone Wolf, from the tenement over which it had so long held sway; and content with the sound of her quick, startled sigh of amazement, that what she now beheld could so marvelously outshine what had been disclosed in the other boxes, he withdrew his hand, shut the case, found place for it in the safe, and without pause closed the door, shot the bolts, and twirled the dial until the tumblers fairly sang.

One final twist of the lever handle convincing him that the combination was effectively dislocated, he rose, picked up the lamp, replaced it on the desk with scrupulous care to leave no sign that it had been moved, and looked round to the girl.

She was where he had left her, a small, tense, vibrant figure among the shadows, her eyes dark pools of wonder in a face of blazing pallor.

With a high head and his shoulders well back he made a gesture significantly more eloquent than any words: "All that is ended!"

As though thereby released from chains of some strange enchantment, she started and came swiftly toward him.

"And now—" she asked breathlessly. "Now to make our getaway," he replied with assumed lightness. "Before dawn we must be clear of Paris. Two minutes, while I straighten this place up and leave it as I found it."

He moved back to the safe, restored the wing of the screen to the spot from which he had moved it and, after an instant's close scrutiny of the rug, began to explore his pockets.

"What are you looking for?" the girl inquired, coming over to him again.

"My memoranda of the combination."

"I have it." She indicated its hiding place in a pocket of her coat. "You left it on the floor, and I was afraid you might forget—"

"No fear!" he laughed. "No"—as she offered him the folded paper—



"What Do You Want, Monsieur?"

"keep it and destroy it once we're out of this. Now those portieres." Extinguishing the desk-light, he turned attention to the draperies at doors and windows.

Within five minutes, leaving every thing as they had found it, the two were once more in the silent streets of Passy.

They had to walk as far as the Place de Trocadero before Lanyard found a cab, which he later dismissed at the corner of the Faubourg St. Germain.

Another brief walk brought them to a gate in the garden wall of a residence situated at the junction of two quiet streets.

"This, I think, ends our Parisian wanderings," Lanyard announced. "If you'll be good enough to keep an eye for busybodies—and yourself as inconspicuous as possible in the recess of this doorway."

And he walked back to the curb, measuring the wall with his eye.

"What are you going to do?"

He responded by doing it so swiftly that she gasped with surprise; pausing momentarily within a yard of the wall he gathered himself together, shot up lightly into the air, caught the top curbing with both hands, and—she heard the soft thud of his feet on the earth of the enclosure, and the latch grated behind her as the door opened.

"For the last time," Lanyard laughed quietly from the aperture, "permit me to invite you to break the law by committing an act of trespass!"

Securing the door, he led her to a garden bench secluded amid conventional shrubbery.

"If you'll wait here," he suggested—"Well, it will be best. I'll be back as soon as possible, though I may be delayed some time. Still, inasmuch as I'm about to break into this house, my motives, which are most commendable, may be misinterpreted, and I'd rather you waited here, with the street at hand. If you hear a noise like trouble you've only to unlatch the gate. But let's trust that my purely benevolent intentions toward the French republic won't be misconstrued!"

"I'll wait," she assured him bravely; "but won't you tell me—"

With a hand he indicated the mansion towering above them.

"I'm going to break in there to pay an early morning call and impart some interesting information to a person of considerable consequence—nobody less, in fact, than M. Ducroy."

"And who is he?"

"The present minister of war. We haven't as yet the pleasure of each other's acquaintance; still I think he won't be sorry to see me. In brief, I mean to make him a present of the Huysman plans and bargain for safe conduct for us both from France."

Impulsively she offered her hand and, when he somewhat diffidently took it, she gave his fingers a firm, compelling pressure with her own.

"Be careful!" she whispered brokenly, her pale, sweet face upturned to his. "Oh, do be careful! I am afraid for you."

And for a moment the temptation to take her in his arms seemed stronger than any he had ever known.

