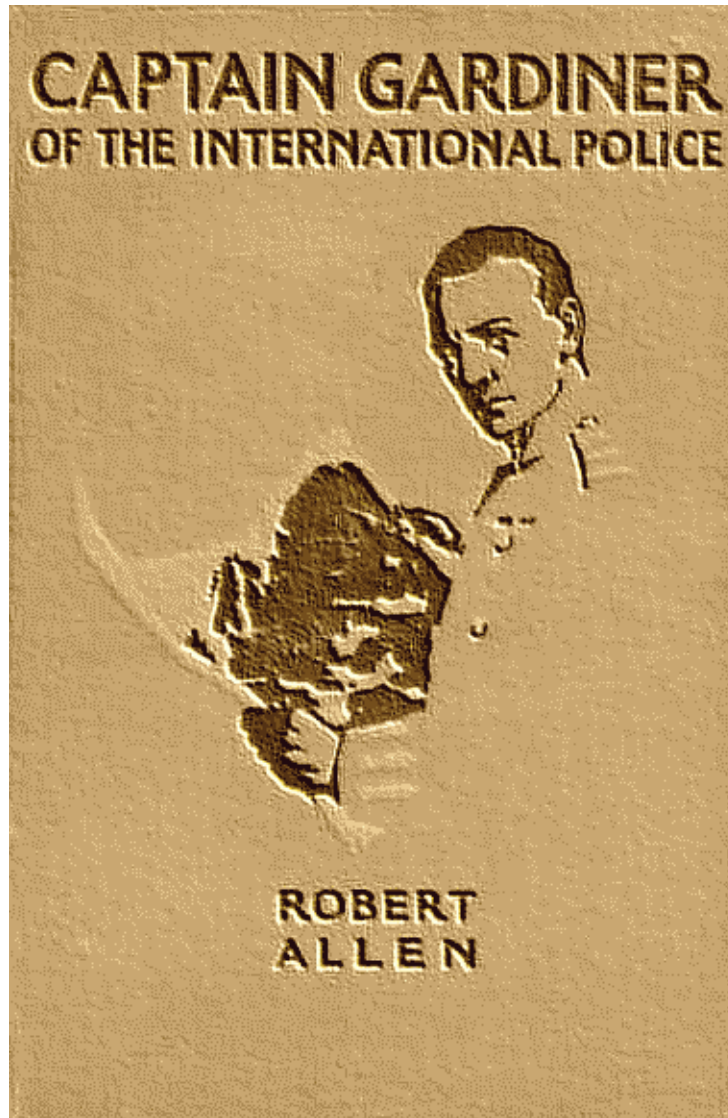


Captain Gardiner of the International Police A Secret Service Novel of the Future

Robert Allen (Allen Robert Dodd)
1916



Chapter I - Mrs. Thornton Gives A Dance

It was on one of the hottest nights of that unusually hot September that Mrs. Thornton gave a dance. The moist, lifeless air enveloped the earth like a heavy cloak and even the carefully shaded lights failed to conceal the lines of heat-weariness in the jaded faces of the guests. To Evelyn Thornton, in whose honour the affair was ostensibly held, the feverish rooms presently became unbearable, and abandoning the arduous duties of hostess to her mother and her younger and more energetic sister Mabel, she took refuge in the darkness of the small easterly veranda overlooking the beach. Light mist wreaths dimmed the splendid moonlight and gave a ghostly quality to the scene which transformed the indistinct line of the breakwater and its lighthouse into a monster of gigantic dimensions, gazing seaward with a baleful blood-red eye, and made of the commonplace tramp steamer labouring southward down the coast a veritable Flying Dutchman.

"Oh, bother!" exclaimed Evelyn crossly; "I do believe that it's hotter out here than it is inside."

"That's merely the illogicalness of overwrought sensibilities, my dear girl," replied a voice, seemingly at her very elbow; "I think you'll find if you stay out here --"

"Of course that isn't what I meant exactly," the girl corrected herself hastily. "What I meant was-- now I know you're laughing at me!" For the Captain's broad smile, which he had successfully managed to conceal in the darkness, had given way to unmistakably mirthful symptoms.

"Please forgive me," he begged, as soon as he could regain his composure. "I've heard I don't know how many girls try to describe Jim offhand and I must say that most of them didn't even get as far as you did."

"He is an awfully baffling sort of an individual to analyse," agreed Evelyn, mollified. "Please tell me what you think he is."

"Isn't what you mean," said the Captain after a slight hesitation, "that although he's the kind of person you can always depend upon you feel that under his ordinary manner there's a power and force of character that you're conscious is there but have never seen because the proper circumstances have never arisen to call it forth?"

"Perhaps you're right," she returned thoughtfully. "But when all's said and done, I can't help thinking of Jimmy as a man that very few girls would ever dream of falling in love with, but any girl would be fortunate to have for a friend. Now don't run right off and tell him that," she added hastily. "I don't suppose I really should have said it. But it's impossible for me to regard you as an absolute stranger after hearing Jimmy sing your praises so often. I imagine it's poor diplomacy to admit it, but for a long time I've had the most overpowering curiosity to find out what you were like and" -- with some hesitation-- "why you ever adopted your present profession."

"You consider it such a strange one for a man to take up?" asked the Captain.

"For a man with the intellectual gifts that Jimmy says you have--yes."

"Then you believe I'd be of more use to humanity in the literary field or something of that kind than as an officer of the International Police?"

"I've often wondered," said Evelyn, with apparent irrelevance, "just what use the International Police were to the human race anyhow."

"I suppose you know what the men rather irreverently call the 'Police Creed,'" replied the Captain--"To preserve the integrity of the civilised world; to uphold International treaties and agreements; to protect trade routes and lines of communication between the nations; to guard International peace and welfare.' Aren't those matters of some importance to humanity?"

"I never heard that before," said the girl. "Yes, those things are all essential. But does it

require such an expensive army and navy to secure them? Since the War of the Nations there's hardly been a ripple on the surface of the world's peace and I don't believe there ever will be in the future. Humanity learned its lesson then and it isn't likely to forget it. At least, you won't find many thinking people who will admit the possibility of any disturbance arising in years to come of sufficient magnitude to justify the maintenance of so large a force as the International Police. The world is too well satisfied with the benefits of peace and progress to ever want to interrupt them."

"That sounds like my old friend Doctor Everard," remarked the Captain with some amusement. "Did you study under him at Vassar?"

"It is Doctor Everard," admitted Evelyn, flushing slightly. "But I thoroughly believe in what he says, and I don't think I'm the only one."

"No," said the Captain, "you're not--unfortunately."

"Why 'unfortunately'? Do you believe there'll ever be another war?"

"Yes," he replied quietly, "I do."

"But the civilised nations--"

"I wasn't talking about the civilised nations necessarily."

"Well," said Evelyn meditatively, "you know what Doctor Everard says about the Eastern situation. 'By no flight of the imagination whatsoever can we conclude that the Oriental nations can ever constitute a menace to the civilised, Christian world. Even were they capable of threatening us by their power and organisation, the rapid advances that civilisation and Christianity are making throughout the Far East, the recognition of the substantial material benefits that peace and concord bring by the educated classes of the Oriental world, and the enormous potential power of the western nations would check any tendency to disturb present conditions even if the International Federation had no armed force whatever at its disposal.'"

The Captain made a gesture of humorous helplessness. "I never attempt to argue with a disciple of Everard," he said. "He's too plausible."

"Naturally," returned the girl in a satisfied tone, "because you can't. That's just the way with all you horrid old pessimists. You hint at awful impending disasters of all kinds, but you haven't got a single sound argument to back your statements up with."

"I sincerely trust you are right," said the Captain soberly. "But it's just because I'm not satisfied in my own mind that you and Everard and the rest that think as you do are right, that I'm holding to my present job."

"Of course," agreed Evelyn a little stiffly. "Every one's entitled to his or her own opinion."

"Just so," assented the Captain, and catching the note of irritation in her voice, hastened to change the subject. "And speaking of the East in general, isn't that moonlight the most glorious thing you ever saw?"

A light breeze had sprung up while they were talking, and blown the thin haze aside and the round circle of the moon now poured a path of splendour across the water to their very feet. The Captain arose and moved to the low railing of the veranda, where he stood drinking in the grateful breeze in long breaths. Evelyn came to his side and followed his gaze out over the gently heaving ocean.

"It isn't going to last long," she said, pointing to the horizon, where a narrow bank of black cloud glowed at long intervals with the dull illumination of distant lightning.

"It reminds me a little of the subject of our talk," said the Captain thoughtfully. "This beautiful, peaceful moonlight night with that storm cloud piling up slowly off there where only a few people notice it now. And plenty of people won't see it until it's too late."

In spite of herself, Evelyn shivered slightly. She felt disturbed and uncomfortable and half angry with her companion for the unaccountable manner in which his words had upset her

composure. She was about to suggest that they return to the ballroom, when a sudden burst of merriment stopped her, which was followed an instant later by the precipitate entrance of Jimmy Merriam and her sister Mabel upon the veranda.

"Every one's busy having a good time in there," explained the younger girl, replacing a stray strand of her dark hair with a gesture wholly feminine and correspondingly alluring, "so they don't need us any more and Jimmy and I are going out in the motor boat for a little while. Better come along and be chaperon or Jimmy'll be proposing to me again. He's done it five times already this evening."

"She said she'd never experienced the pleasure of rejecting any one," said Merriam with a good-natured smile, "so I thought it would be a shame to have her miss any fun if I could give it to her."

Mabel Thornton laughed again and gave her escort a friendly pat on his plump shoulder. She possessed what her sister lacked to a great extent--a keen sense of humour, which often made her both the despair and admiration of the more serious Evelyn.

"Do you think it's safe with that storm coming up?" asked the Captain.

Merriam turned a weather eye on the distant cloud bank and studied it for a few seconds in silence.

"That won't arrive for a couple of hours yet," he said finally. "We'll just run around inside the breakwater for a while and scoot for home when it gets close."

"I'll take your word for it," said the Captain. "You're the nautical member of the party. Shall I get your cloak, Miss Thornton?"

"I think Mabs has it," returned Evelyn. "Thank you--" as the Captain adjusted the garment about her shoulders.

It was only a step to the boathouse and the party were soon slipping easily over the long swells as the swift little craft headed for the steady red glare on the end of the breakwater. Evelyn and the Captain sat silently in the stern, drinking in the glory of the night, while at the steering wheel Mabel and Jimmy discussed affairs in low tones. Intent on the pleasure of the moment, they scarcely noticed that the breakwater had been left astern and it was not until the breeze suddenly died away that Merriam, looking up, noticed that the cloud bank had enlarged until it now covered nearly half the sky. He rapidly spun the wheel and the obedient little cockle-shell careened as she turned and headed back at full speed for the far-off shore line.

"We've plenty of time to make it," he observed reassuringly, as they shot past the red beacon on the breakwater. "Is it all right to cut straight across, Mabs?"

"I don't believe I would, Jim," she advised. "There isn't an awful lot of water over those shoals and the tide's still running out."

Merriam glanced at the clouds, now rapidly mounting towards the brilliant moon and then out across the level expanse in front of him.

"I guess I'll chance it," he said, as the wheel turned in his hands. "There ought to be three feet at dead low water and this boat could run in a gutter without hitting anything."

They sped on for some moments in silence.

"Jim," said Mabel anxiously. "I'd keep further out if I were you. There's a good deal too much weed around here for comfort."

"Don't you worry, young lady," returned the helmsman. "We're practically across now--"

A splintering concussion tore them from their seats. The light boat almost stopped, jumped forward again, and finally came to rest, her propeller grinding helplessly on the hard rock that held her. Merriam, with undisturbed presence of mind, shut off the motor.

"Well," observed Mabel, breaking the silence, "you've done it now."

Evelyn and the Captain came forward. "She's leaking pretty badly in the stern," the latter

explained.

"I don't think there's much danger of sinking," said Mabel rather grimly, "if that's any consolation to us."

"It isn't that," said Merriam. "Look there!" He pointed upward. "In five minutes more it'll be dark as the inside of your hat. I can think without any effort at all of half-a-dozen places I'd rather be in than this boat when that squall breaks."

"It don't look very far to shore," the Captain suggested.

"It's not," Mabel agreed. "But most of the way you'll have fifteen feet of water under you. Eve can't swim any too well and we neither of us can do much in these clothes. Besides, the storm's pretty sure to break when we're about halfway over."

Merriam kicked off his pumps rapidly and began tugging at the collar of his dress shirt.

"You'd better come with me, Mabs," he ordered briefly. "I'm not as good a swimmer as Les and you can swim better than Eve. It's our only chance and if we don't hurry, it won't be even that much."

Evelyn, confused by the sudden rush of events, did not notice that the Captain had quickly followed his friend's example. But now he stood before her on the treacherous ledge, clad only in his shirt and trousers, the water up to his ankles. She understood the silent command in his eyes and giving him her hands, stepped over the low gunwale of the boat into the warm water. He grasped her firmly by the arm and led her forward into the gathering darkness. Once he called to the pair ahead, "Does it go off suddenly?"

And when the answer came back, "No, it shelves off," he said to her, "When we get into deeper water, do you think you could get rid of your skirt?"

She shook her head mutely and trembled very much as she felt the wet caress of the water rise to her knees, then to her waist, then to her breast. Then the Captain stopped and she heard his voice, quiet and steady, in her ear. "Put your hand on my shoulder and hold tight. Whatever happens, don't try to get your arms around my neck. You understand?"

She was too frightened to reply, but her silence seemed to satisfy him. She felt him draw her hand over his shoulder and her fingers instinctively gripped the folds of his shirt. Then her feet were lifted off the rocky floor of the reef, and she floated helplessly on the black void.

At that instant, the storm broke.

Chapter II - The Men Who Rule The World

LONDON. A high, vaulted room into which the daylight streams through many tall, pointed windows. The bare stone walls are wainscotted halfway up and on the dark woodwork hang many paintings, all depicting events connected with the founding of the International Federation. There is the "Signing of the Treaty of Geneva" by Fortier, the obscure French artist, who became famous in a single day. There is Hartmann's celebrated group of the "First Commissioners of the Federation." There is even that much-discussed picture "The Peace of Berlin" by an unknown hand, which brought ever-increasing sums at the sales until Greene, the American capitalist, presented it to the High Commission. At one end of the long hall, over the great bronze doors, Commerce gazes with stony eyes at the scene below. At the other end, Justice and Peace stand on either side of the huge fireplace. Over the fireplace itself are the arms of the Federation in hammered steel taken from the last gun to be fired in the War of the Nations.

Down the centre of the hall runs a long table of polished mahogany at which are seated twenty-five men. To the careful observer, their faces are of much interest, for among them can be seen the lofty forehead of the thinker and the keen eyes of the man of affairs, the placid countenance of the dreamer and the furrowed features of the scientist, the baffling mask of the diplomat and the firm, set mouth of one accustomed to command. Every race is represented here, from the fairest of the Saxons to the darkest of the Latins, for these are the High Commissioners of the International Federation of civilised nations -- the men who rule the world.

If the reader were familiar with the usual calm which presided over the meetings of this august assemblage, he could not fail to observe that today a spirit of restlessness seemed to pervade the gathering. Only the voice of the President, an iron-grey man of over seventy years, continued calm and unhurried through the routine business of the day. Presently when the mass of papers at the upper end of the long table had melted away to a few scattered sheets, a watchful secretary deposited a small pile of documents before the President and a slight stir ran through the throng as though an event long waited for had arrived.

"We have now to consider, gentlemen," went on the steady voice; "the question of reducing the body known as the International Police, which, as you are aware, is the active agent of this Commission and of the International Federation. A referendum has been held in six of the most powerful members of the Federation, to wit: Great Britain, the United States of America, France, Prussia, the South American Confederation, and Russia, recommending for our consideration and report this important matter." He paused for an instant as if considering what his next words were to be, and several of the Commissioners shifted uneasily in their chairs. "It is known to you all," resumed the President, "that we have no power to enforce our decisions upon the nations. We can only deliberate upon the matters brought to our attention and recommend a certain course of action resulting from these deliberations. It is also known to you that in no recorded instance have the nations which we represent failed to accept our recommendations."

A little ripple of excitement was plainly evident among the Commissioners. Feet moved upon the floor and glances were exchanged, for since the early days of the Commission no presiding officer had ever spoken thus. The President's words seemed to heighten the gravity of the event and increase the tremendous burden of responsibility, which each man felt upon him, thirty fold. But the President had taken up the topmost of the pile of papers in front of him and was continuing in his usual, unhurried tone.

"I have here," he said, "a memorandum of the present strength of the International Police, as provided for in the Constitution of the Federation. It is not necessary for me to refer to this

in detail, since the complete report of the Police General Staff is accessible to each one of you. In view, however, of the discussion upon which we are about to embark, I will remind you that the Military Division numbers about 800,000 officers and men, including all branches of the service, and the Naval Division has in its first line some thirty-eight first-class and ten second-class battleships, and in addition, a large fleet of first, second, and third-class cruisers, destroyers, and submarines and the necessary auxiliary and supply ships." The President laid the paper at one side and took up another.

"The suggestions contained in the referendums of the six powers mentioned," he resumed, "are too varied to furnish an accurate guide to the desire of the world at large. The United States wishes an arbitrary reduction made to half the present strength within a year's time. Great Britain suggests a gradual reduction extending over a number of years and eliminating, in all, about one-third of the present force. Prussia submits a detailed plan for reorganisation on a much smaller basis, but leaves the method of bringing this about to the judgment of this Commission. The other plans present even greater differences."

He pushed the mass of papers away and leaned back in his chair.

"The important point for us to consider at this time," he continued, "is whether or not a reduction of any nature is advisable. Gentlemen, the matter is now open for discussion."

There was an interval of silence after the President had spoken the formal words which opened the deliberations of the Commission on any question. A feeling of tension was in the air which, to the unenlightened observer, would appear greater than even a subject of so much importance warranted, and each man looked at his neighbour as if striving to see who had the courage to take the initiative. In the dead stillness of the Council Hall, the tramp of the sentry on the walk below the windows could be plainly heard. Suddenly a slight, dark man, seated near the centre of the long table, arose.

"Your Excellency," he began, bowing to the President, "and fellow-members of the High Commission, it is true that for very many years this strong force of which we have the direction has been for the most part idle. Now people complain, and with much justice, that to keep this great, idle force efficient there is a drain upon the nations of money and men that could be put to better uses. The world points backward to the long, peaceful years since the War of the Nations. 'We have had no need of these many ships and these many men in the past,' says the world, 'why should they continue to burden us? Peace breeds peace. Education, enlightenment, the teachings of our religion, with their rapid strides are swiftly sweeping away the last remnants of opposition to the great mission of our Federation. If we have had peace in the past, can we not all the more surely trust in its continuance for all time?' Thus speaks the world. Am I not right, fellow-members of the High Commission?"

He looked about him as if appealing for support and more than one head in the assembly nodded assent.

"Now hear me!" resumed the Italian, leaning forward on the table and speaking with more vehemence, "I have given you the voice of the world and I say that that voice is wrong! Do you believe that this building, because it has stood for so many years, will stand forever? No, my friends, we do not. The weather will wear it away little by little and unless we constantly guard it and constantly renew it, it will some day fall. So we must constantly guard and constantly renew the strength of our great Federation, or it too will fall and carry with it the last hope of the human race. Do you believe because for so many years the western world has lived in harmony and accord that the fierce and terrible ambition of race and race rule is dead? Ah, my friends, if you trust in this you are blind -- blind -- blind! Countless millions who do not share our dreams and are not of our religion of love grow greedy of our wealth and power. They say that with wealth and power we will grow overconfident and careless in our seeming security and when the hour of our weakness comes, they will be ready. My friends,"

he stretched out his hands appealingly, "I do not plead with you for mere ships and men, but I do beseech you not to betray the guardianship of the world which the world has placed in your hands. The world has chosen us from many millions to watch over it, because it trusts us better than it can trust itself. The hour of our weakness is at hand. Pray God we see it in time!"

Once more a subdued rustle was heard and again glances were exchanged, but the grey President sat motionless and only his eyes searched keenly among the faces grouped about the table. Another man rose slowly to his feet, a man with snow-white hair, but whose lean, hard features showed none of the weakness expected from his many years.

