

The CZAR'S SPY

The Mystery of a Silent Love

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CHAPTER XVI—Continued.

"Well, the only Russian who appeared to have any connection with them was Baron Oberg, the governor general of Finland, whose habit it was to spend part of the winter in the Mediterranean. From Elma Heath's conversation at dinner that evening at Nice I gathered that she and her uncle had been guests on the Iris on several occasions, although I must say that Muriel was extremely reticent regarding all that concerned the yacht."

"Of course," she said quickly. "Now that I have told you the truth, Jack, don't you think it was only natural?"

"Most certainly, dear," he answered, still holding her hand. "Yours was not a secret that you could very well tell to me until you could thoroughly trust me, especially as your father had been implicated in the theft of those documents from Malta. The truth is," he said, turning to me, "Phillip Leithcourt has all along been the catspaw of Baron Oberg. A few years ago he was a well-known money lender in the city, and in that capacity met the baron, who, being in disgrace, required a loan. He was also in the habit of having certain shady transactions with that daring gang of continental thieves of whom Dick Archer and Hylton Chater were leaders. For this reason he purchased a yacht for their use, so that they might not only use it for the purpose of storing the stolen goods, but for the purpose of sailing from place to place under the guise of wealthy Englishmen traveling for pleasure. Upon that vessel, indeed, was stored thousands and thousands of pounds' worth of jewels and objects of value, the proceeds of many great robberies in England, France and Belgium. Sometimes they traveled for the purpose of disposing of the jewels in various inland towns where the gems, having been recut, were not recognized, while at other times, Chater and Archer, assisted by Mackintosh, the captain, and Olinto Santini, the steward, sailed for a port, landed, committed a robbery, and then sailed away again, quite unsuspected, as rich Englishmen."

"And the crew?" I asked, after a pause.

"They were, of course, well paid, and were kept in ignorance of what the supposed owner and his friends did ashore."

"But Oberg's connection with it?" I asked, surprised at those revelations.

"Ah!" exclaimed Muriel. "The ingenuity of that crafty villain is fensh. Before he got into the czar's favor he owed my father a large sum, and then sought how to evade repayment. By means of his spies he discovered the real purpose of the cruises of the Iris—for I was often taken on board with a maid in order to allay any suspicion that might arise if only men were cruising. Then he not only compelled my father to cancel the debt, but he impressed the vessel and those who owned and navigated it into the secret service of Russia. A dozen times did we make attempts to obtain secret papers from Italian, French and English dockyards, but only once in the case of Malta and once at Toulon did we succeed. Ah! Mr. Gregg," she added, "you do not know all the anxiety I suffered, how at every hour we were in danger of betrayal or capture, and of the hundred narrow escapes we have had of customhouse officers rummaging the yacht for contraband. You will no doubt recollect the sensation caused by the theft of the jewels of the Princess Wilhelmine of Schaumbourg-Lippe from the lady's maid in the rapide between Cannes and Les Arcs, the robbery from the Marseilles branch of the Credit Lyonnais, and the great haul of plate from the chateau of Bardou, the Paris millionaire, close to Arcachon."

"Yes," I said, for they were all robberies of which I had read in the newspapers a couple of years before.

"Well," she said, "they were all committed by Archer or Woodroffe and his gang—with accomplices ashore, of course—and never once did it seem that any suspicion fell upon us. While the police were frantically searching hither and thither, we used to weigh anchor and calmly steam away with our booty on board. We had with us an old Dutch lapidary, and one of the cabins was fitted as a workshop, where he altered the appearance of the stones, and prepared them ready for sale while the gold

was melted in a crucible and put ashore to be sent to agents in Hamburg."

"But that night in Leghorn?" I said.

"What happened to poor Elma?"

"I do not know," was Muriel's reply.

"We were both on board together, and standing at the crack of the door watched you sitting at dinner that evening. The instant, however, you went ashore, Chater, Woodroffe—whom you called Hornby—and Mackintosh, the captain—who, by the way, was an old ticket-of-leave man—went ashore, and, of course, broke into the consulate. Then, as soon as they returned, Elma came to my cabin, awoke me, and said that the baron was taking her ashore, and that they were to travel overland back to London. She was ready dressed to go. I kissed her, and promising to meet her soon, we parted. That was the last I saw of her. What happened to her afterwards only she alone can tell us."

"But she is not the baron's niece?" I said.

"No. There is some mystery," declared Muriel. "She holds some secret which he fears she may divulge. But of what nature, I am in ignorance."