But reminding himself that he had voluntarily stipulated for a year's probation, he released her hand with an incoherent mumble, turned, and hastily disappeared in the direction of the house.

CHAPTER XXI.

Elation and Despair. Established behind his splendid mahogany desk in his office at the ministry of war, or moving majestically abroad attired in frock coat and shining topper, or lending the dignity of his presence to some formal function which appertained unto his office, M. Ducroy sat on an imposing figure.

Ahead—it was sadly otherwise. Lanyard switched on the bedside light, turning it so that it struck full upon the face of the sleeper, and as he sat down he smiled.

The minister of war lay upon his back, his distinguished corpulence severely dislocating the chaste simplicity of the bedclothing. Athwart his shoving chest fat hands were peacefully folded in a gesture affecting naive. His face was red, a noble high-light shone upon the promontory of his bald pate, his mouth was open.

To the best of his unconscious ability he was giving a protracted imitation of a dog fight; and he was really exhibiting sublime virtuosity—one readily distinguished individual howls, growls, yelps against an undertone made up of the blended voices of excited noncombatants.

As suddenly as though someone, wearying of the entertainment, had lifted the needle from that record, it was discontinued. The minister of war stirred uneasily in his sleep, muttered a naughty word, opened one eye, scowled, opened the other.

He blinked furiously, half-blinded but still able to make out the discomposing silhouette of a man seated just beyond the radius of glare—a quiet presence that moved not, but eyed him steadfastly; an apparition the more arresting because of its very immobility.

Rapidly the face of the minister of war lost several shades of purple. He moistened his lips nervously with a thick, dry tongue, and convulsively he clutched the bedclothing high and tight about his neck, as though laboring under the erroneous impression that the sanctity of his person was threatened.

"What do you want, monsieur?" he stammered in a still, small voice which he would have been the last to acknowledge his own.

"I desire to discuss a matter of business with monsieur," replied the intruder after a small pause. "If you will be good enough to calm yourself—"

"I am perfectly calm—"

But here the minister of war verified with one swift glance an earlier impression, to the effect that the trespasser was holding something that shone with a metallic luster, and his soul began to curl up round the edges.

"There are eighteen hundred francs in my pocketbook—about," he managed to articulate. "My watch is on the stand here. You will find the family plate in the dining room safe, behind the buffet—the key is on my ring—and the jewels of madame, my wife, in a small strong box beneath the head of her bed. The combination—"

"Pardon, monsieur labors under a misapprehension," the housebreaker interposed dryly. "Had one desired those valuables one would readily have possessed oneself of them without going to the trouble of disturbing the rest of monsieur. I have, however, already mentioned the nature of my errand."

"Eh?" demanded the minister of war. "What is that? But give me of your mercy one chance to explain! I have never wittingly harmed you, monsieur, and if I have done so without my knowledge, rest assured you have but to petition me through the proper channels and I will be only too glad to make amends!"

"Still you do not listen!" the other insisted. "Come, M. Ducroy—calm yourself. I have not robbed you, because I have no wish to rob you. I have not harmed you, for I have no wish to harm you. Nor have I any wish other than to lay before you, as representing government, a certain matter of state business."

There was silence while the minister of war permitted this exhortation to sink in. Then, apparently reassured, he sat up in bed and eyed his untimely visitor with a glare little short of truculent.

"Eh? What's that?" he demanded. "Business? What sort of business? If you wish to lay under my consideration any matter of business, how is it you break into my home at dead of night and rouse me in this brutal fashion—"

here his voice faltered—"with a lethal weapon pointed at my head?"

"Monsieur will admit he speaks under an error," returned the burglar. "I have yet to point this pistol at him. I should be very sorry to feel obliged to do so. I display it, in fact, simply that monsieur may not forget himself and attempt to summon servants in his resentment of this—I admit—unusual method of introducing oneself to his attention. When we understand each other there will be no need for such precautions, and then I shall put my pistol away, so that the sight of it may no longer annoy monsieur."