"Your Excellency and gentleman," he said, "this is too important a matter to leave to the guidance of mere conviction, however sincere that may be. We must consider the facts of the case and the facts alone if we are to arrive at any sane conclusion -- or any safe one," he added as an afterthought. "For many years we have heard of the supposed menace of the Eastern races and it is a popular belief that our splendid International Police has been kept at its present strength in deference to this world-wide superstition. In fact, I do not doubt that this belief has been shared by many of you. Let us see, now, in just what this supposed danger consists. Since the founding of our federation, we have had treaties with China, Japan, and the Mohammedan countries by the terms of which our teachers, our missionaries, and our industrial representatives have been free to come and go in the nations of the orient, carrying the benefits of our civilisation to all who would accept them. At present the different nations of our Federation have established over fifty colleges where the higher branches of learning are taught in the Chinese Republic alone, besides schools without number. Our missionaries report nearly a third of the entire population converted to the doctrines of Christianity. Our business houses have branches and connections throughout the East. The detailed facts will be placed before you in the complete report of this session. Even more to the point is a letter recently received by me from a high dignitary of the Chinese Republic. In substance, this is as follows: 'The benefits we have received from the International Federation are so great and wide-spread that they are recognised not only by the more enlightened classes of the Republic, but by the common folk as well. We are doing our best to imitate, but we must struggle constantly against the forces of bigotry and superstition. But the time will come, and I believe that it is not far off, when China will be ready to join her sister nations of the western world.' My observations are not confined to China alone. You will find in the statistics I have prepared that similar conditions exist in all the other nations outside of the Federation. I do not wish at this time to make any definite proposal for decreasing or maintaining our International Police. I wish merely to say that if we have kept up this huge armament to protect us from a visionary storm cloud in the East, we have been carrying a useless weight for many years."

There was a deep-toned assent from the other side of the table. "I also," said the Prussian representative, "I haf myself prepared figures which all this will prove."

Many other Commissioners spoke at more or less length, some taking one side of the question, some the other, but as the session wore on it was easy to see that the alarmists were losing in strength. The sunset glow faded from the tall windows long before the last speaker had finished and the hall shone with the many cunningly hidden electrics when the President spoke the final words which dissolved the Commission for the day.

"You will be furnished, gentlemen," he said, shading his tired eyes with his heavy hand; "with a full report of the session, including all the facts and figures cited, as usual. You will study this at your leisure and be prepared to vote upon the question thirty days from today. This is the extreme limit granted to us under the Constitution of the Federation. If a majority at any time desire that the matter be brought before a meeting of the Commission for further discussion, this will be granted. The session is closed."

A golden chime pealed through the hall and the great bronze doors opened, revealing a double line of men in the grey-green uniforms of the International Police standing with the immobility of the stone statues in the Council Chamber. The Commissioners thronged out hurriedly, passing between the lines of the Police, who presented arms with a single rattle of their rifles, and when the last man had passed, broke into column and tramped resoundingly down the corridor. Only the grey President remained motionless in his chair after the others had gone and standing at a little distance, respectfully waiting, the Italian who had made the opening speech of the session. When the noise in the corridor had died away, the President stirred and addressed the waiting Commissioner. "You wish to speak with me, Signor?"

"I wished to ask, your Excellency," exclaimed the Italian impulsively, "if you favoured this horrible crime against civilisation which the High Commission in its unaccountable blindness seems determined to perpetrate?"

"It is not permitted to me under the Constitution," said the President evenly, "to show favour or disfavour. My duty is to guide the machinery of the High Commission -- nothing more."

"But at least, your Excellency," urged the other, "one may have an opinion. That is a right allowed by nature to every human being and even the Constitution of the International Federation cannot take it away."

"To have an opinion is permitted -- yes," returned the President, "but to express such an opinion to any member of the High Commission -- no!"

The Italian half turned away with a helpless gesture of his thin, nervous hands. For several seconds he stood hesitating, while all the while the keen eyes of the grey old man in the lofty chair studied his dark, expressive features. Suddenly he raised his head proudly, the light of his conviction shining in his eyes.

"Hear me, your Excellency," he began, "I was but a child when the War of the Nations tore my unhappy country from end to end. All that I held most dear was swept away in that awful turmoil, and for long years thereafter I with my fellow-countrymen remained crushed to the earth without help and without hope. Then a dream came to me in the darkness wherein I lay -- the dream of a world united in the bonds of an everlasting peace -- the dream of great nations putting the sword from their hands and joining surely and firmly in an irresistible march towards a higher civilisation than the earth had yet beheld. When the first faint whisper of the formation of an International Federation reached my ears, I hailed it as the first great proof that my dream would be fulfilled. With this assurance burning like a sacred fire in my breast, I drew Italy among the first into the great Federation. Ah, your Excellency, many men have mocked at me for being a dreamer -- a visionary -- pursuing shining bubbles and letting go the solid, material affairs of the world. But can any say that in this instance I dreamed to no purpose?" He paused and looked appealingly at the motionless figure in the great chair, but it remained immovable and seemingly oblivious, save for the restless movements of the keen, grey eyes.

"With the accomplishment of my early vision," the Italian pursued, "another came to me. I saw the great nations of the earth, untroubled in their onward progress, grow careless and unmindful that their mission was still unfinished. Long years of peace brought false confidence in a seemingly impregnable security. The nations have grown insolent in their power and blind to the fires which still smoulder on the borders of civilisation. They believe that their command alone is sufficient to turn the forces of the earth as they desire. Your Excellency, can a word check the raging fire in the forest when once it is unloosed? I have no facts and figures to amuse the plodding world" -- he threw out his hands with an indescribable gesture of impatience and disgust -- "I have no long columns of statistics to prove whatever I wish to prove. But I know the world and the heart of the world. I can see the mighty powers of the East lulling us to a fatal sleep with smooth promises and many words -- and if we sleep,

we are lost!"

For the first time the President stirred as if moved by the words of the speaker. For a brief space he seemed to deliberate with himself, but at length he rose and advancing to the younger man put a kindly hand upon his shoulder.

"Come with me," he said, and led the way out of the Council Chamber and down the long corridor to an oaken door at which stood a rigid sentry. The door opened to the pressure of a spring, and passing through a small anteroom, where two officers of the International Police rose in salute, the pair entered a low room, the walls of which were completely covered with quaintly carved woodwork, dark with great age. A large desk stood against one wall and at this the President seated himself, motioning his companion to a capacious armchair placed nearby.

"Signor di Conti," began the President slowly, "for over two years I have been seeking for a man to undertake a work of the gravest importance -- a work which I have begun but which, owing to the official bonds which circumscribe my actions, I may not finish. For this work I required a visionary and a man with the unshakable convictions of a visionary. I believe, Signor, that in you I have found the man I sought."

The speechless Italian inclined his head and the President continued:

"If you carry this work to a successful termination, you may one day be acclaimed as the saviour of the civilised world --"

"And if I fail, your Excellency?" the Italian interrupted softly.

"You must not fail."

The Italian bowed his head in his hands as the President turned to his desk. A muffled bell sounded in the anteroom and immediately an officer of the International Police stood before the President.

"Please ask Colonel Villon to bring me the last report in File Fourteen."

The officer saluted and withdrew and five minutes later a short, jolly-looking, typically French officer presented himself, with a small bundle of papers under his plump arm. No one would ordinarily have selected the jovial Colonel for the efficient head of a very efficient Intelligence Department, but such he was and the cleverest secret service man in all the nations of the Federation. The President signed him to a chair, and taking the papers the officer proffered, handed them without a word to the bewildered Italian. The latter received them in a daze and commenced to peruse them. For nearly an hour he read eagerly, while the grey President watched him silently and the stout Colonel played with his sword knot. At length the Commissioner raised his head, his eyes shining, his whole face in a glow.

"Your Excellency --" he gasped.

"You will undertake the work?" asked the President.

"Your Excellency," said the Italian, rising to his feet in a kind of exaltation, "it is not a task you offer me -- it is a crown of glory."

But the President had turned to his desk again and when he spoke it was in the most matter-of-fact tones.

"You will call upon Colonel Villon for anything you may need that he can furnish you and you will, of course, have access to all the papers and any future reports dealing with the matter in hand. In short, the conduct of the affair will be wholly in your hands. Any assistance outside the scope of the Intelligence Department which you may need, your authority as a High Commissioner of the Federation will, of course, obtain for you. That is all, gentlemen."

They bowed and withdrew, the Colonel to a well-earned and dreamless sleep, the Italian to a night-long vision of the great mission entrusted to him. In the anteroom, one of the orderlies slumbered heavily on a couch, while his companion whiled away the dark hours of his watch with endless games of solitaire. Little by little London grew dark and silent. But in the low-

ceilinged room of the President, the master mind of the world stayed wakeful through the long night, thinking and planning, planning and thinking, for the greatest good of all mankind.

Chapter III - Merriam Meets All The Powers Of Darkness

EVELYN THORNTON, reclining luxuriously in a comfortable hammock and surrounded by many pillows, sniffed the strong, salt sea breeze with great contentment and explored with slender fingers the contents of the large box of chocolates at her side in the hope of locating by sense of touch one of the variety which she liked the best without the necessity of interrupting the peaceful flow of her thoughts by turning her head to look for it. Theoretically, Evelyn was renewing her acquaintance with "Rabbi Ben Ezra," being under the necessity of writing a paper on the "Optimism of Robert Browning" for the next meeting of the College Women's Club; but, as a matter of fact, the volume lay face downward in her lap and she gazed at the distant horizon line, lost in a day-dream so profound that she was oblivious to the noise of a motor car coming to a halt under the porte-cochere around the corner of the house, and was only startled into consciousness by a step on the veranda.

"Why, hello, Jimmy Merriam!" she exclaimed, holding out both hands in an excess of pleasure at seeing him again. "Forgive me for not rising to the occasion, but I'm too utterly comfortable to stir. Do find yourself a chair somewhere and tell me all the news, and to begin with, what you've been doing all these ages since I saw you last."

"Well," said Merriam, flushing a little with pleasure at the warmth of his reception; "in Biblical phraseology, I've been going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it. To be more exact, I had to run out to Madison, Wisconsin, to attend the annual convention of the American branch of the International Chemical Society and read a paper and from there I went to Ann Arbor for a visit with my old friend and teacher Professor Armstrong, who has recently been appointed president of the University of Michigan. And right there I got the biggest surprise of my life." He paused with a half-ashamed air of importance and the girl nodded eagerly for him to go on. "Well, not to prolong the agony," he continued, "after we'd talked a while, Armstrong said in that sharp way of his, 'What are you doing now, James?' 'Not very much of anything,' I confessed; 'I've got some commercial work that pays pretty well and the rest of the time I'm devoting to research.' 'H'm,' says Armstrong, 'that kind of a life won't get you anywhere. You ought to be more in touch with what's going on in the world of chemistry if you're ever going to tap the possibilities I think you have in you. The Dean of our College of Chemistry has just resigned to take a position in the East. Do you want the job?'"

"Why, Jimmy, how perfectly splendid!" cried the girl, her eyes bright with happiness at his good fortune. "Please consider yourself congratulated forty-seven times at the very least. I'm just awfully, awfully glad for you." And her fingers closed over his hand in a friendly squeeze.

"'Tisn't so bad," said Merriam modestly. "Eight thousand a year and most of the summer to do research in if I want to. I can afford a 'plane and take you out riding on moonlight nights."

"Not if you live out in Michigan," retorted Evelyn. "But if you do buy a 'plane, don't get a 'Detroit.' The Carters had one last year and it made their lives miserable, besides nearly falling into Newark Bay with Mr. Carter when he was flying down to Long Branch. But, honestly, Jimmy, I do hate to have you go off into the wilds this way. We'll all miss you terribly. I know Mabs will be inconsolable. She won't have any one to fight with after you're gone."

"Perhaps it won't be as bad as you imagine," said Jim with a smile. "I tell you, Eve, I've got a little plan I'm going to disclose to you after I've been at my new job long enough to find out what it's like and if you approve of it, it may reduce the distance between us considerably."

"Oh," said Evelyn, puzzled and a little uneasy, though she could hardly have told why. "Have you told Leslie about your good luck?" she added, wishing to feel herself on surer ground.

"Told whom?" asked Merriam, surprised.

"Leslie Gardiner, of course," she replied, colouring faintly. "Oh, I forgot that you were such a

stranger nowadays. Why, Leslie and I have become old friends. He's over here three or four times a week, and we go riding or walking -- we've had some splendid long tramps, Jim; just the kind you always used to enjoy so much -- and squabble about the Eastern situation. Leslie insists that I'm a most unpractical idealist and I tell him that he wants to bring back the age of militarism and then we begin all over again. I thought probably he'd written you about it."

"No," said Jim lifelessly. "He didn't mention it. We've both been pretty busy and we didn't write much."

"But I suppose that you'll be seeing him soon, now that you're back again, won't you?"

"Probably this evening. I telegraphed him that I was coming and to be out at the house for supper."

"Do you know, Jimmy, I was almost prepared to dislike your friend before I met him -- I suppose because you praised him to me so continuously. But he really has some splendid ideas -- for a man -- even if they don't always coincide with mine. And he can talk about so many things intelligently that most men can't -- like literature and music, I mean -- and he's had such interesting experiences in out-of-the-way corners of the earth, only it's almost impossible to get him to tell about them. And then I think he's rather good-looking, don't you?"

"Yes. Les is a very good sort," answered Jim indifferently.

Evelyn glanced at him in some surprise. Her woman's intuition told her that something was seriously wrong, but feeling that it would be useless to try to find the clue, she sought to shift the conversation into easier channels.

"I've been wanting to see you," she began rather hurriedly; "so as to find out just what did happen the night of the dance, when we were caught in that dreadful storm. All I can remember is starting to swim over to the mainland with Leslie and then the storm breaking, and struggling for dear life for a few moments to keep my head above water -- and the next thing I knew, I was in bed with a solemn-looking nurse over by the window pouring out something nasty into a glass for me to take. You were already on your way West and Leslie had called three times to find out how I was, and neither he nor Mabs would tell me anything about it. They pretended it wouldn't be good for me, but that couldn't have been the only reason."

"No," replied Merriam slowly. "I don't think it was. You see, Mabs was wrong about our having to cross the channel before we could reach land. The channel was on the other side of the reef we were stuck on and, as a matter of fact, we only had to swim a few feet before we hit bottom. Mabs and I were safe across before the storm broke, but you and Les were right in the middle of the deepest part. The squall swept you against a nasty ledge of rock, but Les managed to hit it first. If he hadn't, I doubt very much if you'd be lying in that hammock eating chocolates now. Les was tougher and got out of it with only a sprained arm."

"Oh," said the girl softly, her smooth cheek the colour of a pink rose. "I suppose that's why he wouldn't talk about it. He didn't want me to feel that I was under obligation to him for -- for saving my life. He said he hurt his arm falling off his horse."

"Probably," replied Jim with as near an approach to a sneer as he could summon up on short notice. "Les couldn't fall off a horse if he tried. But then he always did have curious notions of reticence. But as I was saying, you hit the rock -- the two of you -- and that put an end to Leslie's immediate usefulness. You were past taking any interest in the proceedings already. Then Mabs dashed in with me after her -- I guess she was grateful for all the muscle she'd worked up during the summer -- and between us we managed to haul you out, and then Mabs played watch-dog while I hunted up a car to get you home in. You were still oblivious the last time I saw you, but Les had come around all right and was smoking in front of the sitting-room fire with his arm bandaged up and his feet on the fender. That's all the story I

know. I guess you can tell the sequel better yourself."

"Poor Mabs," said Evelyn with a little laugh, not noticing his final words. "I expect she was afraid that if she told of her part in the rescue, I might think she was trying to pose as a heroine."

"I suppose she was," assented Merriam rather savagely. "Evidently modesty is contagious. However, you'll observe it's not one of my failings. But then it's never been my good luck to have the role of hero."

"Why, Jimmy!" she exclaimed, regarding him with wide, reproachful eyes; "whatever has gotten into you? I never heard you talk that way before."

He flushed dully under her steady, hurt gaze.

"I'm awfully sorry, Eve," he said more gently. "I haven't been very well lately and I guess my trip must have upset me more than I thought. I oughtn't to have come here in the first place, feeling as grumpy as I did. I think perhaps I'd better run along now, before I say anything else I shouldn't. I'll be all right when I've had a little rest and some decent food."

"Why, Jimmy, that's too bad," she cried with ready sympathy. "I ought to have understood instead of scolding you. You must get all mended up again soon and then come over and we'll have one of our good, old-fashioned talks. You will come as soon as you can, won't you?"

"Yes, I'll come," he answered, avoiding her friendly, pitying eyes. He took the hand she held out to him a little awkwardly. "Good-bye," he said briefly and hurried down the steps. His eyes were burning and his throat felt dry and hot.

"So it's Leslie, is it?" he said to himself bitterly as his swift roadster shot into the highway. "Captain Leslie Gardiner of the International Police -- damn him! What a fool -- what an insensate fool -- I might have known how it would be!" Then suddenly, unmindful of danger, he bowed his head on his hands as they rested upon the steering wheel. "Oh, my God!" he cried softly; "the very best friend I have in the whole world!"

And so for forty miles of sunlit road Merriam fought with all the Powers of Darkness for the possession of his soul. But when, with the lengthening of the afternoon shadows, he turned the car into the driveway that led to his own house and saw the tall figure of the Captain smoking meditatively on the veranda, his face was calm and the voice with which he hailed his friend was steady and even rang with a note of cheerfulness. They met after the manner of old friends who have been for some time separated, hiding the depth of their feeling under an air of boisterous indifference. Merriam, as if fearful of what his friend might say, plunged at once into a detailed account of his western trip, which, with the questions of the Captain and numerous explanations, lasted until the dignified, white-headed negro servant announced that supper was ready.

"I think," remarked the Captain towards the close of the meal; "that when men get along to our time of life, it's a good thing to plan to settle down -- as you're going to do -- to some steady work find a permanent abiding place. I've been getting awfully tired lately of the thought of running all over the country as I'll have to do the minute my furlough expires, and as I have done ever since I got into the Intelligence Department. It's all right as long as you're young and have your reputation still to make to spend three months in Prussia and the next three in western Canada and then six more on the China frontier and wind up with a year or so in Peru, doing survey work that the Peruvian government is too lazy to attend to itself and the South American Confederation can't see any use for. But I tell you, Jim, I've got to the point now where I want to see some prospects of a home of my own and a pretty little wife to run it for me and a boy to take up my work when I have to retire. It didn't bother me so much when I was off somewhere in the wilds, living in my uniform -- or rather, what was left of it -- seven days and seven nights in the week and sleeping under God's big blue tent most of the time, but since I've been back and seen how contented and happy the men I used to know

are in their own homes with their families growing up around them, why, I tell you, Jim," cried the Captain, growing more vehement as he proceeded, "I've said to myself more than once, 'Les Gardiner, you damned fool, why don't you try for your share of that happiness?' And by the Lord, Jim, I'm going to!"

"Yes," returned the other rather drily, signing to the old negro to bring the cigars. "It does sound somewhat attractive. Have you made any definite plans towards the accomplishment of your desire?"

"I've done this much," replied the Captain; "petitioned for a headquarters job in the United States Atlantic Coast District. Kepplemann's Intelligence Officer is to be retired on January first and there really isn't any reason why I shouldn't have the place, if I want it badly enough. Besides, I did some good work for the Department while I was in China and I can get a recommendation from Villon himself if I need it. That means I'll be settled permanently in New York for the rest of my life, barring accidents. Kepplemann likes me pretty well, and when he once gets a staff officer he likes, he holds onto him like grim death. He's a good district commander to work with if he is a German."

"Smoke?" asked Merriam, pushing the box towards his friend. When the Captain had made his selection, he took a cigar himself and lighting a match, held it to the end of the weed with steady fingers.

"Les," he said casually, between puffs, "how long have you been in love with Eve Thornton?"

The Captain laid down his cigar and pushing back his chair, leaned forward, gripping the arms and staring at the other from under puckered eyebrows. "Good God!" he exploded. "Who in hell told you about that?"

"My own ears, for one," replied Merriam quietly. "My own eyes for another. When a man talks as convincingly as you just did about settling down, it usually means he has some girl in mind he'd like to settle down with. As to the girl being Eve Thornton -- well, when a person devours a photograph as eagerly as you've been taking in that picture of her on the mantelpiece, it doesn't take any great detective powers to deduce that it must hold more than a passing interest for him."