"You say that your father has never taken any active part in the robberies? Where is he now?" I asked.

"Ah!" she exclaimed sadly, her face pale and haggard.

"I have heard that the vessel was scuttled somewhere in the Baltic."

"That is true. Oberg's purpose having been served, he demanded half the property on board or he would give notice to the Russian naval authorities that the pirate yacht was afloat. He attempted to blackmail my father, as he had already done so many times, but his scheme was frustrated. My father, because of his inhuman treatment of poor Elma, defied him, when it appears that Oberg, who was in Helsingfors, telegraphed to the admiral of the Russian fleet in the Baltic. The crew from the Iris were at once landed at Riga, and only Mackintosh and my father put to sea again. Ah! my father was desperate, for he knew the merciless character of that man whose victim he had been for so long. They watched a Russian cruiser bearing down upon them, when, just as it drew near, they got off in a boat and blew up the yacht, which sank in three minutes with its ill-obtained wealth on board."

"And your father?"

She was silent, and I saw tears standing in her eyes.

"There was a tragedy," Jack explained in a low, hoarse voice. "He and the captain did not, unfortunately, get sufficiently far from the yacht when they blew her up, and they went down with her."

And I looked in silence at Muriel, who stood with her head bent and her white face covered with her hands.

Almost at the same moment there was a low tap at the door, and the servant maid announced:

"Mr. Santini, miss."

"Ah!" exclaimed Jack quickly, as Olinto entered the room. "Then you had my note! We have asked you here to reveal to us this dastardly plot which seemed to have been formed against Mr. Gregg and myself. As you know, I've had a narrow escape."

"I know, signore. And the signor commendatore is also threatened."

"By whom?"

"By those who killed my poor wife, and who intended also to silence me," was his answer.

"The same who compelled you to take me to that house where the fatal chair was prepared, eh?"

"It was Archer, who, fearing that you came to London in search of them, devised that devilish contrivance," he said in his broken English. Then continuing, he went on fiercely: "Now that I have discovered why my poor Armida was killed, I will tell the truth, and not spare them. Since you left Scotland, signore, I have been up in Dumfries, and have discovered several facts which prove that for some reason known only to himself, Leithcourt, while at Rannoch, wrote to both Armida and myself separately, making an appointment to see us at the same time at that spot on the edge of the wood, as he had some secret commission to entrust to us. The letter addressed to me apparently fell into someone else's hands—probably one of the secret agents of Baron Oberg, who were always watching Leithcourt's doings, and he, anxious to learn what was intended, made

himself up to look like me, and kept the appointment in my place. Armida, having received the letter unknown to me, went up to Scotland, and was also there at the appointed time. What actually transpired can only be surmised, yet it seems that Leithcourt was in the habit of going up to that spot and loitering there in the evening in order to meet Chater in secret, as the latter was in hiding in a small hotel in Dumfries. Therefore those who formed the plot must have endeavored to throw suspicion upon Leithcourt. It is plain, however, as both myself and Armida knew the gang, it was to their interest to get rid of us, because the suspicions of the police had at last become aroused. Poor Armida was therefore deliberately enticed there to her death, while the inquisitive man whom the assassin took to be myself was also struck down."

"By whom?"

"Not by Chater, for he was in London on that night."

"Then by Woodroffe?" Durnford said.

"Without a doubt. It was all most cleverly thought out. It was to his advantage alone to close our lips, because in that same fatal chair in Lambeth old Jacob Moser, the Jew bullion broker of Hatton Garden, met his death—a most dastardly crime, with which none of his friends were associated, and of which we alone held knowledge. He therefore wrote to us as though from Leithcourt, calling us up to Rannoch, in order to strike the blows in the darkness," he added in his peculiar Italian manner. "Besides, he feared we would tell the signore the truth."

"You have not told the police?"

"I dare not, signore. Surely the less the police know about this matter the better, otherwise the Signorina Leithcourt must suffer for her father's avarice and evil-doing."

"Yes," cried Jack anxiously. "That's right, Olinto. The police must know nothing. The reprisals we must make ourselves. But who was it who shot me in Suffolk street?"

"The same man, Martin Woodroffe."

"Then the assassin is back from Russia?"

"He followed closely behind the Signor Commendatore, Markoff, a clever secret agent of Baron Oberg's, came with him."