"It is true, I do not understand you," grumbled the minister of war. "Why—if your errand be peaceable—break in to my house?"

"Because it was urgently necessary to see monsieur instantly. Monsieur will reflect upon the reception one would receive did one ring the front door bell and demand an audience at three o'clock in the morning!"

"Well—" M. Ducroy conceded dubiously. Then, on reflection, he iterated the monosyllable testily: "Well! What is it you want, then?"

"I can best explain by asking monsieur to examine—what I have to show him."

With this Lanyard dropped the pistol into his coat pocket, from another produced a gold cigarette case, and from the store of this last selected a single cigarette with meticulous care.

Regarding the minister of war in a mystifying manner, he began to roll the cigarette briskly between his palms. A small shower of tobacco cracked and came away; and with a bland smile and gesture of a professional conjuror, Lanyard exhibited a small cylinder of stiff paper between his thumb and index finger.

Goggling resentfully, M. Ducroy spluttered:

"Eh—what impudence is this?"

His smile unchanged, Lanyard bent forward and silently dropped the cylinder into the Frenchman's hand. At the same time he offered him a pocket magnifying glass.

"What is this?" Ducroy persisted stupidly. "What—what—"

"If monsieur will be good enough to unroll the papers and examine them with the aid of this glass—"

With a wondering grunt M. Ducroy complied, smoothing out several small sheets of photographer's printing-out paper, to which extraordinarily complicated and minute designs had been transferred—strongly resembling laborious efforts to conventionalize a spider's web.

But no sooner had M. Ducroy focused upon them the magnifying glass than he started violently, uttered an excited exclamation and subjected the papers to an examination both prolonged and exacting.

"Monsieur is no doubt now satisfied?" Lanyard inquired, when his patience would endure no longer.

"These are genuine!" the minister of war demanded sharply, without looking up.

"Monsieur can readily discern notations made upon the drawings by the inventor, George Huysman, in his own hand. Furthermore, each plan has been marked in the lower left-hand corner with the word 'accepted,' followed by the initials of the German minister of war. I think this establishes beyond dispute the authenticity of these photographs of the plans for Huysman's invention."

"Yes," the other agreed breathlessly. "You have the negatives from which these prints were made?"

"Here," Lanyard said, indicating a second cigarette.

And then, with a movement so leisurely and careless that his purpose was accomplished before the other in his preoccupation was aware of it, the adventurer leaned forward and swept up the prints from the counterpane in front of M. Ducroy.

"Here!" the Frenchman exclaimed. "Why do you do that?"

"Monsieur no longer questions their authenticity?"

"I grant you that."

"Then I return to myself these prints, pending negotiations for their transfer to France."

"How did you come by them?" demanded M. Ducroy, after a moment's thought.

"Need monsieur ask? Is France so ill-served by her spies that you do not already know of the misfortune recently suffered in London by one Captain Ekstrom?"

Ducroy shook his head. Lanyard received this indication with impatience it seemed hardly possible that the French minister of war could be either so stupid or so ignorant. But with a patient shrug he proceeded to elucidate.

"Captain Ekstrom," he explained "but recently succeeded in photographing these plans and took them to London to sell to the English. Unfortunately for himself—unhappily for perfidious Albion!—Captain Ekstrom fell in with me and mistook me for Downing street's representative. And here are the plans."

"You are—the Lone Wolf—then?"

"I am, monsieur—simply as concerns you, the person in possession of these plans, and who offers them through you, to France, for a price."

"But why introduce yourself to me in this extraordinary fashion to consummate a transaction for which the ordinary channels with which you must be familiar are entirely adequate?"

"Simply because Ekstrom has followed me to Paris," Lanyard explained indulgently. "Did I venture to approach you through the customary channels, my chances of rounding out a useful life thereafter would be practically nil. Furthermore, my circum-

stances are such that it has become necessary for me to leave France immediately—without an hour's delay—also secretly; else I might as well remain here to be butchered. Now you command the only means I know of to accomplish my purpose. And that is the price, the only price, you will have to pay me for these plans."