"Well," said the Captain, relaxing, "there's no use denying it when it's true. Jim, I never felt about any girl in all my life as I do about Evelyn, and first and last, I've known a considerable number, good, bad, and indifferent. Why, Jim, I -- I love her, Jim." He paused, frowning at the blue smoke rings that rose lazily towards the ceiling. "And I won't ever forget," he added earnestly, "that it's through you that I first met her."

"You haven't spoken to her yet?" asked the other, avoiding the frank gaze of his companion and studying the design of the chandelier with considerable intentness.

"No, I haven't -- yet," replied the Captain, with some hesitation. "D'you think, Jim, my chances --"

"I think your chances are pretty good, Les," said Merriam, rising and knocking the ashes from his cigar into the fireplace. "You see, she was a good deal interested in you even before she met you, and then when you saved her life that night --"

The Captain made a deprecating gesture. "She doesn't know about that," he said.

"Doesn't she? Well, she ought to be clever enough to guess that she didn't get ashore all by herself. Besides, Mabs may have told her. Even if Eve did know, she might have a little delicacy about saying anything--"

"That's so," assented the Captain.

"So I wouldn't worry about the outcome," continued Merriam, throwing the half-consumed stub of his cigar into the glowing logs. "If you don't mind, I think I'll turn in. My trip has kind of taken it out of me. See you in the morning."

"Good-night, Jim, and -- and God bless you. I can't ever tell you how grateful I am for the help you've given me, and for all --"

"Oh, that's all right, Les," said Merriam as he turned away. "It's always a pleasure to be of service to an old friend."

Chapter IV - Leslie Sets Out Upon A Mission

ON a certain clear, bright afternoon in October, Captain Leslie Gardiner, bareheaded in the warm sunshine, stood in the driveway of the hotel which was his temporary habitation, waiting for his orderly to bring his horse from the stable. The air was strong and bracing with a hint of the winter to come and the distant lines of the Connecticut hills stood out sharply against the hard blue of the sky. The Captain expanded his deep chest with a long breath of pure contentment. It was very good to be alive on such a day; to be alive and to be in love and about to set out like a knight errant of old to lay siege to the fair citadel, with every assurance that it must inevitably surrender at discretion. Possibly the Captain rather regretted that he could not array himself in shining steel with a white plume flowing from his helmet and a great two-handed sword by his side, for, although in the ordinary affairs of life Leslie Gardiner was as practical a man as the most practical of ages could desire, he was endowed with an undeniable streak of romance which, on occasions such as the present, annoyed him considerably by coming persistently to the fore. It was out of deference to this streak of romance that the Captain wore today his grey-green police uniform with the triple bars of gold on the shoulder straps, although the practical side of his nature was thoroughly satisfied that he was clad in this fashion only because his leave would be up that evening and it was a saving of time to pack his civilian garments and ship them off beforehand. Still it could not be questioned that the neat uniform set off his well-built figure to excellent advantage and the Captain was conscious of a certain innocent pleasure in the flutter his appearance caused among the white skirts on the hotel veranda.

The arrival of the orderly with his horse put an end to the Captain's pleasant meditations and returning the trooper's respectful salute, he took the bridle of the big bay and swinging easily into the saddle, rode slowly down the winding driveway.

The keen autumn wind hummed through the telephone wires along the roadside and the cloud banks swept their shadows over the flaming shoulders of the autumn hills. Here and there a giant maple reared a blazing pyramid of foliage against the dark background of the evergreens. Oh, it was good to be alive on such a day; to be alive and to love. He urged his willing beast into a gallop, as he turned into the road leading to the shore, and presently the flashing waters of the ocean came into sight, foaming under the lash of the vigorous breeze. There was her home -- that low, grey stone building on the right of the thin line of cottages and even at that distance he could see a flutter of white at one of the windows. Only a curtain waving in the wind probably, but perhaps -- And the noble animal under him snorted in surprise as his master's heel commanded even greater speed.

She had seen him coming and stood on the steps to greet him as he dismounted, a slim dark-blue figure with welcoming eyes. Thus they met, the tall, powerful man and the dark-haired slender maid, and the gods smiled upon them in the bright sunshine and caressed them with the strong salt breeze. Their hands touched half timidly as though they were conscious that great Nature had paused in her work to bless them with her age-old blessing, but their first words were commonplace enough.

"Oh, Leslie," the girl exclaimed, "I am glad to see you! I've just been pining away for some one to play with. You can't imagine how stupid it is here since Mabs went back to college and most of the neighbours have gone too, and, of course, those that haven't are just the ones that bore you to death every time you see them. We're going ourselves just as soon as mother can reconcile herself to the ordeal of packing."

They had instinctively turned into the familiar path leading to the beach as she was speaking, the well-trained troop horse following docilely behind with only a halt now and then to snatch at a tempting tussock of coarse beach grass.

"Are you sure you'll be warm enough?" he enquired solicitously as they stepped out upon the firm sand.

"One couldn't be cold in this glorious sunlight," she replied, smiling happily up at him. "Doesn't it just make you feel like doing something rash and reckless and shockingly unconventional? If I wasn't sure that those horrid Lemoines next door had their eyes glued to their windows watching us, I'd race you to the point. Only I suppose it would be rather unladylike," she added demurely. "And besides I know you'd beat me all to pieces."

"I'll dare you to when we're safely hidden under the bluff from the prying gaze of the neighbours. We really ought to do something out of the ordinary to commemorate our last day together."

The girl turned startled eyes to his. "Our last day together?"

"I'm afraid so. My leave is up tonight and in twenty-four hours more I'll be on my way to Baltimore, unless the Chief Intelligence Officer of the Atlantic Coast District has decided that he'd rather have me somewhere else since I heard from him yesterday."

"Leslie! You're not really going away tonight!"

"When duty calls I must obey," quoted the Captain. "Will you honestly be just a little bit sorry to have me go, Eve?"

"Sorry!"

Did Leslie Gardiner realise that not to every man is it given to have an exquisite being, quivering with life and love, waiting only for his word to come to him in wonderful, sweet surrender? Perhaps he did, for when presently he held her hands between his own and asked her to be his wife, he bowed his head humbly as under a rich blessing scarcely deserved and he kissed the hands he held before he crushed her in his arms.

They sat on the warm, white sand through the long hours of the afternoon, talking of the golden future that had opened before them, while the big bay troop horse browsed contentedly on the short, sparse grass that grew on the bluff above their heads. The waves swelled and broke in front of them, scattering diamond drops in the clear air. The white clouds moved majestically above them, momentarily hiding the sun, only to have it break forth again, flooding earth and sea and sky and making wonderful lights and shadows in the girl's dark hair. Out on the blue ocean the white sails of a yacht, bound for New London, gleamed as she tossed and ploughed through the steep rollers, and far away on the horizon long, steady flashes of light showed where an outward-bound mail dirigible was heliographing her name and destination to the Point Judith station.

At length the shadow of the bluff creeping nearly to their feet and the impatient stampings of the horse, anxious for his evening oats, warned them that the day was drawing to a close. They rose protestingly and slowly made their way back to the house, the girl frankly encircled by the Captain's arm. He held her to him for many minutes before he mounted, kissing her wonderful hair, her flushed cheeks, and her warm crimson lips. He leaned from his saddle to kiss her once again and when at length he drove his booted heels into the flanks of his eager horse, she called him back again before he had covered half the distance to the highroad. She had unclasped a rich gold bracelet from her arm and now reached up and fastened it about his wrist, pressing her lips to the red metal and the bronzed flesh beneath.

"Oh, my dear, dear love," she whispered, "you must come back to me very, very soon, for you are more to me than anything else in heaven or earth -- more to me even than my own soul."

He could not trust himself to reply, but his fingers crushed the hand that lay white against the black mane of his horse and he hastily wheeled the splendid animal towards the crimson heart of the sunset lest the weeping girl should see the mist in his own eyes.

The exaltation of the afternoon still held him as he rode up the winding driveway of the hotel

in the clear twilight, tossed his bridle to the waiting orderly, and ran quickly up to his room. A letter lay on his table and he was dimly conscious of a curious little spasm at his heart as he recognized the long official envelope and embossed blue seal of the International Police. For some seconds he stood, holding the letter in his hands and staring as if fascinated at the brief address and the seal with its simple design of a police officer in full uniform and the encircling motto, "For the greatest good of all mankind."

"It must be the answer to my petition," he said half aloud, but the lips that spoke the words were dry and uncomfortable. A month ago he would have welcomed gladly the prospect of active service, but now -- With sudden resolution he tore open the stiff envelope and unfolded the single thin sheet of the wireless despatch which it contained.

"CAPTAIN LESLIE GARDINER," he read, "Intelligence Department, U. S. Atlantic Coast District, New York. Sir: Immediately upon receipt of this order you will report to the Commandant of the Cape Cod airship station, who has been instructed to place a ship at your disposal. You will proceed at once to London and report to me at headquarters as soon thereafter as possible. Speed is of the utmost importance. PIERRE VILLON, Colonel and Chief, Intelligence Department."

The Captain let the message slip from his fingers and stood staring at the fading light in the western sky. Such an end to such a day! The order could mean but one thing -- active service of the most exacting nature. At best he would be sent to the ends of the earth, perhaps for six months, perhaps for a year, perhaps for several years. Who could say?

"And I can't even say good-bye to her," he said hoarsely. "Not even good-bye!"

Rousing himself after a brief interval, he summoned his orderly and bade the man make all haste with the preparations for departure. His own belongings were already in his bag which stood at the door and when the trooper had gone, he sat down at the table and drawing a sheet of paper towards him, commenced to write.

"MY DEAR, DEAR GIRL:

"I have been ordered away on secret duty, the nature of which I do not even yet know myself. It may mean months of separation -- perhaps even years. I am trying to face it bravely, but oh, my darling, it is very, very hard when I think of the long, weary time that must pass before I can look upon your face again. Surely the gods are laughing at the grim humour of the trick they have played upon us. But even though they part us forever, they cannot take away this wonderful love that has been granted to us. Your sweet beauty will be before me always, in the daytime when I move in the world of men and through the night in my dreams. You are the highest and most perfect thing my mind can imagine or my soul conceive and my heart is yours for all this life and to the end of time."

He signed and addressed the letter rapidly and rose as a knock came on his door.

"The car is ready, sir."

He handed the missive to the trooper, averting his face lest the man read the misery in his eyes, and passed out into the night.

Action is grateful to the tortured soul. The Captain found relief in the dark, swift ride to the station, found relief in the stir of the arrangements necessary for a special train to take him to his destination, found relief in the dizzy pace of the big electric locomotive, as it tore through the sleeping countryside. The brilliant headlight glanced along the polished steel of the monorail on which they ran and the gyroscope, hidden in the black interior of the engine, hummed steadily, like a huge hive of bees. To the Captain it presently seemed to take on a cadence, matching the monotonous repetition in his brain. "When will I see her again? When will I see her again? When -- oh, when will I see her again?" But as they crashed over the switches at Middleboro and headed eastward towards the Cape, it took on a deeper and more sinister tone: "Will I ever see her again? Ever -- again?"

A single lighted window in the black mass of buildings constituting the airship station at Chatham marked the commandant's office, and thither the Captain bent his steps, after answering the challenge of the sentry at the gate. The richly-furnished room held but a solitary occupant; a stocky young man in the blue of the Naval Division, who was comfortably ensconced in the commandant's big arm-chair, with his feet on the polished mahogany of the commandant's sacred desk, and engaged in smoking a doubtful-looking pipe. He looked up as the Captain entered, but did not offer to remove his feet or otherwise alter his eminently satisfactory position.

"Captain Gardiner?" he enquired, stretching out a huge, hairy hand. "Glad to meet you, Captain. I'm Lieutenant Hooker of the Ariadne -- dirigible of the first class. The Chief went to bed three hours ago and left me to do the honours. There's something or other he wants you to sign -- I guess that's it" -- indicating a paper on the desk with the stem of his pipe -- "and as soon as you've done that, we'd better be off. They seem to be in something of a hurry at London, to judge from the despatch we got this evening."

Leslie bent over the reflecting mahogany and affixed his signature to the printed form which the naval officer had pointed out to him. This formality completed, he signified that he was ready to depart, whereupon Lieutenant Hooker knocked out his pipe against the corner of the commandant's desk and after summoning a sleepy cadet to stand watch for the remainder of the night, led the way out into the shadows of the yard. Guiding Leslie expertly among the many pitfalls that beset their path, the Lieutenant paused at the wireless telephone station only long enough to command the shirt-sleeved operator, "Tell London we're off," and then continued to the long row of steel sheds which sheltered the airship fleet.

The door of No. 5 stood open and the Lieutenant entered, drawing Leslie after him. Sputtering arc lights made brilliant the vast interior and bathed with their powerful rays the slate-coloured hull of the Ariadne as she lay ready in her cradle, shifting a little and tugging at her moorings as some one on board tested the tank controls, port and starboard, bow and stern. When she rested quiet again, the Lieutenant gave a brief order to a man in soiled white duck who stood at the switchboard built against the wall of the shed and the great steel leaves that composed the roof swung upward, revealing a rectangle of the star-studded sky. Another short command and the huge clamps that moored the Ariadne to her cradle yawned wide, leaving her free. The two officers crossed the short gangplank, which was immediately drawn in after them, and mounted to the pilot house, where a young cadet, fresh from the training school, saluted and stepped back from the control board.

"I'll take her to-night, sonny," said Hooker kindly. "We're in a bit of a hurry. You'd better turn in."

He filled his pipe deliberately, offering his pouch to the Captain, who shook his head, having encountered navy tobacco before, and taking his place at the control board, moved the handle of the engine-room telegraph to the right. The long hull trembled as the subdued noise of rapidly revolving machinery arose under their feet and then lifted perpendicularly, guided by the steel runways of the shed, until it hovered above the roof. Then, as the glare of the arc lights faded out into blackness, the Ariadne pointed her nose to the glittering stars in a magnificent upward curve and set out on her race towards the sun.

In the dim pilot house, Hooker puffed at his pipe slowly and studied the dials on the control board while the Captain stared with unseeing eyes at the moonlit ocean beneath and fingered the gold circlet that bound his wrist. At length the Ariadne ceased climbing and Hooker, settling back more easily in his chair, filled a fresh pipe and became communicative.

"They seem to want you pretty bad over there, Captain," he remarked. "Any idea what's up?"

Gardiner shook his head. "My orders were simply to report at headquarters as soon as

possible," he replied.

"When they send for an Intelligence officer in such a hurry, it usually means something pretty big," observed the other reflectively. "The last trip I made with a man of your department was when I carried LeClerc down to Cape Town to investigate that African trouble. He never came back."

"No," said the Captain in a low voice. "He was killed in Uganda. We never knew how he died, but months after a friendly tribesman brought in his report, carefully written out in detail. He evidently knew he was to die and die horribly, but his last thought was of his duty."

"Not quite," returned the Lieutenant, staring through the window in front of him. "A little while before I landed him, he gave me a diamond ring -- a woman's ring. 'If I'm never heard from again,' he said, 'you'll see that this reaches a -- a certain woman in Rouen and you'll tell her that I died with her name on my lips, because it will be true.'"

The Lieutenant stopped and puffed at his nearly cold pipe.

"And you did?" asked Gardiner in a troubled voice. The other nodded briefly.

"She was a wonderful girl," he continued. "One of those dark French beauties who fairly take a man's breath away with the miracle of them. And brave -- great God, how brave she was! She heard the awful news I brought her without a tremor and thanked me with a dignity that made me feel like crawling to her feet and kissing the hem of her gown. A few months afterwards, I happened to be in that part of the world again and I took a day's leave and went to Rouen to see her, but they told me she'd gone into a convent. She must have loved him very much."

There was a long silence in the pilot house while the stars outside began to pale and a dim light commenced to show in the east. Finally the Captain spoke rather huskily. "Hooker, it seems an unusual request to make of a man I've just met, but -- but I've left a girl back in America whom I hoped to marry before I was sent off to the end of the world again, and will you -- and I wonder if you'd be willing to do as much for me as you did for poor LeClerc if it should become necessary? I know it's very foolish of me, but I have a feeling I can't explain that this mission on which I am starting out will be a dangerous one -- perhaps a very dangerous one -- and if anything should happen to me, I wouldn't want her to think that in my last hour I hadn't remembered her," he ended simply.

The kind-hearted Lieutenant extended his huge paw and took the Captain's hand in a grip that, strong as he was, made him wince.

"Don't let that worry you, Captain," he said reassuringly. "Let me know the time-limit as soon as you find out how long you're to be gone, and I'll attend to the rest if I have to give up my commission to do it. But I guess you've probably had the girl on your mind until you've begun to estimate the job as something bigger than it really is. I'll bet that all they want you for is to map the passes of the Himalayas or some nonsense of that kind, so that if any one of the High Commissioners should happen to wake up some fine day and ask what the Intelligence Department is doing to justify its existence, there'd be something to show him. In this peaceful age, about the only risk any of us run is that of catching cold on night duty."

When evening closed around them again, they saw the lights of London against the darkening sky.

Chapter V - Leslie Learns More About His Mission

PIERRE VILLON, chief of the Intelligence Department of the International Police, dined late in his dignified old house in Brompton, London. The stout Colonel loved the things of the flesh and sat long at table, excusing his weakness by the reflection that he had many early years of privation, when away on active service, to make up for, and in this he was indulged by his daughter Corinne, who, however, seized upon every possible occasion to scold her father for his inclination towards the more material pleasures of life and even went so far at times as to lay hands upon his bottle of red wine and bear it away to a hiding place of which she alone had the secret.

"You observe, my friends," the jolly Colonel would say to the more intimate members of his circle of acquaintances, with a humorous gesture of helpless compliance, "one does not require a wife to be what you English call henpecked. Is it not so?"

And when Mademoiselle returned, he would pinch her smooth cheek affectionately, to the intense envy of the younger officers of his staff, who nevertheless regarded the charming Corinne with considerable awe. For it was currently reported that she knew more about the affairs of the Intelligence Department than any one except the Colonel himself and had on more than one occasion helped her father with an intricate problem for which even his clever brain could find no solution.

"When Corinne marries," Villon would declare, "the Federation must find a new Intelligence chief." But those who knew him best only laughed in reply, for the good Colonel could no more keep away from his beloved work than a mother from her first-born child. At times, however, he would grow serious and pointing to his pretty daughter, would exclaim, "There is the one woman in all the world who never tells what she knows!"

On this particular evening the good Colonel sipped his after-dinner liqueur and glanced at the clock from time to time with an impatience so ill-concealed that it speedily attracted the notice of Corinne, who looked up inquiringly from her domestic occupation of attaching sundry buttons to her father's old uniform blouse.

"He should be here by now," said the Colonel in reply to the question in her eyes, and as she did not seem wholly satisfied he added by way of explanation, "It is the officer who is to accompany Major Wilkie on the secret mission."

Corinne bent over her work again.

"Then you have decided whom to send?" she asked.

"Eh, yes. I thought you knew. It is Captain Gardiner, the American. He made some investigations on the China frontier that pleased me much and he knows the country well. Besides he holds the same views as our honoured President and Signor di Conti, and he is both brave and careful -- a rare combination. Yes, he is undoubtedly the right man to send."

His daughter nodded. She had met the Captain and approved of him, largely because he seemed utterly unconscious of his own good qualities. And then the clever Corinne was after all a woman and the Captain was undeniably handsome.

The sound of the street door bell at this juncture put an end to further enquiries and the girl, folding up her work neatly, vanished in the long hallway, from which she shortly ushered in no less a person than the Captain himself. The Colonel arose to return the Captain's formal salute and immediately subsided into his chair again, motioning his subordinate to a seat at the other side of the table.

"Permit me to offer my congratulations, Captain," he said. "You have made a quick trip. You will take a glass of wine, perhaps, after your journey? Eh, I know" -- as the Captain declined politely -- "The rules of the Service! But there are occasions -- And I am too old to change my ways, I who saw the birth of the Federation! But you will smoke? Yes, that is good. One may

converse more easily with the aid of good tobacco. My child, be so kind as to bring me the papers."

The girl left the room, only to return immediately with a large, square envelope which she placed in her father's hands and then resumed her seat by the fireplace. The Colonel opened the receptacle and drew forth a mass of discoloured sheets which he spread before him, while Gardiner lighted the cigar offered to him with fingers that were none too steady. Presently the Colonel pushed the papers aside and leaning back in his chair drew in the smoke of his cigarette with every indication of perfect contentment.