Then for the first time I recollected that the man I had recognized in the Strand was a fellow I had seen lounging in the anteroom of the palace of the governor-general of Finland. The pair, fearing that I should reveal what I knew, were undoubtedly in London to take my life in secret. Now that Leithcourt was dead, Woodroffe had united forces with Oberg, and intended to silence me because they feared that Elma, besides escaping them, had also revealed her secret.

"I trust that the Signorina Leithcourt has explained the story of the yacht and its crew," Olinto remarked.

"And has also shown you how I was implicated. You will therefore discern the reason why I have hitherto feared to give you any explanation."

"Yes," I said, "Miss Leithcourt has told me a great deal, but not everything. I cannot yet gather for what reason she and her father fled from Rannoch."

"Then I will tell you," said Muriel quickly. "My father suspected Woodroffe of being the assassin in Rannoch wood, for he knew that he had broken away from the original compact, and had now allied himself with Oberg. Yet it was also my father's object to appear in fear of them, because he was only awaiting an opportunity to lay plans for poor Elma's rescue from Finland. Therefore one evening Woodroffe called, and my father encountered him in the avenue, and admitted him with his own latchkey by one of the side doors of the castle, afterwards taking him up to the study. He knew that he had come to try and make terms for Oberg, therefore he saw that he must fly at once to Newcastle, where the Iris was lying, get on board, and sail away."

"With some excuse he left him in the study, and then warned my mother and myself to prepare to leave. But while we were packing, it appeared that Chater, who had followed, was shown into the study by the butler, or rather he entered there himself, being well acquainted with the house. Thus the two men, now bitter enemies met. A fierce quarrel must have ensued, and Chater was poisoned and concealed, Woodroffe, of course, believing he had killed him. My father entered the study again, and seeing only Woodroffe there, did not know what had occurred. Some words probably arose, when my father again turned and left. Then we fled to Carlisle and on to Newcastle, and next morning were on board the yacht out in the North sea, afterwards landing at Rotterdam. Those," she added, "are briefly the facts, as my poor father related them to me."

"And what of poor Elma—and of her secret? When, I wonder, shall I see her?" I cried in despair.

"You will see her now, signore," answered Olinto. "A servant of the

Princess Zurloff brought her to London this afternoon, and I have just conveyed her from the station. She is in the next room, in ignorance, however, that you are here."

And without another word I fled forward joyfully, and threw open the folding doors which separated me from my silent love.

Silent, yes! But she could, nevertheless, tell her story—surely the strangest that any woman has ever lived to tell.

CHAPTER XVII.

Contains Elma's Story.

Before me stood my love, a slim, tragic, rather wan figure in a heavy dark travelling coat and felt toque, her sweet lips parted and a look of bewildered amazement upon her countenance as I burst in so suddenly upon her.

In silence I grasped her tiny black-gloved hand, and then, also in silence, raised it passionately to my eager lips. Her soft, dark eyes—those eyes that spoke although she was mute—met mine, and in them was a look that I had never seen there before—a look which as plainly as any words told me that my wild fevered passion was reciprocated.

She gazed beyond into the room where the others had assembled, and then looked at me inquiringly, whereupon I led her forward to where they were, and Muriel fell upon her and kissed her with tears streaming from her eyes.

"I prepared this surprise for you, Mr. Gregg," Muriel said, laughing through her tears of joy. "Olinto learned that she was on her way to London, and I sent him to meet her. The princess has managed magnificently, has she not?"

"Yes. Thank God she is free!" I exclaimed. "But we must induce her to tell us everything."

Muriel was already helping my love out of her heavy Russian coat, a costly garment lined with sable, and when, after greeting Jack and Olinto, she was comfortably seated, I took some notepaper from the little writing table by the window and scribbled in pencil the words:

"I need not write how delighted I am that you are safe—that the Almighty has heard my prayers for you. Jack and Muriel have told me all

about Leithcourt and his scoundrelly associates. I know, too, dear—for I may call you that, may I not?—how terribly you must have suffered in silence through it all. Leithcourt is dead. He sank the yacht with all the stolen property on board, but by accident was himself engulfed."

Bending and watching intently as I wrote, she drew back in horror and surprise at the words. Then I added: "We are all four determined that the guilty shall not go unpunished, and that the affliction placed upon you shall be adequately avenged. You are my own love—I am bold enough to call you so. Some strong but mysterious bond of affinity between us caused me to seek you out, and your pictured face seemed to call me to your side although I was unaware of your peril. I was sent to you by the unseen power to extricate you from the hands of your enemies. Therefore tell us everything—all that you know—without fear, for now that we are united no harm can assail us."