"I don't understand you."

"It is on schedule, is it not, that Captain Vauquelin of the aviation corps is to attempt a nonstop flight from Paris to London this morning, via two songers, in a new Parrott biplane?"

"That is so. Well?"

"I must be one of those passengers and I have a companion, a young lady who will take the place of the other."

"It isn't possible, monsieur. The arrangements are already fixed."

"You will countermand them."

"But there is no time—"

"You can get into telephonic communication with Port Aviation in two minutes."

"But the passengers have already been promised—"

"You will disappoint them."

"The start is to be made in the first flush of daylight. How could you reach Port Aviation in time?"

"In your motor car, monsieur."

"It cannot be done."

"It must! If the start must be delayed until we arrive, you will give orders that it shall be so delayed."

For a minute the minister of war hesitated; then he shook his head definitely.

"The difficulties are insuperable—"

"There is no such thing, monsieur."

"I am sorry; it can't be done."

"That is your answer?"

"It is regrettable, monsieur."

"Very well!" Lanyard bent forward again, took a match from the stand on the bedside table, and struck it. Very calmly he advanced the flame toward the cigarette containing the roll of inflammable films.

"Monsieur!" Ducroy cried in horror. "What are you doing?"

Lanyard favored him with a look of surprise.

"I am about to destroy these films and prints."

"You must never do that!"

"Why not? They are mine, to do with as I like. If I cannot dispose of them at my price, I shall destroy them!"

"But—my God!—what you demand is impossible! Stay, monsieur! Think what your action means to France!"

"I have already thought of that. Now I must think of myself."

"But—one moment!"

Ducroy sat up in bed and dangled fat legs over the side.

"But one moment only, monsieur. Don't make me waste your matches!"

"Monsieur, it shall be as you desire, if it lies in my power to accomplish it."

With this the minister of war stood up and made for the telephone, in his agitation heedless of dressing-gown and slippers.

"You must accomplish it, M. Ducroy," Lanyard advised him gravely, puffing out the flame; "for if you fail, you make yourself the instrument of my death. Here are the plans."

"You trust them to me?" Ducroy asked in astonishment.

"But naturally—that makes it an affair of your honor," Lanyard explained suavely.

With a gesture of graceful capitulation the Frenchman accepted the little roll of films.

"Permit me," he said, "to acknowledge the honor of monsieur's confidence."

Lanyard bowed low and gravely.

"One knows with whom one deals, monsieur! And now! if you will be good enough to excuse me."

He turned to the door.

"But—eh—where are you going?"

"Mademoiselle," Lanyard said, pausing on the threshold—"that is, the young lady who will accompany us—is waiting anxiously in the garden out yonder. I go to find and reassure her and—with monsieur's permission—to bring her into the library, where we will await monsieur when he has finished telephoning and—ah—repaired the deficiencies in his attire, which one trusts he will forgive one's mentioning!"

He bowed again, impudently, gayly and—when the minister of war looked up again sheepishly from contemplation of his naked shanks—had vanished.

In high feather Lanyard was making his way down to a door at the rear of the house which gave upon the garden—in his new social status of governmental protege disdaining any such a commonplace avenue as the conservatory window whose fastener he had forced on entering. And, boldly jabbing the door, he ran out into the night to rejoin his beloved, like a new man walking to new life.

But she was no more there—the bench was vacant, the garden deserted, the gateway yawning to the street.

With the low, curt cry of one staggered by a brutal blow from a trusted hand, Lanyard turned from the bench and stumbled out of the garden and to the junction with the cross street. But nowhere in the compass of their perspectives could he see anything that moved.

After some time he returned to the garden and quartered it with the thoroughness of a pointer beating a covert. But he did this hopelessly, bitterly aware that the outcome would be precisely what it eventually was—that is to say, nothing.

He was kneeling beside the bench—

(Continued Next Week)

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