"I am told, my friend," he began, "that you hold the belief with some other far-seeing ones that the security of our great Federation is not yet assured and that if we do not keep a watch upon the East, our aims may never be accomplished. Is it not so? Well, my friend," he continued without waiting for the Captain's motion of assent, "I have here the proof that your belief is not an idle one." And he placed his open hand on the sheets before him.

"This proof is sufficient for me," he resumed, "for I have my fingers on the pulse of the world, but we must convince the people of our great Federation and the members of the High Commission, and it is to aid us in this task that I have sent for you."

The Captain's face seemed troubled, but the eyes of his superior were fixed on the papers in his hands. Only Corinne looked up quickly and as quickly back again to the blazing logs with a puzzled frown.

"This is a report," pursued the Colonel, "prepared by Major Wilkie of the Secret Service after investigations in China extending over a year's time. He has discovered, after much labour and not a little danger to his own life, that, as many of us have suspected, there exists among the nations outside of our Federation a well-defined plan and agreement to fall upon us when our watchfulness shall relax and sweep us from the earth. This much the gallant major has laid bare. You know, my Captain," he leaned forward across the table, "and I know that on such evidence alone the High Commission will not hold back from its insane plan to weaken our defences in our very hour of need. You know and I know that men high in authority, who see the world only as it comes within the narrow limits of their studies, will not accept the mere word of a brave soldier and truthful gentleman. 'He desires to make for himself a reputation,' they will say, 'He wishes to be esteemed for his untiring zeal. Is it not so? Well, then, this that he discloses to us is interesting, but it is not proof. See, we have here the many promises and assurances of the nations of the East, who are our friends. Shall we distrust all these and take the story of one man alone for the real truth? No, we must have more evidence that these friendly peoples wish us ill before we begin to fear.' Eh, my Captain, it is the way of the world and has been through all the ages. Like the ostrich who hides his head in the sand, and, because he perceives no danger, is confident that he is safe, our rulers and our people will not see the impending disaster and will continue to trust in their false security until it is too late, unless we arouse them in spite of themselves. It is to do this -- to preserve our great Federation and its holy aims, and," he added more softly, looking upon his daughter with great love, "to keep from harm those most dear to us, that we must give the blind world the proof which it demands."

"See, then," he continued, taking up the papers which lay on the table under his hand, "I will read you what our good Major Wilkie has written concerning this matter. 'The source and head of this conspiracy against the peace of the western nations lies in a secret association which controls the government of China and is composed of the most powerful officials and military officers of the Chinese Republic. For several years this association has been waiting for the time to come when the watchfulness of the Federation shall be relaxed and its powers of resistance to external attack weakened. The recent agitation, which is well known and has been carefully followed by the members of the association, to reduce the International Police,

it is believed will present the long-expected opportunity. If the High Commission yields to the pressure exerted upon it and agrees to diminish materially the International force, nothing can save the Federation from an unsuspected declaration of war which it will be totally unprepared to meet.

"In addition to the armed forces of China, which in themselves constitute a serious menace, the aid of the Mohammedan countries has been enlisted and agents of the allies have been sent among the savage tribes of Africa and other dependencies of the Federation to foment a revolt when the proper moment arrives. I also believe that an endeavour will be made to secure the co-operation of Japan and if this is obtained, the outcome may well be considered doubtful.

"The headquarters of the association are supposed to be located in Peking, although my information on this point is not trustworthy, and here are deposited the plans of the organisation and the treaties between the allied powers. I would suggest to your Excellency that if it were possible to discover this depository and secure copies of these papers, incontestable proof would be furnished of the hostile intentions of the nations concerned and of the necessity for the immediate preparation and despatch of a force sufficiently strong to crush the threatened invasion. I would urge upon your Excellency most earnestly that, in any event, the reduction of the International Police be refused by the High Commission, or at least delayed."

The Colonel paused and shot a keen glance at his subordinate, but Leslie's eyes were gazing intently at the glowing end of his cigar.

"You see, my friend," ended Villon. "The glory of the service I have set apart for you. It is to you and the brave Major Wilkie that the task of securing these papers is entrusted. But I believe that you are worthy to undertake the task and," he added, with a smile that gave a certain grandeur to his usually jovial features, "if your efforts are attended with success, to wear the crown."

He arose as the street door bell again sounded.

"Ah," he exclaimed, "here is the Major himself and Signor di Conti." And in confirmation of his words, the two men, after a brief interval, followed Corinne into the room.

Major Wilkie was a spare, sombre-looking man of indefinite age, evidently one for whom life had ever been a serious matter and had held very little that was light or joyous. Although a true Scot, born and reared in the shadow of Edinburgh Castle, he seemed to have lost most of the native humour of his race -- if indeed he ever had it -- as he had long ago lost all trace of the Scottish tongue. An ideal secret service man; silent, resourceful, ready in an emergency, unshaken in courage and unwavering in purpose -- such was the officer who was to be Leslie Gardiner's companion in this dangerous enterprise. At a word from the Commissioner, the four men grouped themselves about the table and di Conti plunged at once into his theme, scarcely waiting for his hearers to be seated.

"You know, my friends, the reasons that have caused you to be summoned here," he commenced, addressing more particularly the two younger officers. "So I will not burden you by reciting them once again. I will not conceal from you that the mission is one of much danger, but it is danger which you must evade if you would save the Federation. Do I not speak the truth, Colonel?"

"It is true, my children," assented the old soldier, nodding his head. "If you are killed, you fail."

"See then," resumed the Commissioner. "You will go at once to Peking. That is all arranged. We have native spies in China who will aid you to find where the papers are kept which you are to secure. That is all we can do. It is for you to furnish the keystone of the building we have thus far laboriously raised. In two months' time we will look for you again."

"Only two months?" queried Major Wilkie.

"Tomorrow," replied di Conti, "the High Commission will vote to reduce the strength of the International Police. We, who can see the danger, have done our best, but whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad, my friends. The High Commission is blind in its own conceit and we cannot doubt how the vote will go. After the vote is taken, at least a month must be consumed while the nations pass upon our recommendation and another month will elapse before the plans for reorganisation are completed and the order issued. My friends, you must return before that order goes into effect, or your work will be of no avail."

Major Wilkie and the Colonel assented gravely, but Gardiner made no sign. He was staring at the flickering firelight and seemed scarcely to hear the words spoken by his superiors; but he roused himself when the small circle drew closer together and began the discussion of the more practical details of the expedition. Talk was a relief to him and he plunged into it eagerly, drawing more than one approving glance from his companions by the plain commonsense of some of his suggestions.

The good Colonel was radiant. He prided himself above all on his ability to judge men and gauge their powers and he felt that on the present occasion his insight into human nature was being once more vindicated. Only the pretty Corinne still wore her puzzled frown until, as she studied the group about the table, she saw the Captain stretch out his arm towards the map spread before them and caught the gleam of the shaded electrics on the golden band that encircled his wrist. When she turned to the firelight again, the frown was deeper, but now it was one of intense thought.

At length di Conti collected his papers and pushed back his chair. "I think that is all, gentlemen," he observed. "It only remains now to say adieu." He paused, looking into the grave faces before him and as he stretched out his hands to them they unconsciously bowed their heads to receive his parting benediction.

"May the good God aid you in your task," he said simply, "and bring you safely back again so that our Federation may be saved."

"Good luck go with you, my children," added the stout Colonel. "Keep brave hearts and, above all, clear heads."

Corinne accompanied the two officers to the door, where she bade farewell to the sober Major with many added wishes for his success, but she detained Leslie for an instant, holding his hand between both of her own.

"We expect great things of you, Captain," she said hurriedly. "She -- the woman whom you love -- and I. You must face your duty without faltering if you would be worthy of her. I, who wish you well with all my heart, tell you this. Remember!"

She pressed his hand hastily and withdrew, leaving the astounded officer to join his companion, who awaited him impatiently in the motor car which was to carry them to the Major's quarters.

The Major inhabited a small, bare room in the northeast corner of the huge Police barracks. The floor was uncarpeted, the furniture simple and scanty, and the books which occupied the row of shelves extending nearly around the room were almost wholly technical works on military science, history, and geography. The apartment was, in fact, typical of the life of its owner.

The two officers quickly exchanged their uniforms for the clothes of civil life, and when the transformation was completed, the Captain filled his pipe and taking a seat at the desk, busied himself with the writing of a letter while his grave superior placed in a worn brown bag the few belongings he intended to carry with him. The epistle finished, Leslie cast a furtive glance at his comrade and, finding him still intent upon his final preparations, made up a small packet which he fastened to his letter with a short bit of string. This done, he looked on idly as

the other moved soberly about the room.

Presently the Major approached the desk and, opening an upper drawer, drew therefrom a small glass phial enclosed in a nickle-plated tube.

"This," he said to his companion, "is death -- instant and painless. You see where it is kept -- if necessity should arise."

The Captain shivered in spite of himself as the other slipped the tube into a side pocket of his coat.

"You think our mission is so desperate then?" he enquired in as steady a voice as he could command.

"One never knows," returned the Major quietly. "It is always best to be prepared. We must try to keep alive, for if we cannot bring back the papers we have failed and even the offer of our lives as a sacrifice would not save the Federation. But I have spent much time in the East and I know its ways. If I am captured while on this mission and see no hope of escape, I would prefer to die rather than trust to the mercy of my captors."

Leslie refilled his pipe to hide his discomposure. He could face danger bravely enough in the ordinary run of things, but this calm, cold-blooded preparation for death in its most revolting form tried his nerve severely. It would have been easier had he not been haunted so constantly by those wonderful grey eyes, surmounted by that wealth of dark hair in which the sunlight awoke such distracting variations of light and shadow. With such a face before him, it was not good to talk of death. But the Major had closed and locked his bag and now straightened his spare figure with an air of finality.

"If you're ready, Captain."

Leslie bowed in silent assent and, following the Secret Service Officer down the long stone corridor to the street, took his place beside him in the automobile that was to carry them to the depot of the London-Petrograd airship line.

The theatres were pouring their multitudes out upon the pavements as the car passed through the brilliantly lighted streets. There was life and stir, the laughter of women, the ever-changing display of costly gowns, gleams from the polished enamel and plate glass of luxurious automobiles, all the pomp and panoply of a complex civilisation. A happy throng it was, radiating the prosperity brought by long years of peace; taking no thought for the morrow, for the morrow would be but as today and yesterday and the many days that had gone before; a joyous throng, with hearts untroubled by the needs of poverty and want, for, with the passing of the great armaments and the closer knitting of the nations in the bonds of industrial union and the growth of the interchange of labour among the great manufacturing countries of the world, poverty and want had almost faded into a tradition; a careless throng, secure in the remembrance of untroubled years, secure in the protection of wise laws wisely enforced, secure in the new religion of the brotherhood of man that was sweeping the world; a heedless throng, unmindful of the danger that threatened on their borders, blinded by wealth and power, trusting in God to shield His favoured people from harm, putting unreasoning faith in their rulers, who, though chosen from among themselves, they believed to be all-wise and all-seeing. Hardly a glance was cast at the swift, slate-coloured car passing ghost-like through the shifting mass of vehicles. Scarcely a single one in all that glittering stream remarked upon the two silent men who held the destiny of the world in their hands. Intent on the pleasure of the moment, they swarmed gaudily under the glaring lights, little thinking that the very foundations of their civilisation threatened to crumble beneath their feet. And the grim Major, watching the brilliant crowd as it passed before his eyes, muttered under his heavy moustache, "They seeing see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand."

At last the car drew up at the entrance of a massive stone and steel building in the Strand and the two officers alighted and hurried into the lofty waiting-room. The Major purchased

tickets, for from the moment of their setting out, the very fact that they belonged to the Police had to be kept concealed and they were travelling as ordinary gentlemen of leisure, bent upon seeing the world, without the credentials which, under usual circumstances, would have secured them transportation to wherever they wished to go.

The station was alive with people. Bearded Russians jostled yellow-haired Englishmen; giant Scandinavians conversed with stocky Frenchmen; a swarthy Brazilian, gesticulating vehemently, followed the stolid porter who bore his belongings; two fresh-cheeked girls from the Bavarian Republic scanned the anxious crowd with amused eyes while their escorts struggled with a mountainous pile of hand baggage, and Leslie noticed, with a certain tugging at his heart, a fair-faced American bride, bewildered, but clinging with happy confidence to her husband as his broad shoulders opened a path to the gate which led to the platform.

As they neared the gate, the crush increased and a babel of farewells deafened them. Friend embraced friend and then broke away to join the thin stream which trickled through the barrier. There were good wishes and boisterous laughter and there were tears, too, for Leslie saw a woman clasp her wondering child to her and suddenly put her handkerchief to her eyes. But the Major, unmoved, forced his way through the throng, drawing the Captain after him, and presently they emerged upon the platform, beside which rose the high, white hull of the big dirigible. It was but a few minutes to the hour of departure and already the white-clad crew were taking their stations preparatory to casting off the moorings that held the long ship prisoner. The hands of the illuminated clock touched at the summit of the dial. A deep-toned bell boomed through the station and the white hull trembled and soared upward as if rejoicing to be free from the earth at last. The lights of London dropped below them and were blotted quickly from sight as the giant ship rose into a dense cloud.

Leslie stood at the rail and stared blankly into the clammy mist that hung around them. As its heavy folds blotted out the calm light of the myriads of stars and supplanted the free air of heaven with impenetrable heaviness, so his unexpected mission with its unknown dangers, all the more fearful because concealed, dimmed the serene and shining future that had lain before him and replaced his hope of happiness with a choking atmosphere of doubt and dread. He had never flinched from duty before, but before he had never looked forward to greater happiness than the commendation of his superiors and the consciousness of work well and faithfully done. Then, sacrifice had meant the glory of a martyr's death; now it meant that he would never see Evelyn again. He started as he felt a touch on his shoulder and heard the Major's even voice in his ear.

"I think we'd better turn in, Captain. We've a hard task ahead of us, and to do our best we must keep fresh and fit."

That same night, Lieutenant Tommy Hooker of the first-class dirigible *Ariadne*, unworried by his vigil of the previous, thirty hours or more, was smoking a contemplative pipe in his cabin while awaiting the order that would start him back to his home station. A knock came on his door and at his brief summons to enter, a corporal of the International Police presented himself and, saluting, held out to the Lieutenant a small packet and a letter. The officer acknowledged the offering with a nod and, when the soldier had withdrawn, transferred his feet from his desk to the floor and, opening the missive, considered the contents with close attention. It was a short letter, but the Lieutenant read it three times and then with a troubled countenance broke the strings of the thin package that accompanied it. For a short space he gazed at the contents, unmindful that his pipe was fast growing cold. Finally he arose with a sigh at the sound of a hurried footstep in the corridor outside his cabin.

"Thank God," he muttered to himself, "my heart is still free."

And when his cadet entered an instant later with the yellow tissue of a wireless order, the Lieutenant took the thin sheet without noticing that the boy was staring curiously at the half of

a woman's golden bracelet which the officer still held in his left hand.

Chapter VI - Major Wilkie Disposes Of A Throne

IF the phantom of one of those European soldiers who tramped through the heat and dust to the relief of the besieged legations in the summer of 1900 could revisit the one-time Imperial city of Peking, he could be readily pardoned for at first mistrusting the evidence offered by his ghostly eyes. In place of the dirt and filth which he knew, he would find clean, well-paved streets and perfect sanitation; in place of the blackness which descended on the city as night closed in, he would see the brilliant glare of thousands of electric lights; in place of the bumping Peking cart in which he rode, he would be startled by the swift, smooth-gliding yellow street cars operated by the municipality. Much of the glory of old Peking has departed in these materialistic days, passing with the destruction of the picturesque old landmarks in the great fire which purged the city in the winter of 1937. The gaping tourist no longer gazes round-eyed at the splendours of the Lama Temple or wonders at the quaint old astronomical instruments in the Observatory. Instead he is led by obsequious guides through the rich beauties of the palace gardens, now a public park, and borne off to inspect the new water-works and the hideous, though imposing, government arsenal.

If the tourist is one of those unfortunate beings to whom a foreign city means simply so many buildings to behold (and carefully check off afterwards in his red-bound guide-book), so many streets to traverse (and mention casually with a frightful mangling of native names when once more among his own people), and so many curios to collect (to the despair of long-suffering customs officials), he will find little to interest him in the new Peking of the Republic of China. But if he be one of those rare souls for whom an unexplored metropolis holds but one thing -- the life and manners of the people -- he will leave the great northern capital with the firm conviction that his stay has not been in vain. For, although the external, material city has evolved into a thing blatantly and prosaically European, the immutable spirit of the East remains, inextricably and dominantly woven into the life of the inhabitants, and while, with the exception of the poorer classes, one finds the garb of western civilisation well-nigh universal, the soul of the Oriental still dwells within the outer shell, remote and inexplicable as in the days of Kublai Khan.

Possibly some such reflections as the foregoing occupied the mind of Captain Leslie Gardiner as he lounged along Legation street at the side of the taciturn Major Wilkie, for in the hour of their morning's ramble he had scarcely spoken three words. Speech of any kind was hardly to be expected from the silent Major and the casual conversation of companionship was practically unknown to him, so it was with some surprise that Leslie presently heard his brother officer enquire in a somewhat uninterested tone, "Did you ever make a study of Chinese history, Gardiner?"

"Why, yes," answered the Captain, hastily rounding up his wandering faculties. "I don't pretend to be a savant, of course, but I got the main events pretty well fixed in mind when I was out here before. In fact, I had to for some of the work I was doing."

"Then," continued the Major, in a still more uninterested manner, "perhaps you can run over some of the principal incidents in the life of Kuang Hsu for me -- if you'd care to."

"Well," replied Leslie reflectively. "To begin with, the Emperor Kuang Hsu was the nephew of the famous Dowager Empress Tsze Hsi An, whose own and only son died when he was about twenty years old without leaving an heir to the throne. He apparently meant well, did Kuang Hsu, but he wasn't any match for his aunt the Empress Dowager, who practically kept him a prisoner in his own palace, because she didn't like his ideas of reform, through the last years of his reign. Rather mean of the old lady, I call it, but she was a strong-minded individual and liked to use her power. Kuang Hsu died in the fall of 1908 and the Empress Dowager died the next day. That practically ended the Manchu dynasty, for the revolution

broke out about three years later and --"

"Yes, yes," broke in the Major rather impatiently, "that's far enough. Kuang Hsu was married, wasn't he?"

"Why, yes. Didn't I mention it? He married Yehonala, the daughter of Duke Kei, brother of the Empress Dowager, but there wasn't any offspring."

"Did you happen to know that the marriage was in deference to the wishes of the Empress Dowager and that Kuang Hsu really wanted another woman?"

"Can't say I did," replied the Captain, becoming interested. "Is that so?"

"Yes, and it's one of those little sidelights that make history interesting. To make up to Kuang Hsu for forcing a wife upon him whom he didn't want, the Empress Dowager permitted him to take the woman he loved for his chief concubine. This woman apparently had aspirations and, in addition, a brother who was one of the disciples of Kang Yu Wei, leader of the reform party which came into temporary power in 1898. Influenced by her brother, she brought Kang to the notice of the Emperor and when the reform movement fell with a crash shortly afterwards, this was remembered against her and she was degraded and imprisoned until the Boxer uprising in 1900. You may recall that the court fled from Peking when the allied troops marched to the relief of the besieged legations, and in the hurry of departure, the former chief concubine was overlooked and left behind in the palace. The story goes that she drowned herself in one of the palace wells to escape falling into the hands of the foreign soldiers." The Major paused significantly.

"And it wasn't true?" asked the Captain quickly.

"As a matter of fact, it wasn't," said the Major, "and I happen to be one of the very few who know about it. She escaped to the seacoast and a little later gave birth to a son, whose descendants are still living. It's a rather interesting story and one worth remembering by men in our line."

They had arrived in front of the lofty white stone front of the new Chih-li University, and here the Major came to a halt and glanced at his watch. At the same moment a young Chinaman emerged from the shadows of the pillared portico and came rapidly down the marble steps. He was redolent of the modern age of the Republic and his garments were of the most fashionable of western fashions. He greeted the Major with outstretched hand after the European manner and glanced significantly at Leslie. Wilkie made a reassuring gesture which the other apparently understood, for he at once said rapidly and in a low tone: "It is all arranged. My master will see you in half an hour."