She took the pencil, and holding it in her white fingers sat staring first at us, and then looking hesitatingly at the white paper before her. Her position, amid a hundred conflicting emotions, was one of extreme difficulty. It seemed as though even now she



And Threw Open the Folding Door Which Separated Me From My Silent Love.

about Leithcourt and his scoundrelly associates. I know, too, dear—for I may call you that, may I not?—how terribly you must have suffered in silence through it all. Leithcourt is dead. He sank the yacht with all the stolen property on board, but by accident was himself engulfed."

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She took the pencil, and holding it in her white fingers sat staring first at us, and then looking hesitatingly at the white paper before her. Her position, amid a hundred conflicting emotions, was one of extreme difficulty. It seemed as though even now she

was loath to reveal to us the absolute truth.

Muriel, standing behind her chair, tenderly stroked back the wealth of chestnut hair from her white brow. Her complexion was perfect, even though her face was pale and jaded, and her eyes heavy, consequent upon her long, weary journey from the now frozen North.

Presently, when by signs both Jack and Olinto had urged her to write, she bent suddenly, and her pencil began to run swiftly over the paper.

All of us stood exchanging glances in silence, neither looking over her, but each determined to wait in patience until the end. Once started, however, she did not pause. Sheet after sheet she covered. The silence for a long time was complete, broken only by the rapid running of the pencil over the rough surface of the paper. She had apparently become seized by a sudden determination to explain everything, now that she saw we were in real, dead earnest.

I watched her sweet face bent so intently, and as the frelight tell across it found it incomparable. Yes; she was afflicted by loss of speech, it was true, yet she was surely inexpressibly sweet and womanly, peerless above all others.

With a deep-drawn sigh she at last finished, and, her head still bowed in an attitude of humiliation, it seemed, she handed what she had written to me.

In breathless eagerness I read as follows:

"Is it true, dear love—for I call you so in return—that you were impelled towards me by the mysterious hand that directs all things? You came in search of me, and you risked your life for mine at Kajana, therefore you have a right to know the truth. You, as my champion, and the princess as my friend, have contrived to effect my freedom. Were it not for you, I should ere this have been on my way to Saghalien, to the tomb to which Oberg had so ingeniously contrived to consign me. Ah! you do not know—you never can know—all that I have suffered ever since I was a girl."

Here the statement broke off, and recommenced as follows:

"In order that you should understand the truth, I had better begin at the beginning. My father was an English merchant in Petersburg, and my mother, Vera Bessanoff, who, before her marriage with my father, was celebrated at court for her beauty, and was one of the maids of honor to the czarina. She was the only daughter of Count Paul Bessanoff, ex-governor of Kharkoff, and before marrying my father she had, with her mother, been a well-known figure in society. Immediately after her marriage her father died, leaving her in possession of an ample fortune, which with my father's own wealth, placed them among the richest and most influential in Petersburg.

"Among my father's most intimate friends was Baron Xavier Oberg—who, at that time, held a very subordinate position in the ministry of the interior—and from my earliest recollections I can remember him coming frequently to our house and being invited to the brilliant entertainments which my mother gave. When I was thirteen, however, my father died of a chill contracted while boar-hunting on his estate in Kiev, and within a few months a further disaster happened to us. One night, while I was sitting alone reading aloud to my mother, two strangers were announced, and on being shown in they arrested my dear mother on a charge of complicity in a revolutionary plot against the czar which had been discovered at Peterhof. I stood defiant and indignant, for my mother was certainly no nihilist, yet they said that the bomb had been introduced into the palace by the Countess Anna Shiproff, one of the ladies-in-waiting, who was an intimate friend of my mother's and often used to visit her. They alleged that the conspiracy had been hatched in our house, color being lent to that theory by the fact that a year before a well-known Russian with whom my father had had many business dealings had been proved to be the author of the plot by which the czar's train was blown up near Livadia. They tore my mother away from me and placed her in the gray prison-van, the sight of which in the streets of Petersburg strikes terror into the heart of every Russian, for a person once in that rumbling vehicle is, as you know, lost forever to the world. I watched her from the window being placed in that fatal conveyance, and then I think I must have fainted, for I recollect nothing more until I found myself upon the floor, with the gray dawn spreading, and all the horrible truth came back to me. My mother was gone from me forever!

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Didn't Break Her Word. "Maud married! Why only last June she told me she wouldn't marry the best man that walks the earth."

"That's all right; the man she married rides in an automobile."