"He is willing, then, to dispose of his merchandise?" enquired the Major in his ordinary manner.

The Oriental made a movement of assent.

"And the price?" queried the Major. "Has anything been arranged concerning the price?"

The other shook his head. "That must be decided between you," he replied. "But my master gave me to understand that he would consider no offer that was not worthy of the value of the commodity which he had for sale."

"I believe I am prepared to make him one which he will not refuse," said the Major with a grim smile. "And as it is so near the appointed time, I think we had better start along. Oh, by the way," he added, turning to Leslie, "allow me to present to you Mr. Li, one of our Peking agents."

The Captain acknowledged the young Chinaman's greeting without betraying any surprise. Since the beginning of his journey with the Major, the intricate and marvellously complete spy system which the Secret Service department maintained in all countries outside of the Federation had gradually unfolded before him until he had ceased to be astonished at meeting its ramifications in all places and at all times. He had known that such a system

existed while doing his work as an Intelligence officer and had even been permitted to make use of it on one or two occasions, notably when on his former mission to the China frontier; but he had never before suspected its extent, for the activities of the Secret Service were jealously guarded and probably no one except Colonel Villon himself knew of all the resources which it had at its command.

Turning southward when they reached the western end of Legation street, the three men passed under the arch of the Chien-men gate and penetrated for some distance into the Chinese city, where the guide suddenly swung into a side street and pulled up before a rather dilapidated structure, half European and half Chinese, whose green-tiled roof and walls and red-lacquered woodwork bore witness to either the poverty or extreme indifference of the present owner. Without giving his companions any opportunity for conjecture, however, Mr. Li led the way swiftly through the entrance pavilion and across a courtyard paved with grey stone to the low one-story building wherein dwelt his master.

The latter proved to be a youngish Oriental, not quite tall enough to be called of average height nor quite short enough to be called undersized. He was slim and his slimness was accentuated by his close-fitting western garments, but withal there was a wiry alertness about his movements that bespoke strength and gave ample proof likewise that his student days had been spent among the descendants of the Anglo-Saxons. He shook hands with the Major in the manner of one thoroughly accustomed to the operation -- another proof of his western training -- and then turned enquiringly to the Captain.

"This is Captain Gardiner, Mr. Wu," said the Major, introducing him, and Leslie could not repress a start of astonishment at hearing his proper name and rank pronounced in public for the first time since they had set out upon their quest. "The Captain is with me in this business. Gardiner, I have the honour of making known to you Mr. Wu, as he prefers to be called in public, but who among friends" -- and the Major shot a significant glance at the young Oriental -- "is addressed as Tsai Chih, only grandson of Kuang Hsu, the last real Emperor of China."

In a flash Leslie's mind reverted to the short exercise in Chinese history through which his superior had put him only half an hour previously, and he understood and paid mental tribute to the clever brain of his taciturn companion. But Mr. Wu had invited them to be seated and now a servant entered bearing the inevitable tea.

"It is one of the few customs of my countrymen to which I still cling," observed their host with a quick smile when the servant had withdrawn. "And now, gentlemen, let us, if you please, talk of more important affairs."

He paused courteously to permit any one who so desired to initiate the discussion and Major Wilkie with characteristic directness plunged at once into the breach.

"I am taking it for granted, sir, that you realise the necessity for keeping our conversation absolutely from any outside ears and have taken the requisite precautions." His listener assented by a motion of his hand. "So I will say without hesitation that, as Mr. Li has in all probability already informed you, I have arrived at the knowledge -- never mind how -- that you are one of the leaders in the conspiracy, now fully matured, to invade the countries of the International Federation as soon as a favourable opportunity shall present itself. I know that this conspiracy has progressed to such a point that complete plans for the rapid mobilisation and organisation of three large armies -- one in China, one in the Ottoman Empire, and one in India -- have been drawn up and accepted by the nations engaged in this movement and now lie in a secret repository in this city along with the treaties in which the allied powers have bound themselves to stick together until the International Federation is destroyed. I know that even now the leaders in the plot are trying to induce Japan to join with them and have practically succeeded, and that the savage tribes in the outlying dependencies of the Federation have been urged to rise against their rulers when the blow falls."

If the Major expected any signs of amazement from his auditor at this unexpected disclosure by a foreigner of secrets so terrible that for one of those involved in the conspiracy to utter them even among sympathising compatriots meant instant death to the rash speaker, he was disappointed, for the impassive countenance of the Oriental remained placid and undisturbed.

"It is perfectly obvious to you," pursued the Major, "that it is of great importance that the Federation secure these plans of campaign, or at least accurate copies of them, in order to meet the assault intelligently."

"Not only is it of the utmost importance, Major Wilkie," remarked Mr. Wu unexpectedly, "but it is necessary to the very life of your Federation that these papers pass into your hands. I have lived in the West for some years, Major, and I know that there this talk of a conspiracy to overwhelm the so-called civilised nations is not credited -- no, nor will be until you can present to the people better proof than you have been able to do so far. I know the western peoples, Major Wilkie. A danger which they cannot understand does not exist for them and they are very far from understanding this danger in the East. Even those who think about the matter at all have no conception of the numbers we can bring against them or," -- he added impressively -- "of the thoroughness of our preparation. And I know another thing. In less than a month the force to which you belong -- the only shield which the Federation possesses -- will number less than half its present strength. That is the opportunity for which we have been waiting -- and it will not be wasted."

The Major leaned forward suddenly and spoke rapidly in a low tone.

"There is no need to discuss this question further," he said. "You know the situation as well as I do -- possibly better. Mr. Li has assured me that you are ready to sell the plans of your organisation to the International Federation. Is that so?"

"I crave your pardon, Major Wilkie," the other returned suavely. "I informed my servant that I would sell those plans if the price you offered was high enough. I think that from the words I have spoken you can comprehend that the secrets I have to dispose of will demand a price far beyond the ordinary conception of man. In fact I doubt very greatly if mere money -- no matter how large the amount -- will buy them."

The Major leaned back in his chair and there was an indescribable tenseness in the atmosphere that warned Leslie that his superior was about to play his trump card.

"I offer you a throne," said the Major quietly. For an instant the unfathomable mask of the yellow man was lifted and a curious expression of surprise, doubt, eagerness, and insatiable ambition swept across his features, which a second later regained their accustomed calm.

"And that throne is --?" he enquired mildly.

"The throne of your grandfather Kuang Hsu -- the throne which would rule over a third of the population of the world -- the throne of Imperial China."

"And you offer me this throne," said Wu, smiling slightly, "when it is not yours to give?"

"Listen," returned the Major, "I know that the throne of China has been your ambition ever since you were old enough to realise from what parentage you sprang. I know that it has long been your dream to establish once again the power of the Manchus over the East and that it is because of this desire that you are taking part in this conspiracy, believing that in the upheaval that will follow you can accomplish your own ends. But have you realised that there are others who also have their dreams of rule and power? Do you not think Japan can produce a dozen men who have the same desire as yourself and twice the means to bring it about? Is it not possible that among the millions of Mohammedans there are a hundred who can enlist the services of an army to push them into power? But you say you have great influence over your fellow-countrymen, influence strong enough to make you a leader in the revolt against the domination of the West. Is your influence one whit stronger than that of

half-a-dozen of your colleagues? Remember, the secret of your illustrious ancestry is known to but a very few and you would have hard work to convince the masses that your claim was a valid one. You are undertaking a superhuman task, your Highness, and it appears to me that your chances of success are very slender."

Wu shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Is the aid you proffer any more certain?" he asked after a brief silence. The Major nodded emphatically.

"The war is bound to come," he returned, "for things have gone too far now to stop. If we are ready for it when it comes, we will win, and winning, we will crush the power of the East once and for all. We will not be content merely to hurl the attack back from our borders. We will follow the beaten armies and annihilate them. We will overrun the Orient and stamp out rebellion until not a spark remains. We will kill without mercy and destroy without scruple, for we must be sure that the work will never have to be done again. Do you think when we are through there will be any left who will dare to oppose whomsoever we see fit to place as ruler over them?"

Wu remained silent, but he could not hide the greed that shone in his eyes.

"All these are mere promises," he said at length. "What assurance have I that if I fulfil my part of the bargain, you will hold to yours?"

The Major drew a paper from the inner pocket of his coat and held it out to his questioner.

"This," he replied, "is a promise and agreement, signed by the President of the International Federation, that if through your aid the plans of the conspiracy are in his hands in time for us to prepare to meet the attack, the armies of the Federation will place you on the throne of China and help you to hold it. Is that sufficient?"

Leslie drew a quick breath. It came to him in that moment that the destiny of civilisation lay not in the clever brain of Colonel Villon or the inspired devotion of Signor di Conti, the High Commissioner; or even in the faithfulness and wisdom of the Major and himself. He understood as he had never done before that the real ruler of the world was that grey old man in London, who foresaw all and prepared for all.

Meanwhile the descendant of the Manchus was studying the paper the Major had given him as if he sought to read in its lines the safe and sure path for his ambition to follow. Presently he looked up.

"It is enough," he said. "I will aid you to secure the papers."

He rose and going to a cabinet, opened a secret drawer from which he took a plan, rudely drawn in India ink. This he spread before Leslie and the Major, following the lines with his long forefinger.

"The plans are hidden," he explained, "in the ruins of an old fu near the southern wall of the Tartar city" -- he indicated the location on his plan -- "which is said to be guarded by the spirits of the dead. For this reason and because the place has been for a long time deserted, we have considered it better not to station guards there who might, by their presence, arouse suspicion. Besides, the secret is known only to a few whose devotion to the cause" -- he smiled grimly -- "is beyond question. See, here is a diagram of the buildings. After crossing the first courtyard, you pass through a gate into an inner court beyond which is a large red-walled pavilion with tall columns in front. The hall of this pavilion is paved with stone and at one side you will find a loosened flagstone, which closes the entrance to an underground chamber. In the northeast corner of this vault, close to the floor, there are bricks in the wall which can be easily removed by hand and this gives access to the steel compartment in which the plans are deposited. You will have to make the venture alone, for I must pass the evening in the company of my fellow conspirators to ward off any suspicion of complicity in the theft. As it is, my head will not feel secure upon my shoulders until the army of the

Federation marches into Peking. Do your work quickly and silently and you need have no fear of interruption."

The Major nodded understandingly and rose to go. Wu took leave of the two officers ceremoniously and retired, leaving Mr. Li to accompany them to the entrance gate. As they were about to separate, the Chinaman placed a detaining hand on the Major's sleeve.

"Do you wish me to go with you?" he asked hurriedly.

The Major shook his head.

"No. The fewer there are, the better are the chances of success. You can be making the necessary preparations so that we can leave the city as soon as the papers are in our hands."

Li assented and withdrew and Leslie and his companion made their way swiftly back to their temporary abode.

"Major," said Leslie as they swung along through the crowded thoroughfare, "I believe you have introduced me to a very complete villain. Lord knows, I've lived too long to be overburdened with many illusions concerning the integrity of mankind, but it's -- well, it's just inconceivable that any man would sell his country in cold blood as your friend the Manchu prince has just done."

"There are a good many reasons why men will do inconceivable things," returned the Major reflectively, "but I tell you, Gardiner, there's nothing on God's earth will turn a man into a devil incarnate, without honour and without remorse, quicker than the lust for power. If I didn't believe that, I'd never have put our lives into the hands of that rascal as I have done."

"Heaven send you're right," said the Captain soberly.

Chapter VII - "For The Greatest Good Of All Mankind"

THE Major counselled Leslie to eat a hearty dinner that evening, for, as he wisely observed, they would have some rapid travelling to do once they got started and there was no telling when they would have time for another meal. At eight o'clock they set out, wrapped in heavy coats of fur, for the night was freezing cold, and traversing uncrowded by-streets as much as possible, soon arrived opposite the crumbling gateway of the old fu. Making sure that the street was deserted, the two officers crossed the road and, passing through the entrance gate, they moved rapid and silent as shadows across the inner courtyards. The door of the red pavilion yielded to a slight push and they were quickly swallowed up in the blackness of the lofty hall.

Here the Major produced an electric lantern and swept its brilliant rays carefully over the irregular pavement, occasionally turning the light on a rough diagram which he held in his other hand. At length a stone rang hollowly under Leslie's feet and, stooping down, he began to feel around the edges for a handhold. But the Major waved him dumbly aside. Drawing a short steel crowbar from under his coat, he slipped its sharp edge into the crevice between the stones. And lo! the heavy slab moved easily to one side with a subdued murmur of well-oiled rollers, disclosing a black opening into which a flight of stone steps disappeared. Instinctively both men hesitated and listened with straining ears, but the heavy silence of the deserted pavilion cloaked them as closely as the darkness. Satisfied that all was right, the Major stepped quickly down the black stairway with Leslie close behind him and was presently throwing the light from his electric lantern along the walls and into the corners of the apartment into which they had descended.

It was a brick-lined vault with a ceiling so low that Leslie's six feet of height reached clear to the roof, and it had a dead, dry, musty breath that oppressed the senses like carbon dioxide. To Leslie's imaginative brain it seemed as though he had been buried alive and he had an almost uncontrollable impulse to rush forth again into the comparatively fresher air of the pavilion. But the Major had finished comparing his plan with his pocket compass and now, advancing to one corner of the compartment, commenced tugging at the seemingly firm-set bricks with his crowbar. They yielded readily and in a few moments Leslie, crouching close behind his companion, saw him slide his arm into the hole he had made in the wall and draw it forth again, clutching a large bundle carefully wrapped in oiled silk. While the younger officer held the lantern, the Major rapidly tore off the coverings and immediately the tightly-rolled documents opened out before their eager eyes.

"Here are the treaties," whispered Wilkie, swiftly separating a small mass of papers from the bundle, "and these are the mobilisation plans. Those we want anyhow."

Feeling at his waist, he unbuckled a heavy canvas belt, which he wore strapped about him, and taking from a compartment it contained a thin nickle-plated case, he folded the important documents into as small a compass as he could and thrust them into it.

"This other stuff," he said, running through the papers rapidly, "we can't very well handle and it isn't of much importance anyhow. Let's see if there's anything else in there we've overlooked." And he ran his arm once more into the hole in the wall and began feeling around in the black interior.

"Good God!" cried Leslie suddenly in a frightened voice, clutching at his holster. "What's that?"

The Major whipped about and the bright rays of the lantern glanced along the short barrel of his automatic as it pointed towards the vague shadows in the further corners of the vault. In the dead silence that followed the Captain's cry they heard soft footfalls on the floor of the pavilion above their heads. Then, as the Major leaped to his feet with a savage oath, the

heavy stone slab that closed the entrance to their prison jarred dully into place.

"My God!" screamed Leslie suddenly, as the full horror of their position came to him. "We're trapped, like rats! We haven't a chance in the world, Major! Not a single chance!"

"Sold us -- the damned hound!" roared the Major fiercely. "God! what a fool I was to trust him! Gardiner, it was my damned folly got you into this!"

But the Captain was breathing heavily through dry, quivering lips as he mechanically fumbled at his holster.

"We must fight 'em off as long as we can, Major -- fight 'em off as long as we can -- hey, Major? We'll send a few of 'em to hell before we go." He laughed recklessly as he jerked out his weapon. Wilkie's iron grip closed on his wrist and the pistol clattered to the floor.

"Stop that!" commanded the Major hoarsely. "I've got to think."

He dug his knuckles into his forehead, lashing his startled brain to meet the emergency. An instant later he raised his head again.

"Listen!" he ordered tensely, tightening his grasp on his companion's wrist. "Whatever happens to us, we've got to save those papers. If we can hide them before those damned rats get us, there's always a chance that our friends will find them somehow and send them on. No, there's no place here" -- as the Captain's gaze wandered vacantly about the narrow walls of the vault -- "They'll turn this place upside down when they find the plans are missing. They'll search us, too. There's only one safe way."

He drew from his pocket the little nickel-plated death tube which he had shown the Captain in London on the night of their departure. "Two seconds after I take this, I'll be dead. You must cut me open and hide the case with the papers in my body. If you're questioned about my death, say that I was afraid to fall into their hands and killed myself. They'll accept the story for a while, anyhow." He hurled his pistol into the black hole in the wall and snatching the Captain's weapon from the floor, sent it whirling after his own. "That won't be any use to you. We must have only our knives, or they may wonder why I didn't use lead. They'll take my corpse out of here and you must try to find out what they do with it. You'll probably be tortured, but they may not kill you. If you're left alive, try to complete the mission somehow. Get word to Li where the papers are hidden, even if you know you have to die. You can trust him absolutely. Forgive me, Captain -- and goodbye!"

He began to unscrew the tube swiftly, but Leslie caught his arm.

"My God, Major -- it's too awful -- I can't do it! Isn't there some other way? Isn't there --"

His comrade shook him off roughly.

"You've got to do it!" he cried savagely. "It's the only possible way. Remember your oath, Captain. It's for the greatest good of all mankind. You swore to uphold that when you entered the Service. Damn you, Gardiner, I'm your superior officer! Pull yourself together, you damned coward, and obey me, or you'll be disgraced forever!"

A blow from his heavy hand sent the Captain reeling back into the shadows. But he recovered quickly, and with chalk-white face and set jaw took the long-bladed knife the Major held out to him. In an instant, the latter had torn off the cover of the shining tube and with steady hand, poured the contents down his throat. A second passed while he tore convulsively at his breast. Then, as the swift poison burned out his life, he dropped in a huddled heap at the Captain's feet. For a brief interval, Leslie was shaken by a deadly nausea. But when it had passed, he took up the glittering knife and with a firm hand set about his horrid task.

It was perhaps half an hour later that the slab slid open again, and amid the glare of many lanterns a throng of merciless yellow faces crowded down the stone stairway into the vault below. They gazed with curious eyes at the bloody corpse and the silent figure standing above it as motionless as the dead man himself. At length four men gathered up the ghastly

bundle on the floor and the others, closing around Leslie, urged him up the stone steps into the lofty hall of the red pavilion, which now shone with many brilliant lights.

A row of chairs ran along each of the side walls and at the upper end a bare wooden table, behind which three seats were arranged, marked the spot sacred to the presiding officers. They were already seated when Leslie was brought in and now his escort rapidly filled the remaining places, leaving him alone in the centre of the hall. He felt the many pairs of cold, cruel eyes turned upon him in silence, but the concentrated hatred with which they sought to overwhelm him glanced aside from him and left him unshaken. He was telling himself that after the terrible ordeal through which he had just passed, nothing could ever stir him again.

Presently two men ascended from the vault below and advancing to the presiding officers, spoke with many gesticulations expressive of rage and perturbation and although Leslie could not comprehend what they were saying, his senses told him that the encircling weight of malevolence was increasing with every word. As the speakers ended, an ominous stir ran around the assemblage and fierce ejaculations arose in different parts of the circle, but the old mandarin who sat at the middle of the bare table checked the rising tumult and motioned the prisoner to approach.

"You and that other devil, your companion," he said in excellent English, although his voice quivered with rage, "have sought to spy upon us and rob us of our secrets. Why have you done this?"

"I sought to uncover the treachery of your nation," returned Leslie between his teeth. "To show the Federation which I serve the danger menacing our civilisation and our principles of progress and the brotherhood of man."

"You speak of civilisation," cried the old man angrily. "What is your civilisation but the thing of a day? Ours has lasted through centuries and will last through centuries more when yours is dead and forgotten. You speak of progress and the brotherhood of man! Is this the doctrine your traders profess who rob us of our resources and insult and revile us when we seek to protect what is only our own by right? Your missionaries come amongst us preaching a religion of universal love, while your rulers exploit us for their own gain as their forefathers did before them when, for money, they ruined our people with their hateful opium. Your nations steal our territory bit by bit, secure in the knowledge that we cannot resist their encroachments, and you tell us that this is the enlightenment that will make a paradise of the world. You usurp the rule of our cities and provinces and administer them for the benefit of your rapacious money-getters, soothing us with the smug assurance that it is for the greatest good of mankind, and when we must perforce submit, you taunt us with our weakness. Do you marvel that, when reason and the dictates of justice fail, we should follow the example you have so often held before our eyes and put our hands to the sword? But enough of this! You cannot understand us -- you who would constitute yourself the arbiter of our destinies -- any better than your ancestors could in days gone by. You have stolen our most valued plans and documents. Where have you hidden them?"

"I cannot say," replied the Captain in a low tone, and at his answer a roar swelled through the gathering and died away as the roar of a breaker on a stony beach.

"Again I ask you, where have you hidden them?" cried the old mandarin, striking the table in front of him angrily.

"I cannot say," returned Leslie steadily, though his face grew even whiter than before. And again the muffled roar swept through the throng, mingled with sharp exclamations of hate and defiance.

"For the last time I ask you, where have you concealed the papers?" said the old man in a terrible voice. "You are in our power and had best reply."

"I cannot say," answered Leslie, immovable as the stone pillars that supported the high

roof-beams, though the perspiration stood in great drops upon his forehead. For a third time he heard the clamour surge about him and his eyes caught here and there the glitter of a knife half drawn from under gorgeous silken robes. But the mandarin made a sign to certain of his followers and while some skilfully pinioned the prisoner's arms, others brought curiously-shaped bits of wood which they fastened about his fingers. The un pitying circle leaned expectantly forward as the old man gave a signal and Leslie felt his knuckles crack under the vice-like pressure exerted upon them. He set his teeth grimly as the frightful pain shot through him, but though the sweat poured from his face in streams, he uttered no sound.

"Where have you hidden the papers?" came the old mandarin's voice through the blinding haze of his suffering, but he only ground his teeth the tighter and shook his head. He felt the pressure on his fingers increase until the warm blood spouted from the tips, but though he strained in agony at the bonds that held him, as often as the old man's question was repeated, so often did he rally his failing faculties and make a sign of refusal. At length the instruments of torture were removed from the shapeless, gory members that remained on his hands and his guards turned to their chief inquiringly. The old man rose and regarded the prisoner with a cruel smile.

"We will give you the remainder of the night to come to your senses," he said. "I think when we return in the morning you will better appreciate the wisdom of telling us what you know. Take him away."

They seized his arms again and hurried him unresisting from the hall across a dim courtyard, where the cold night air bathed him with its reviving breath. The door of a narrow, brick-walled cell stood open and in this they thrust him, fastening him with heavy chains to the stout wooden bench so that he was held immovable. Then the door banged and he was left alone.

From the whirling confusion into which the hurt from his crushed fingers had involved his senses, the vision of a face rose before his troubled eyes -- a face whose sweet beauty was framed in masses of rich dark hair in which distracting lights and shadows played. So vivid was the illusion that he endeavoured to lean closer, but relaxed again as the chains cut into his flesh.

"God!" he groaned in his agony. "Will I ever see her again?"

Then a wave of terror swept over him and he wrestled vainly with his bonds, uttering savage, incoherent exclamations. With such a face waiting for him on the other side of the world, he cried out that he could not die, even though the ruins of humanity fell in fragments about his feet. At last he waited, weak and trembling, his limbs bathed in cold sweat, fighting for the possession of the senses that remained to him.

Suddenly a drop of cold water fell upon his bared shoulder. His nerves tightened to the new danger and for long minutes he sat tensely, straining to see his invisible enemy. Then he laughed hysterically in a vain effort to pull himself together. What menace could manifest itself in that close-walled tomb save through the door towards which he was peering? But his laughter was frozen on his lips as a second drop fell and struck with tingling impact on the same spot as the first. Again his fears arose and overwhelmed him. He had heard of the horrid torture of the water drop, which falling always in the same place, at length bursts open the flesh of the victim, whose mind it has already torn to shreds with its ceaseless monotony, and he sobbed aloud at his impotency against the fiendish ingenuity of his captors.

Through the long hours that followed the sweet, beautiful face of his love stayed with him as he battled for his wavering sanity. But when the grey, cold light of morning filtered through the door of his prison, he knew that he could not die.

They came for him as the first molten shafts of sunlight shot over the plain and guided his shaken and nerveless form back to the council hall, where his judges silently awaited him.

And again as in a fearful dream he heard the insistent voice of the old mandarin repeating his eternal question and in vague surprise he felt his lips frame their former answer, "I cannot say."

The old man leaned forward in his chair and this time his words came clear and burned themselves into the Captain's brain.

"Hear me, you western devil. Our patience is not tireless and you have tried it beyond all reason. If you will answer our question you may from that moment go free, but if not" -- he paused threateningly -- "you will be cut with swords until you die. It will be a slow death and you will have ample time for reflection before your soul passes."

A deathly sickness gripped Leslie and he reeled in the hands that detained him, but he remained silent and gave no sign. At a motion from the chief he was stripped of his clothing and bound tightly to a heavy plank. His shuddering eyes saw the light ripple and glance along the shining blade poised over him and he moaned as the sharp steel sliced into his arm. Suddenly the face rose before him again, beautiful as ever, but paler and with beseeching grey eyes that tore at his very soul. Great God, how could he die with such a face waiting for him? What was death with honour -- what was his oath and the glory of passing with a clean heart if he must leave that forever? What mattered black shame and the betrayal of his fellow men if he could only see her and hold her in his arms once again? And when the eager sword bit into his quivering flesh anew, he whispered with dry lips, "I will tell."

Impassive, they heard his broken sentences and in silence unbound him and thrust him bleeding from the hall. Then the old mandarin sent men swiftly to the inner court where the body of the Major had been carelessly hurled, but though they searched in every nook and crevice, though they ransacked the grounds and buildings of the old fu from end to end, they returned empty-handed. The corpse was gone.

Chapter VIII - Lieutenant Hooker Keeps His Promise

"ISN'T this just the most glorious Christmas weather you ever saw, Jimmy?" exclaimed Mabel Thornton ecstatically. "It makes me feel so good that it almost hurts."

Her companion smiled down on her eager, upturned face indulgently.

"Glorious I'll admit, but a trifle chilly for all that. Mabs, your adorable though turned-up nose is at this moment an undeniable Prussian blue at the tip and as for my feet, I believe you could skate over them without their being aware that anything out of the ordinary had occurred."

The girl laughed with the rippling note of a brown woodland stream and tossed back a heavy strand of hair that had fallen across her face. She was darker than her sister and possessed a vividness and sparkle that the more serious Evelyn lacked. Looking at her dimpling beauty, Jim Merriam caught himself wondering in what way sorrow would alter those bright eyes and that merry red mouth, whose whimsical curves seemed to imply that it was always ready to break into a smile or more likely a flow of bubbling laughter upon the slightest given provocation or no provocation at all.

"I'm not worried about my nose," she retorted. "That stopped having any feeling in it long ago. But I'll confess my feet might be warmer."

"Then suppose we go round once more and quit. There's no use freezing to death for the sake of enjoying ourselves, and besides something tells me that the hour for eating approacheth."

"Come along then, Professor. Goodness! I hate to waste a single minute of this splendid ice, for I just know it's going to snow tonight and spoil it all."

She pirouetted away, the sunlight flashing from the polished steel of her skates as from a heliograph, and the less expert Jimmy followed as rapidly as he was able.

"It's too bad you couldn't persuade Eve to come out," he remarked as he came up with his companion and took the furry-gloved hands she held out to him. "I think it would have done her a lot of good."

"Poor Eve!" said her sister commiseratingly, "I'm afraid she's a good deal worried about Leslie, though she won't say anything about it even to me."

"I don't suppose she's heard anything --?" hinted Merriam.

"Not a word since that note two months ago saying that he was starting out. You haven't any news that you're keeping to yourself, have you?" And she shot a quick glance at her friend.

"Not a whisper, Mabs. You know I'd tell her if I had. It wouldn't be any kindness to Eve to keep bad news from her. It'd have to come out sooner or later."

"No," replied the girl rather irrelevantly, "I don't think you have. Do you really believe anything could have happened?"

"There's no use speculating until we know more than we do now. Les isn't the man to take foolish risks and I'd trust his head to pull him through anything that came up in the ordinary course of events. There's a lot of funny business going on among the Powers that Be just now and I'm not at all surprised that he's been detailed for some job they want kept quiet until it's finished."

"That's what I tell sis, but you know there's no arguing with a woman when she's in love. Anyhow I wish he'd hurry up and appear before Eve frightens herself into nervous prostration as she's trying her best to do -- take a shorter stroke on the turns, Jim. My legs aren't as long as yours."

"I wish I could do something to help her," said Merriam, lessening his stride obediently. "But there's nothing that can be done in a case of this kind except wait."

"I know you do, Jimmy dear," replied Mabel softly. "And I wish you had the right. But -- well, I'm afraid it can't be helped. A woman doesn't fall in love because there's any reason for it. She just does, that's all."

"Then -- then you know?" said Merriam a little huskily.

"I'm not blind," returned the girl, looking out across the dazzling lake. "And I want to tell you, Jimmy, that I think you've behaved splendidly and if it ever makes you feel any better to talk about it, why, you needn't be afraid you'll bore me."

"Mabs," said Jim earnestly, returning the friendly pressure of her little hand, "I believe you're the nearest approach to an angel that ever blessed an unsuspecting earth and if I ever have the chance to show you --"

"I'm glad some one appreciates my good qualities," she interrupted more lightly. "So few do. Now if you really want to show your gratitude, you can begin by taking my skates off for me. My hands are absolutely numb. Oh, look! I do believe our party's arriving."

She pointed across the level meadow, brown and desolate in the grip of the winter frost, to the big white house before which an automobile had just drawn up and was disgorging its fur-wrapped occupants amid a babel that reached them almost undiminished in the clear, freezing atmosphere.

"Who's coming?" asked Merriam as he swung the skates over his shoulder and, taking the girl's arm, hurried her over the crisp, dry grass.

"Connie Coleman -- she's my room-mate you know -- and her brother -- you'll like him -- he's an awfully nice fellow -- and Mrs. McPherson and her husband -- she used to be Dolly Hemingway, you remember? Her hubby's in business with dad and he met Dolly first at our house when she was visiting sis."

"Well, I hope there'll be enough dinner to go around," said Merriam as they ran up the steps.

"Piggy!" she retorted, holding up a slim finger at him. "Don't you ever think about anything but eating? Consider poor me -- all my fussy clothes to get into and just twenty minutes to do it in."

She vanished up the broad, old-fashioned staircase with a laugh, while Jim was immediately engulfed in the throng of new arrivals.

"Well, Mrs. McPherson," he exclaimed, greeting a fashionably-gowned, golden-haired young woman with friendly blue eyes, "it's awfully nice to see you again. Marriage seems to have agreed with you," he added, glancing appreciatively at her happy, smiling face.

"It agrees with me so well that I'm recommending it to all my friends," she replied. "You'd better try it yourself, Professor Merriam."

"'Fraid I haven't the time," he laughed. "A university department requires more attention than a wife. I can't afford both."

"You poor man! They must keep you frightfully busy. We've been hearing something of the wonderful record you've been making since you took charge."

"Please don't turn my head any more than it is already. As it is, I'm thinking seriously of asking the president of the university to retire in my favour."

"Then you'll be so exalted we won't any of us dare speak to you, so I'd better fulfil my obligations while you're still approachable. Connie, this is Professor Merriam of whom you have doubtless heard Mabel speak many a time and oft."

"I'm delighted to meet you, Miss Coleman," said Merriam heartily, taking the hand the tall girl rather timidly extended. "But I must warn you that, as a friend of Mabel Thornton's, I shall absolutely refuse to consider you as a mere acquaintance."

"In that case," she returned, smiling, "I intend to monopolise you as soon as dinner is over and make you talk shop. My chemistry is the bete noir of my existence and I'm sure you could

aid my faltering steps if you'd only be so kind."

"I'm yours to command," bowed Jim gallantly. "We will hold a special class as soon as I have satisfied my ravenous hunger."

He would have added more, but at that moment the Thorntons' butler touched him on the arm.

"Beg your pardon, Mr. James, sir," he said in a low tone, "but there's a military man at the door asking for Miss Evelyn, an' Miss Evelyn not bein' ready an' Mrs. Thornton bein' particularly engaged --"

"Oh, all right, Harris, I'll see to your friend directly. You'll pardon me, Miss Coleman?"

"Only on condition that you remember after dinner," she replied archly.

"I won't forget. After dinner it is, in the southwest cosy corner near the big fireplace."

He made his escape and hastened through the hall, asking himself as he went if it could be news of Leslie and if so, what news. For a brief minute he debated whether or not it could be the Captain himself, but his reason told him that it was not like Leslie to suddenly appear from nowhere at the risk of startling his ladylove into hysterics. At the door he stopped in some surprise, for instead of the expected grey-clad police orderly, he was confronted by a short, stocky young man, dressed in a rough, dark blue overcoat, the sleeves of which were ornamented with three stripes of gold lace and a foul anchor flanked by three gold bars, who was discussing a tough-looking cheroot with every indication of perfect satisfaction. This unlooked-for individual quickly removed both his cap and cheroot as the door opened, but beholding a fellow male, replaced both as swiftly and regarded Merriam with something of suspicion.

"I was told you wished to see Miss Thornton," began the Professor, "but as she isn't quite ready to receive callers, perhaps I can take the message."

Then, as the other hesitated with a dubious expression on his tanned countenance, Merriam added, "Is it anything about Captain Gardiner? Perhaps I had better explain that I am an intimate friend of both the Captain and Miss Thornton, and if it's bad news --"

"Well," interrupted the sailor, apparently satisfied, "there's no use denying that it is and I guess it's just as well to explain it to a friend of the family -- and a man -- to start with. I'm Lieutenant Hooker, commanding the first-class dirigible Ariadne, Naval Division, Mr. --"

"Merriam," said Jim impatiently.

"Merriam?" repeated the Lieutenant, "glad to make your acquaintance. I carried the Captain on the first leg of his trip and just before we landed in London he said to me: 'Hooker, I have a feeling that this mission I've been sent on is going to be a dangerous one. If I don't come back within a certain time' -- two months it was -- 'it'll be because I've been killed in the performance of my duty and I want you to take this packet to a girl at home and tell her that I died thinking of her to the end.' Well, the two months are up and here I am."

It seemed to the bewildered Professor as if a black cloud had suddenly settled down over the clear winter landscape, blotting out the bright sunshine and turning the smiling earth into an emptiness and desolation. He had never realised until that moment how firmly he had believed in his friend's ability to surmount all dangers and difficulties and come back at last, safe and triumphant, to those who loved him. And dominating his own grief, was the thought that came to him with a sinking of the heart of what the brutal message would mean to that other, far dearer than a friend to him, for whom he would gladly have given his life, but whom he was powerless to spare this crushing blow.

"Say," said the sympathetic naval officer, "it's too damned bad, that's what it is. I only saw the Captain for a short time, but I feel almost as cut up over it as though I'd known him all my life. He was too fine a man to be wiped out like that, when there were plenty of blunder-headed fools who could be spared just as well as not. Good Lord! Who's this?"

His hand instinctively went to his cap again, as Merriam, turning quickly at the sound of a light step behind him, confronted Mabel Thornton.

"Hello, Jimmy," she exclaimed joyously. "Didn't I do well? It only took me fifteen minutes -- Why, what's the matter?"

She gazed at the faces of the two men in startled amaze and faltered backward a step as if to ward off an expected blow.

"Come out and shut the door," commanded Jim in a low tone. "Mabs, this is Lieutenant Hooker of the Naval Division. He's just brought the news that Leslie is--"

"Not dead?" breathed the girl almost inaudibly, staring with wide, frightened eyes.

"I'm afraid so," said Jim, turning his face away.

Suddenly Mabel bowed her head in her hands and sobbed aloud.

"Oh, poor, poor Eve! This will kill her!"

The kind-hearted Lieutenant shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other and at last, fearful of losing his composure, hurriedly resumed his story.

"I wirelessly headquartered so as to be sure of my ground before I came here. All they knew was that reports had come in regularly until about three weeks ago, when they unaccountably stopped, and since then no word of any kind had been received from him. That, and the fact that he was overdue, led them to fear the worst. Although, of course, they wouldn't tell me anything about the kind of work he had been sent to do or what part of the world he was in, I was given to understand that his failure to turn up when he was expected could mean only one thing -- that his plans had miscarried. And the nature of his mission was such that failure meant death."

As he was speaking the girl had grown calmer and now she turned her tear-wet, appealing face up to her friend.

"How can we tell her?" she besought him tremulously. "How can we tell her? Oh, Jimmy, help me!"

Merriam tugged thoughtfully at his watch chain, with deep puckers in his forehead between his eyes.

"She mustn't know about it today of all days," he said at last, "and when tomorrow comes -- why, I can tell her as well as any one else, I suppose. That is if you think you can act your part today, Mabs."

"You can trust me," she returned in a low voice. "And now I think we'd better go in or they'll be missing us inside."

"Well," observed the Lieutenant in a relieved tone, "then I'll be off before any one notices me. Here's the packet." And he held out a small parcel wrapped in a blank official form.

Mabel took it from his hand, hesitated, and glanced at Merriam as if seeking his assistance, and finally suggested somewhat uncertainly, "Perhaps -- don't you think she might want to speak to you after -- when she knows? You see, he gave the message to you personally and -- and you were the last one to be with him."

"That's so," agreed Jim quickly, "I hadn't thought of that."

"Oh, well," assented the officer heartily, "in that case I'll camp out at the Inn until you want me."

"You won't do anything of the kind," returned the girl, remembering herself even in her sorrow. "Do you think after all you've done for us, we're going to spoil your Christmas for you? You must come right in and have dinner with us. Jim, you take charge of him and do the honours, please."

"But I say," protested the Lieutenant in alarm, "I'm not prepared for anything like that and besides I never was much of a social light anyhow."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Mabel. "It's nothing for you to be afraid of -- just a family party --"

and -- let me think a minute -- Oh, I know! I met you at a college dance and asked you here today and forgot all about it until you suddenly appeared. I've done things like that more than once before and they won't think it strange."

And before the Lieutenant could expostulate further, he was carried off by the Professor, who helped him to remove the stains of travel and guided him to the dining-room, where Mabel was still explaining to her amused, but perfectly credulous, family his unexpected appearance.

All through the dinner, Hooker watched her whenever he could manage to do so undetected and when the meal was over and the men had gathered around the big fireplace over their cigars, his eyes continually wandered to the little group clustered about the big piano at the far end of the room. She was singing a merry Christmas song with a jolly little trill running through it like her own rippling laughter and as the last clear note soared, hung an instant and died away amid a little burst of feminine applause, the Lieutenant smote his knee appreciatively, but to himself he was saying, "By the Lord, she's a thoroughbred! To listen to her, you wouldn't think she had a care in the world."

You would have thought so even less had you beheld her, a little later on, playing hide-and-seek with an enthusiasm one-half of which expended on her studies would have graduated her with the highest honours a full year ahead of time; or teaching the Lieutenant the intricacies of the old-fashioned waltz -- which was just then coming into favour once more after a sleep of nearly half a century -- despite his repeated protestations that he couldn't dance anything but the hornpipe and that only by proxy. Under her irresistible influence the Lieutenant forgot the sombre duty that had brought him there, Merriam put aside his many cares and frankly relapsed into childhood, and even Evelyn felt a lightening of the daily-increasing load of vague, unformed dread which she bore.

And there was a game of hunt-the-slipper, at the proposal of which pretty Dolly McPherson made a great outcry that she never, never, never would submit to having the Professor undergo such an indignity as being asked to sit upon the floor; nor would she be quieted until the unresisting Jimmy was enthroned in the tallest chair that the combined efforts of the Lieutenant and Mr. McPherson could produce. Whereupon Constance Coleman, exalted beyond her natural timidity, promptly invested him with a huge brown paper fool's-cap, hastily improvised by Mabel, and then in sudden terror at her own unheard-of audacity, retired precipitately into the coat closet and could not be persuaded to emerge again until her victim assured her through the keyhole that he bore no malice and considered it rather a good joke than otherwise.

Last of all, as the short winter's day drew to a close, they made a semicircle about the light of the roaring fire and apples and nuts in dainty baskets of thin silver were passed around, while under the expert care of some of the younger members of the party the marshmallows grew to a luscious brown in the warmth of the blaze and the popcorn danced in the popper and flew with sudden reports into masses of tantalising whiteness.

At length when the stories came at longer and longer intervals and finally even Hooker insisted that he could not recall a single other adventure, the circle began to disintegrate. Constance Coleman, suddenly recollecting the passing of time and opportunity, captured the Professor and drew him aside into an obscure corner, from which presently issued such sounds as, "-- and then when you add HN03 --" "But, Professor Merriam, when I do it, it doesn't." The two businessmen vanished into the library, ostensibly to decide a disputed matter of financial rating, but as they failed to reappear, it was evident that they found their own society all-sufficient. Jack Coleman, having a passion for music when rendered by a musician of acceptable beauty, dragged Evelyn off to the piano, while the deserted wives affected to listen, but rather spoiled the impression they desired to convey by a constant

murmur of, "And, my dear, I never would have believed it of her --" to the intense satisfaction of young Mrs. McPherson, who felt that her wedding ring was at last gaining her admission to the conversation of the grownup married world with all its delightful scandal-swapping.

"Tell me," said Mabel, shielding from the firelight the tired lines that aged her girl face, "did I do well?"

"Do well?" repeated the Lieutenant. "Say, Miss Thornton, I wish you'd let me spread out on the floor and then walk on me awhile. You ought to get a Distinguished Service Medal for what you did today -- only it wouldn't be half reward enough."

She smiled a little wearily and twisted and untwisted her fingers in the gold chain about her smooth throat.

"It hasn't been easy," she said with a little catch in her voice, "but I could do it all the rest of my life if I thought it would help sister."

She took the packet the Lieutenant had given her from the bosom of her dress and unfolding the wrapping, turned the broken circlet it contained idly in her hands, watching the wavering firelight flicker and flame from the red gold.

"It all seems so cruel and -- and unnecessary," she went on. "Why should she have to suffer so when her only fault was to love a man too well? It isn't as though she'd ever done anything to merit this -- this that's come to her. Evelyn's always been such a good girl -- so thoughtful and kind and unselfish and patient with us all. And goodness knows" -- with a sorrowful little smile -- "there are times when the Angel Gabriel himself couldn't exist in the same house with me. Even mother can be awfully exasperating when she wants to, but Eve never got cross with us or nagged and if we were ever in any trouble -- And now this -- Oh, it isn't fair! It isn't! It isn't!"

She stopped, choking back a sob and her bosom strained at its silken covering as if it would burst the shimmering fabric asunder.

"It's life, little lady," said the Lieutenant soberly. "When we're young, we can't get over the feeling that for every sorrow we endure there should be a compensating joy and that there ought to be and must be some great, equalising power that evens things up so that the good live happily ever after and the wicked repent in sackcloth and ashes. Then, as we get a little older, we begin to find out that there isn't a universal justice in life. Very often there isn't any justice in it at all -- at least not the kind we expect. We see ignorance punished as if it were a deadly sin and excellent intention become a curse where it should have been a help, and worst and hardest of all to bear, we see over and over again the innocent suffering for the mistakes of the guilty; or even from no human fault at all, but just through a combination of circumstances which could not be foreseen and for which, apparently, no one is to blame."

"And is that all we come into life for? -- Just to live and suffer, often through no fault of our own?" she whispered with a strange, hard look on her young face.

"I don't know," replied the Lieutenant, staring at the firelight, "I don't know. Perhaps in spite of the anxiety she has borne and the anguish she is doomed to bear, your sister would say that life has given her one thing which makes up for all and that is -- love."

For many minutes they were silent while the blue and yellow and crimson flames ebbed and flowed and threw fantastic lights and shadows on the rugged features of the sailor and the youthful, mutinous face of the girl. Occupied with their own thoughts, they did not notice that the piano had stopped and when at last Mabel raised her head in sudden terror, she looked into the wide, staring eyes of her sister.

"Mabel," said Evelyn hoarsely, pointing to the broken bracelet, which the other still unconsciously held in her hand, "where did that come from? Tell me! I must know!"

Instinctively the younger girl glanced at the man beside her, but he made a helpless gesture. The situation was beyond him.

"Tell me!" breathed Evelyn again, her face slowly whitening as she devoured them with her eyes.

Then Mabel rose with a new dignity that had cloaked her on the instant, and putting a slender arm about her sister's trembling body, drew Eve's white cheek down against her own.

"Dear heart," she said softly, "come with me. I have something to say to you." And she led her tenderly from the room. They slowly mounted the broad stairway, Mabel clinging more and more tightly to the handrail as Evelyn's weight dragged more and more heavily upon her, and gained the tall-windowed, blue-and-gold bedroom which they had shared from babyhood; and here Evelyn sank mutely into the big, wide-armed chair while her sister knelt beside her, clasping her hands in a close, loving grip.

"It's Leslie," said Mabel simply.

Why was it that the old dread should clutch at Evelyn's heart with such a new and sinister meaning? She knew the answer that would be given even before she asked the question, "Is he --?"

"Yes," choked Mabel and hid her face on her sister's shoulder.

She did not cry out in a passion of grief as Mabel half feared, half hoped she would. She only uttered a single little moan like a stricken animal and then remained mute and trembling and clutching at her sister's hands. Even when Mabel began in a low voice to repeat what the Lieutenant had told, she made no sign. But her eyes darted about the room as if she were some trapped wild thing, seeking a loophole of escape from the unconceived and strange enemy.

"So at least," ended Mabel, "he died as a soldier and a gentleman should, doing his duty to the end and leaving his honour unstained like a true knight, even though he failed in his task."

But Evelyn twisted herself free from her sister's arms with a very bitter cry.

"Honour! What is honour to me if it will not bring him back to me? Can the knowledge that he has done his duty fill the empty years that lie before me?"

"But Eve -- dear sister, could you have loved him so well if, to save himself for you, he had turned coward and brought shame and disgrace both on himself and you?"

"Disgrace!" she returned wildly, "shame! They are only words! Could they hurt us while we had our love? Do you think the scorn of the whole world would have mattered to me while he held me in his arms?"

"And your children?" said Mabel quietly; "what would you have said to them?"

Evelyn swayed against the bedstead and stood for a long moment, crushing the broken golden circlet to her white breast until crimson drops rose under the jagged ends and stained the red metal.

"My children?" she repeated dully.

Suddenly her hand went to her throat and with a little, choking sob she crumpled into a heap on the bed and burst into a storm of weeping. Mabel regarded her for a moment with pitying eyes and then went softly from the room and slowly descended the wide stairway. And her face was the face of a woman, made wise by great sorrow.

In the hall she met the Lieutenant nervously pacing the polished floor with his short, black pipe clenched unconsciously in his teeth.

"You've told her?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered simply.

"Did she ask for me?"

"No."

"Then I'll be off," he said with quick tact. "I have to report for duty first thing tomorrow morning and it'll take me most of the night to get up to Chatham."

"Thank you," she replied gratefully as he struggled into his overcoat. "I -- we can't begin to

tell you how much we appreciate all your kindness --"

"Oh, that's all right," he interrupted with some embarrassment, "you've given me a day that more than makes up for any trouble I may have taken." He paused irresolutely for an instant and then added impulsively, "Say, Miss Thornton, I've always been sort of a lonely individual and led a rather hard, lonely life and -- and I'd be awfully much obliged if you'd let me come and see you sometimes."

"Why, surely," she replied quickly, holding out a friendly hand, "come down whenever you feel like it. We'd be glad to see you any time."

She watched his square figure until it disappeared in the darkness with a smile on her lips, and then sighed wearily and turned back into the house.

"I wonder why it is," observed the Lieutenant to himself as he tramped down the winding driveway, turning up the big collar of his overcoat against the first flakes of the expected snowstorm, "that a girl always says 'we' when she knows what you really want her to use is the first person singular?"

But as no one appeared to reply to the officer's question and as his own philosophy was quite unequal to the task, he remained unanswered.

Chapter IX - At The Eleventh Hour

Two hours more of the old year in London. Two hours more before another milestone on the journey of life would be passed; two hours more for wiping out old scores to leave the slate clean for the beginning of a new account; two hours more in which to forget old enmities and renew old friendships; two hours more in which to reflect upon the sorry record of the year gone by in preparation for faint-hearted resolutions of amendment that would scarce stay warm until the bells had ceased pealing in the new year; two hours more before the curtain would fall on another act in the great drama of humanity, only to rise again on the same characters, portraying the same passions of selfishness, greed, cruelty, and self-seeking and the same virtues of generosity, kindness, and love through the next scene and the next and the next to the last great scene of all, whose outcome none of the actors knew and few dared to imagine.

Two hours more of the old year in Colonel Villon's comfortable old house in Brompton. The fire burned brightly in the sitting-room, lighting up the calm face of Corinne as she sat sewing by the little square table; lighting up also the features of the good Colonel as he smoked in unwonted silence with a worried frown marring his usually serene brow. Presently the girl, folded up her work and seating herself on the arm of her father's chair, nestled her young body against his plump figure and rested her smooth cheek on his grizzled hair.

"Thinking, father dear?" she asked.

"Eh, yes, my child," he answered moodily, "thinking of all that has happened in the year gone by -- in the many years that have gone by since your mother died, little daughter, and of what may happen in the years to come."

"And that makes you sad, dear father? Why should it make you sad?"

"It reminds me that I grow old, Corinne beloved. What is it the English poet has written? 'So the old order changeth, yielding place to new.' The old order is changing very swiftly, my child, and I, alas! have put too many years behind me to change with it. Soon I will be useless and worn out and then --?"

"You must not think such things -- you who have been the eyes and ears of the Federation for so long. Ah, you are troubled because the mission to China has failed, but believe me, dear father, all will come right in the end -- it must. And then the people will know of your cleverness and loyalty and patience, and give you the honour that belongs to you as they have done so often in years gone by."

But the Colonel shook his head sorrowfully. "We have failed, little daughter-- failed in the supreme test. To-day the order has gone into effect which weakens our defences by half, and now nothing is left but to await the deluge."

"But the President, dear father--"

"Is the President the good God, little daughter? All that man could do he has done -- and more. But can he overcome the mad will of a besotted world? Nay, my child, the saints have grown weary of our overweening confidence and self-righteousness, and already our punishment is prepared."

For a time she was silent, and in the deep stillness of the old house, the big clock in the hallway ticked with a harsh and warning sound as the few remaining minutes of the old year sped swiftly away. Suddenly the bell of the front door pealed loudly and, startled by its unexpected clamour, Corinne slipped hurriedly to the floor and hastened to answer the impatient summons. She returned quickly, her eyes shining with suppressed excitement and her momentous news trembling on her lips.

"It is a message from China, dear father."

"Is it Major Wilkie or--?"

"No -- some one I do not know -- a native. His tidings are of the utmost importance, he says."

"Admit him at once, my child. There is yet time --"

He arose as Corinne ushered in a once dapper young Chinaman, dressed in clothes of European cut and fashion, but much travel-stained and disordered. He bowed to the Colonel and then stood impassive, waiting to be questioned.

"You have news of our mission to Peking?"

The Oriental inclined his body in assent.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Li," the yellow man replied in faultless English. "I am an agent of the Secret Service, stationed in Peking."

The Colonel drew a notebook from the inner pocket of his undress blouse and fluttered the pages rapidly.

"Eh, yes," he muttered to himself as he found the place; "Li -- native spy. And written in red ink 'Absolutely trustworthy.' What is your news?" he added, looking up quickly.

For answer, the other fumbled for some seconds in his clothing and at length produced an object which he threw upon the table. It was a thin metal case, once highly polished but now deeply stained with a brown rust not made by water. With an eager exclamation the Colonel pounced upon it and tearing off the cover, snatched at the bundle of papers it contained. Quickly he ran them over with burning, feverish eyes and tossed them from him with a hoarse cry.

"The papers!" he shouted, his voice breaking in his excitement. "Treaties and plans for mobilization! Look, my child!" -- he pointed with a trembling finger. "Eh, my God! We are saved!" Suddenly he paused and shot a penetrating glance at the messenger. "And the others?" he asked harshly. "What has become of them?"

The Chinaman shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands in deprecation. But apparently the Colonel understood, for he motioned to a chair and pushing his cigarette case across the table, took up his stand before the fire while Corinne waited tensely, viewing them with anxious glances. The Chinaman gravely bowed his acknowledgments and, carefully lighting his cigarette, leaned forward in his chair, his elbows on the table.

"You must know," he began in his crisp, clean-cut English, "that Major Wilkie bargained with Prince Wu for the papers you have just observed, offering in return to place him on the throne of China, which was rightfully his by inheritance."

"Eh, yes," interrupted the Colonel impatiently. "That was in the last report we received from him."

"That same night," went on the Chinaman, "Major Wilkie and Captain Gardiner went alone to the place where the Prince had told them that the papers were concealed. I knew the Prince was not to be trusted and so I followed against the orders of the Major, who suspected nothing."

"And you did not warn him?"

"Can truth prevail against the confidence born of smooth-tongued lies? The Major believed that greed and ambition would seal the lips of the Prince and even I, who knew that black-hearted race, was almost lulled into a feeling of security. But the Major trusted implicitly and went trusting to his death."

"Yes, yes," the Colonel nodded with bright eyes; "it was an error of judgment. My God, yes! An error -- It has led many men to their destruction and will lead them."

"I followed them, I say," resumed the other, "to the old palace which is the headquarters of the secret society and saw them enter the pavilion where the papers were concealed. Then, as I hid myself in the shadows, armed men arose seemingly from the very earth itself, and I

knew that all was lost. By what miracle I myself escaped detection, I do not know."

The Colonel uttered a suppressed exclamation as his cigarette burned into his fingers, but quickly lighting another, signed for the spy to go on.

"I waited perhaps half an hour -- perhaps longer," the latter continued. "I cannot tell, for the time passed slowly. Meanwhile more members of the society had arrived and presently men emerged bearing the body of the Major, which they cast into the darkness almost at my feet. Then I saw indeed that the mission had failed, and though I stayed on until the paling shadows warned me that the day was coming, the doors of the pavilion remained shut and silent. I had chosen my house close by so that I could watch what went on in the old palace and thither I bore the Major's corpse, for I am a Christian and I desired to give it decent burial. Besides, he had been very kind to me."

He paused, and Corinne drew a little sobbing breath of pity, but the Colonel leaned forward with feverish cheeks.

"And the papers?" he asked impatiently. "Where did you find them?"

The Oriental held up a restraining hand.

"When I came to prepare the dead man for burial," he said slowly, "I found that the body had been cut open with a knife, and as I sought to close the wound, which gaped wide, my hand encountered -- that!" With a rapid gesture he pointed to the blood-rusted case on the table. "Then I came here."

The Colonel was breathing quickly and his eyes were two points of flame.

"Yes, yes," he cried; "I see it all! My God, the brave Major! He sacrificed himself that the Federation might be saved. It is thus that the truly great make atonement for error -- and it is thus that we lose those we can least spare. Eh, my child, do you understand? The age of heroes has come again and I, Pierre Villon, have lived to see it!"

He paced the room rapidly in his exultation and gestured unrestrainedly, muttering to himself.

"But there is yet work to do," he exclaimed suddenly, wheeling about. "The President must know of this and Signor di Conti. My daughter, be so good as to summon my car that we may go directly, for time presses. It is at the eleventh hour, is it not? Yes, that is it. At the eleventh hour the news has come and there is yet time!"

And in startling confirmation of the figure of speech, the big clock in the hall rang its mellow note eleven times and was silent again. But when the bell of the street door sounded announcing that the car was waiting, Corinne came swiftly forward and laid a trembling hand on the arm of the spy as he was about to follow his chief.

"You said nothing about Captain Gardiner," she reminded him in a low tone. "What happened to him?"

A blank mask seemed to suddenly descend over the face of the Oriental and he shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands a second time.

"I do not know," he replied and the girl, after a vain attempt to penetrate the impassive features of the other, turned away baffled with a sigh, and for long hours thereafter sat staring into the fire with unseeing eyes.

But Colonel Villon was in high good humour as his car sped through the streets. Success was as the breath of his nostrils and his soul was great enough to rejoice generously in the success of the cause, even though his own carefully-laid plans would have failed but for an unforeseen accident, to bring about the desired end.

The President was not at his town house. He had gone into the country for the holiday, they were told. The Colonel scratched his ear meditatively for a few moments and ended by telephoning to Signor di Conti and ordering his chauffeur to drive on.

Their speed increased as they left the city behind them and soon they were boring through

the night at sixty miles and hour or more. At times a constable on a motor-cycle would draw up beside them, his hand shifting from his handle-bar to his hip, only to fall back as he recognised the official slate-colour of the International Police car. Sometimes a slow-moving farm truck would flash into the glaring path of the brilliant headlights, pulling to one side at the warning blast of the police siren with a rattling of the steering gear and much complaint from tight-pressed springs; sometimes it was only a single dark figure tramping steadily forward and hardly looking up as the swift car roared past; sometimes a merry party of young people, bound on a New Year's frolic, scrambled to the side of the road with many little feminine shrieks and outcries. Once, as they shot through a small hamlet, a dog dashed into the road in front of them and they could feel the impact of his body as it smashed to pieces against the low-hung radiator. Once, as their headlights gleamed on the gaudy golden sign of a roadside tavern, a drunkard staggered out from the shadows and was only avoided by a wrenching swerve that nearly tore the car from the hard-packed highway. But she recovered and sped onward, while the drunkard stood in the middle of the road and cursed her retreating tail lights.

At last, dizzy with the cold, rushing air and numbed by the tenseness of their great speed, they turned into a winding driveway, passed an old stone lodge where a sentinel saluted stiffly, and drew up before a great, rambling mansion, looming black and shapeless against the stars. Presently, in answer to repeated rings, a sleepy footman appeared and admitted them surlily. The President was tired and had gone to bed, leaving orders that he was not to be disturbed, but if they would come again in the morning --

"Thousand devils!" roared the exasperated Colonel; "must the destiny of the world be halted by a numskull -- a thick-head -- an idiot wine-swiller -- a half-witted, misbegotten --"

But the now fully-awakened footman had fled in terror and soon returned saying that His Excellency would be down immediately. And as they waited, another car drove up to the door bringing Signor di Conti, who, in his joy and exultation, embraced the stout Colonel somewhat to the latter's embarrassment, for he had lived so long among the undemonstrative Anglo-Saxons that he had unconsciously adopted the point of view which assigns such forms of greeting to the exclusive use of the weaker sex. Then a slow step was heard on the stair and the three stood with respectfully bowed heads as the door opened and the grey President entered.

He wore a grey dressing-gown over his night attire and it occurred to the Colonel, as he raised his eyes to his superior, that far from detracting from the old man's dignity, this costume even added to it, as if, by a curious sort of paradox, it called attention to the fact that though clad in unconventional manner, the personality of the man dimmed the mere incident of dress and caused it to fade from the consciousness of the beholder. As the artist is unaware of the nakedness of his model, being dominated by the beauty of her well-proportioned body, so this great, dominating soul wiped clean from the minds of the others the image of a disordered, elderly gentleman in an untidy dressing-gown and flowered slippers, and left with them only the consciousness that they were in the presence of the master spirit of the world.

"You have news from China?" he inquired gravely of di Conti, as the one who had the undertaking in charge.

"It is not I, Excellency," replied the Italian generously; "but our good Colonel Villon who has at the last moment snatched victory from defeat."

But the big-hearted Colonel hastened in his turn to disclaim all credit for the unlooked-for success of the mission.

"The honour is due, your Excellency," he said impressively, "to this gentleman, who is an agent of the Secret Service -- a spy, if you will have it so -- and to one who can never claim his just reward, because he gave his life that the Federation might live."

In simple, straightforward language he told the story of the Major's death and the finding of the papers in his body, and the grim President nodded in appreciation of the gallant deed.

"He will have his due" said the old man quietly when the Colonel had ended, "for his name will be honoured when yours and mine are forgotten. And you also," he added, turning to the Oriental, "have served the Federation well and will be recompensed as you deserve. But all in good time. We must think of the living before we can remember the dead."

He touched a bell that stood on the table close to his hand and, when the servant he had summoned appeared, the President directed that his secretary be awakened and sent to him.

"I will at once issue an order," he explained to di Conti and the Colonel, "countermanding the act reducing the strength of the International Police which went into effect to-day, and to-morrow the High Commission will be convened to make a formal declaration of war. You, Colonel Villon, will carry a despatch immediately to the General Staff in London and you, Signor, will remain here. I may require your assistance."

"Your pardon, Excellency," said di Conti a little nervously, "but you will recall the decision of the Supreme Court of the High Commission in the Panama Canal case of the year '45. In this decision it was made an offence of high treason against the International Federation for any officer of the Federation, no matter how exalted his rank, to rescind an order issued by the High Commission under the authority of the nations, unless the approval of the Commission and the nations involved was first secured."

"I had not forgotten," returned the President gravely; "but in the present emergency, I hold my duty to humanity to far outweigh my duty to the law, even though it be the law of the nations. The responsibility is mine alone and I assume it gladly, knowing that in transgressing the law I am acting for the greatest good of all mankind."

And the keen-visioned Colonel muttered under his breath, "Eh, but he is a true leader -- that man!"

War!

Over the western world the news spread like wildfire.

It flashed from city to city on the humming wires that laced the continents, and the tall towers of the wireless stations caught the message and flung it broadcast. On the ships at sea, on the mighty dirigibles cleaving the air, the dread word ran among passengers and crews alike and was received with open rejoicings or white faces and trembling lips. It stared grimly from the newspapers upon quiet families gathered about the home table, and little children wondered to see their elders on a sudden so grave, and lisped the word with smiling lips, unconscious of its awful meaning. In the waste places of the earth, sweating couriers checked their reeking horses to cry the news at the doors of lonely hovels or in the streets of drunken mining camps, and strong men listened with brightening eyes and tugged their cartridge belts tighter. In the great centres of population, men of business left their offices and gathered in the streets with ominous shakings of the head and mutterings for peace at any price that would leave their complex industries undisturbed. And selfish hearts ignored the throes of civilisation in the contemplation of threatened wealth, amassed to perilous heights through the long untroubled years.

War!

The big police barracks in Paris weltered in a riot of sound. Bearded officers embraced with tears of happiness streaming down their cheeks, and private soldiers shouted joyous oaths down the ringing corridors. In London, smooth-cheeked subalterns cast regulations to the winds and as the bubbling champagne flowed down the long mess tables, hammered on the boards with their naked swords and cheered hoarsely, while their superiors smiled with sober delight and made no effort to restrain them. The cafes of Munich and Berlin swarmed with grey-green uniforms and the big men crashed their big steins on the wet tables and sang the

savage songs that tradition had handed down to them from the red year of '15, for this was their day of rejoicing. To-morrow the iron grip of discipline would crush out license and freedom and so they made merry while there was yet time. Even the solitary Cossacks, ceaselessly patrolling the eastern frontier, yelled fiercely and shook their slender lances at the cold, glittering stars when their reliefs brought them word.

And in the airship station at Chatham, Lieutenant Tommy Hooker cried "Hurray!" and smote his cadet between the shoulder blades, greatly to that budding officer's astonishment, and then straightway sat himself down to express his feelings most inadequately in a six-page letter to Mabel Thornton.

But in the long, low room at headquarters where General von Weber, the commander-in-chief of the army and Admiral Barrows, chief of the Naval Division, sat in council with the officers of the General Staff, there was an atmosphere of grave purpose. On the polished table lay plans for the mobilization of the forces and the invasion of China, drawn up years before by careful, painstaking staff officers, and replete with long details of transport and commissariat, and monotonous with diagrams of roads and mountain passes and maps bristling with the intricate signs and figures of the Topographical Department.

There was little to discuss, for the pre-arrangements covered nearly everything, and besides, they had the enemy's plans before them. The allies had based their preparations on the belief that they could choose their own time for commencing the war, that is, in summer, when the northern ports on the Japan Sea would be free from ice and the roads of Manchuria passable for artillery; and that they would have to oppose them a first line army of only 400,000, or at the most, 500,000 men, and these widely scattered among the military districts of Europe and the Americas. The capture or isolation of Vladivostok and a strong demonstration along the line of the Trans-Siberian railway would compel the International Police to divide their slender forces. Then, before the Federation had time to organise a second line strong enough to withstand the invasion, two more allied armies, striking at the Caucasus mountains and the Balkan peninsula, would brush aside what feeble resistance could be offered and open the road to southern Europe.

By taking the initiative and declaring war six months before the appointed time, the Federation had won the first trick. The northern coast of the Japan Sea was still ice-bound and the armies of the allies were unprepared. Before another day had dawned, the Manchurian frontier corps of the Police was on the march to attack Harbin and the long troop-trains, rolling eastward on the Siberian railway, were bringing the men of Russia and northern Europe to strengthen the fighting line.

Chapter X - Headquarters In Manchuria

ON a certain cold, bright morning in early March, General St. John, commander-in-chief of the Federation forces in northern Manchuria, studied a map of the district occupied by his troops and puffed at his pipe the while with every indication of contentment. The General and his staff had taken exclusive possession of the new European Hotel which raised its brick walls prominently amid the buildings of the riverside settlement of Harbin Quay, and from the windows of his comfortable quarters the Commander-in-Chief could look out upon the frozen surface of the Sungari and the clean-cut lines of the great railway bridge which spanned the river at this point. But river, bridge, and town were old stories to the ruddy-faced General, while the map told a tale ever changing and new which, though still in its early chapters, seemed to the optimistic reader to hold the promise of a happy ending as every good story should.

A barrier of coloured lead blocks eighty-five miles to the south of Harbin, showed where the 9th corps straddled the Manchurian railway and held the line of the upper Sungari against the 50,000 men of the first Chinese army. To the southeast another row of blocks marked the position of General Petrovich and the 11th corps, which, with its left resting on Kirin, commanded the headwaters of the Sungari and the terminus of the Kirin branch railroad and could attack the enemy on the right and rear when the proper moment should arrive. On the seacoast, the 1st division of General von Erlen's 20th corps held Vladivostok, while the 2nd division was still pouring into Harbin at the rate of 1,000 men a day.

"And I don't see," mused St. John to himself half aloud, "why this campaign shouldn't make me von Weber's successor. It stands to reason that the important work will be done here in the north. All the southern army will have to do will be to keep the Turks out of Europe and when this business is decided, they'll surrender fast enough -- oh, come in! Come in!"

At this permission, the door opened quickly, admitting the burly form of Hathorn, the Chief-of-Staff.

"Beg pardon, General, but the Germans caught a man trying to sneak into our lines last night. He said he had important information and after General von Erlen had examined him, he thought he'd better send him to you."

"Oh, all right! Bring him in. By the way, Hathorn, has von Erlen received any message from Koch this morning?"

"Just the usual one, sir."

"Everything quiet on the coast?"

"Everything quiet, sir."

"-- As I expected. We won't hear anything from the Japs as long as Vladivostok harbour's frozen up. Well, bring in your prisoner."

The General refilled his pipe and assumed a judicial attitude as Hathorn ushered in a fur-clad, unkempt individual with his arms bound securely behind him. At first glance, the resemblance of the prisoner to a wild animal was startling, for besides the furry garment which completely covered his body, his face was nearly hidden by a matted growth of long yellow hair from under which two keen blue eyes surveyed the General with considerable interest.

"General St. John?" enquired this extraordinary being in excellent English, before the Commander-in-Chief had time to recover from his momentary surprise.

"I have some news that may interest you, General."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the astonished officer; "who in the devil's name are you?"

"My information is of more importance than myself, I think," replied the prisoner calmly.

"Briefly, it's this. Two weeks ago, the Japanese landed two divisions with artillery and cavalry

a little to the south of Possiet Bay by means of air transports, of which they apparently had a large number. They marched northward and, sending a flying column in advance of their main force, cut General Koch's line of communication and captured the railroad. Vladivostok surrendered after holding out for five days and the Japanese are now coming down the railroad as fast as they can with between 60,000 and 70,000 men to take you in the rear and capture Harbin."

For a minute or so the General stared at his informer open-mouthed, and then suddenly burst into loud and prolonged laughter.

"Gad, sir," he exclaimed, wiping the tears of merriment from his eyes; "do you really believe for an instant that I'm going to swallow any such cock-and-bull story as that? Why, we've been receiving wires from Koch every day saying that he hasn't seen hair nor hide of the enemy. Did you see that message that came in this morning, Hathorn?"

"Yes, sir," replied the officer addressed. "It read, 'All quiet here. No sign of the enemy anywhere.'"

"Well," inquired the General triumphantly, "that's definite enough, isn't it? What can you say to that?"

"Is there any reason why the Japanese couldn't have sent those messages themselves to keep you from growing suspicious?" returned the prisoner, unmoved. "General Koch was surrounded and cut off before he had the slightest warning that anything was wrong. What would be the object in the enemy trying to surprise you if you knew all about it beforehand? They planned this move too carefully for that."

"But damme, sir," roared the General, growing red in the face, "d'ye think a thing like that could go on and I hear nothing of it? Koch couldn't have been beaten as easily as that. There isn't an airship made that could transport guns heavy enough to batter down those forts -- And even if it did happen, he'd have contrived to get word to me somehow."

"How could he? He only had a few scout 'planes and no big airships at all. The Japs got his 'planes with their anti-aircraft guns before he realised what was up, and their dirigibles dropped kelinite bombs into his forts. When I left the city, he had abandoned his works and was trying to cut his way through to the north with his division -- or rather, what was left of it."

"But if he was surrounded so that, according to your story, a flea couldn't have crawled through the lines, how in the devil did you get here?" shouted the General, pounding his table angrily. "And who in hell are you, anyway? I tell you, sir, you've a damned good deal of explaining to do if you don't want to stand up against a wall facing a firing squad."

"I got here because I knew how to keep out of sight in the first place, and am well acquainted with the country, in the second," replied the prisoner coolly, apparently undisturbed by the threat. "As to who I am, I don't see why that should concern you as long as my information is correct. As you seem to doubt its accuracy, however, I might remind you that it's easy enough to prove the truth of what I say by sending two or three air scouts out to the east."

The General leaned back in his chair, mastering his exasperation with an effort. "What do you think of this remarkable tale, Hathorn?" he asked at length, sweeping the papers with which his table was littered to one side with a furious gesture.

"I think, sir," said the Chief-of-Staff respectfully, "that it's hardly plausible, but still quite possible. As the prisoner says, it's a simple matter to send out scouts and learn the real truth."

"Look here," said the General, suddenly struck with an idea; "suppose this man's a spy -- that's possible, isn't it? Suppose he's been sent to frighten me with this wild story into abandoning my position on the upper Sungari and ordering Michaloff and the 9th corps back here to protect the base. Michaloff can get here in three days if he has to, with the help of the railroad, but then the Chinese could advance up the river towards Kirin and outflank

Petrovich, and the Lord only knows what would become of the 11th corps then. I tell you, Hathorn, that sounds a good deal more satisfactory to me than anything this man has said so far."

He would have said more, but at that moment an orderly entered announcing General von Erlen, and immediately afterwards the grizzled head and worried countenance of the veteran corps commander himself appeared.

"Ah, General," he exclaimed, quickly taking in the situation, "you are examining my prisoner, hein? It is very disturbing, the news which he brings, is it not?"

"My God!" uttered St. John fervently; "you don't mean to tell me that you've been taken in by his inconceivably idiotic tale, von Erlen?"

"So?" said the German. "That is how it goes then? You do not think it is the truth that he tells?"

"Is every one crazy here but me?" shouted the General. "Now you --" He paused abruptly, as von Erlen shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not command here," said the old German quietly; "but if I did--"

"Well, if you did what in the devil would you do about it?"

"I would begin digging trenches on the east so fast as ever I could and I would at once send to General Michaloff to come with his best speed, and then I would send out air scouts to see if this man tells the truth."

"Yes, and God help Petrovich and the 11th corps if Michaloff did come."

"Petrovich is not a fool. If the 9th corps can hold the Chinese, the 11th also can, providing they are warned in time to prevent a flanking movement. Is it not of more value to sacrifice a few men than to risk the whole army and your lines of communication besides? See, General," he went on, bending forward and speaking more earnestly, "I believe what this man says. Why should he lie? Detection is too certain. Send out your scouts immediately and by to-night you will know the truth, but also do not lose a moment in making ready your defences and, above all, order Michaloff to come to your assistance. Even if he begins to move at once, he can leave enough men to hold his lines until night comes and by that time you will know."

St. John tugged at his heavy moustache irresolutely, but before he could speak, the telephone on his table rang sharply and he hastily caught up the instrument, glad of a momentary diversion.

"Hello! What's that, Luttrell?-- General Michaloff attacked in force? -- All right, I understand. -- Wire him to keep me informed."

He snapped the receiver back onto its hook and turned to the others. "You heard, gentlemen? It would be utter folly to abandon that position now for a mere rumour."

"But, sir," protested Hathorn, "don't you think this attack is a feint to keep Michaloff too far away to help you when the Japanese come?"

"When the Japanese come?" repeated St. John rather contemptuously. "So you've been infected by the panic, too?"

"I agree with General von Erlen, sir," retorted Hathorn with some heat; "and I think that not a moment should be lost in taking proper precautions."

"And I don't see why 'proper precautions' should include giving up my whole plan of campaign. No, gentlemen, I've decided. Michaloff stays where he is until I see more necessity for his moving than I do now."

"But, General," pleaded the Chief-of-Staff, "nothing in this whole wide world that we can do will save the army if we haven't men enough, and I firmly believe that without General Michaloff and the 9th corps --"

"No!" thundered the Commander-in-Chief; "I've made up my mind once and for all and that settles it." He paused an instant to collect himself and then continued more calmly, "Hathorn,

send out two scouts to the east and see what you can find out and see that this prisoner is carefully guarded -- we may want him again. Von Erlen, you can start digging trenches as long as your men have nothing else to do. And now, if you please, gentlemen, I'm busy."

The old corps commander shrugged his shoulders protestingly, but left the room without another word, closely followed by General Hathorn, escorting the prisoner, and St. John turned to his work again with an air of relief. But as the day wore away into twilight and the star-relieved blackness began to cloak the town, he became uneasy, and at length reaching for his telephone he called up his Chief-of-Staff.

"Heard from those scouts yet, Hathorn?"

"No, sir, and I don't half like it. They should have been back an hour ago."

"Whom did you send?"

"Captain Bagworthy and Lieutenant Forsythe, sir. They're the best we have."

"All right. Let me know directly they come in."

"Very well, sir."

Again the General turned to his map, although he had studied it so often that in all probability he could have re-drawn it and indicated the position of each battalion and battery with perfect accuracy had he been so minded. But, "Damme!" he burst out obstinately, "I'm not going to call in Michaloff just on suspicion. It'd mean the loss of two months' hard work and probably all for nothing. Von Erlen's an old fool. If we played safe all the time, we'd never get anywhere."

But protest as he would, St. John could not free his mind from the vague doubts and fears that assailed it, and when the little travelling-clock on his table announced the hour of midnight and still no word from the scouts had been reported, he rose from his chair angrily repeating for the tenth time that evening that von Erlen was an old fool -- only on this occasion he offered as an afterthought that he himself was another -- and stamped through the corridor and down the stairway to the big drawing-room, which had been converted into a working-place for his staff.

Down one side of the room ran a long, unpainted wooden table at which several non-commissioned officers of the signal corps sat in front of chattering telegraph instruments. At the further end of the table, a little battery of telephones was connected with the central switchboard in another part of the building. Through these, when he so desired, St. John could communicate with the headquarters of each battalion, battery, or squadron in his command.

The General swept the group of busy staff officers with a swift glance and then, as a fair-haired Englishman, wearing the three diamonds of a colonel on his shoulder-straps, rose from his place and saluted, he asked briefly for General Hathorn. The Chief-of-Staff had gone to General von Erlen's headquarters.

"Tell him I want him," ordered St. John briefly, and while his command was being transmitted, he took up the file of orders sent out during the day and began idly running through the thick mass of yellow slips. Suddenly he paused with a startled oath and roughly jerking two of the thin sheets from the clip which held them, thrust them under the light of a green-shaded electric bulb. And as he read, his face grew dark with anger and the veins in his temples swelled into purple ridges. Here and there an officer raised his head in astonishment and as he caught the expression of the General's features, mentally braced himself for the expected outburst. But before the storm could break, the thick hangings of the doorway were quickly pushed aside and General Hathorn strode into the room. He hesitated as he sensed the tense atmosphere of the apartment and as his eyes focussed themselves upon the form of his commander, his face gradually paled under its heavy coating of bronze.

"General Hathorn," began St. John in a voice terribly calm, "I find here an order, with my

name attached, directing General Michaloff to abandon his position and move northward to the support of the troops here. Will you have the goodness to explain this?"

"I sent that order on my own responsibility, General," returned the Chief-of-Staff steadily, though his cheeks were white and the perspiration stood out in tiny drops on his forehead.

"And why," went on the General in a cold fury, "should you take it upon yourself to do such a thing when you knew it was against my wishes -- yes, even against my express commands?"

"I thought it best," began Hathorn hurriedly. "It seemed the only way to save the army -- and you wouldn't see the danger -- I was sure when the scouts returned that I would be justified --"

"That's enough!" thundered St. John, crashing his heavy fist on the table. He paused a moment, fighting for his composure, and continued in tones all the more fearful because of the suppressed rage with which they were charged, "I suppose you realise that I can have you shot for this. You may consider yourself under arrest. Colonel Luttrell, see that this man is carefully guarded until I have time to deal with his case. You will act as chief-of-staff until your appointment is confirmed or you are relieved."

"But, sir," pleaded the condemned officer, "at least wait until --"

"Enough, sir!" said St. John harshly; "I command here!"

Obstinate and self-willed as he might be, dictatorial as he often was, there was yet something of grandeur about this savage old commander, and a little ripple of appreciation ran through the encircling throng of staff officers. With all his faults, their General was unquestionably a man.

In silence General Hathorn bowed his head and unbuckling his sword, offered the scabbarded blade to his successor. The latter stretched forth his hand to receive it, when a sudden commotion in the hallway without arrested him and the weapon clattered to the floor unnoticed. The sharp challenge of a sentry rang out, followed by exclamations and hurried footsteps in the echoing corridor. The curtains were thrust aside roughly and supported by the arm of the sentinel, an officer staggered into the room. There was clotted blood on his cheek and on his left side, his leather jacket was discoloured by a broad stain which spread with every choking breath he drew. For an instant he stood swaying, gazing at the eager circle with glazed eyes. Then --

"They're coming!" he gasped, and twisting from the restraining arm of the soldier, pitched forward in an untidy heap on the floor.

Through the rising tumult, the harsh voice of the General could be heard issuing swift commands and an instant later an officer wearing the red cross band on his arm pushed through the crowd and knelt above the wounded aviator.

"Make him speak, doctor," said St. John curtly. "You'll have plenty of time to patch him up afterwards."

The surgeon nodded as he jabbed the silver needle of a hypodermic into the hairy arm, and the wounded man groaned and opened his eyes.

"You say they're coming?" prompted the General, leaning tensely forward.

The aviator silently assented and breathed more strongly as the stimulant took effect.

"How far away are they?"

"About forty miles -- they're coming on like hell -- cavalry and horse artillery in advance -- trains bringing up the infantry and heavy guns -- they were looking out for us -- some of their 'planes were hidden in a valley -- rose behind us to cut us off -- got Bagworthy directly -- chased me 'way to the south before I could get free-- God!"

He clenched his hands in a spasm of pain and his eyes closed again. The surgeon, syringe in hand, looked up inquiringly.

"That'll do, doctor. Try your best to save him. Hathorn, you'll give me your parole and

resume your duties until this business is settled. Tell General von Erlen to scrape up every non-combatant he can put his hands on for his trenches and save his soldiers as much as he can. Tell General Michaloff of the hole we're in and ask him to hurry. Wire Khailar to side-track everything else and rush through ammunition and heavy guns. If you haven't done so already, warn Petrovich that his right flank is left unprotected and to look out for himself. Come up to my quarters when you're through and bring that prisoner with you."

Gone all dreams of easy victory and speedy promotion. Gone all fondly-cherished visions of splendid triumphs and acclaiming throngs. As the mist wreaths of the morning fade into nothingness under the burning sun, so had they vanished under the bright light of the fact that he must fight desperately to save even a part of his great host. Hardest of all was the thought that but for the disobedience of a subordinate, who by this act hazarded future and even life itself, his case were well-nigh hopeless. And as he paced his room in black bitterness of spirit, St. John acknowledged to himself that his own overweening confidence, self-will, and intolerance of opposition had invited this disaster. But in this overwhelming crashing of his fortunes a grim resolve remained -- to die fighting if need be, but at least to fight until he died.

When Hathorn and the prisoner entered, he questioned the latter closely as to the strength of the enemy and satisfied at length that he had drawn out all the information that would be of value to him, he was about to dismiss his mysterious captive when the man asked permission to offer a suggestion. St. John nodded rather impatiently, but as the recital proceeded, his eyes grew brighter.

"You believe you could carry out such a plan?" he asked eagerly when the stranger had ended. "But no -- there isn't one chance in a thousand that it would succeed."

"Isn't one chance in a thousand worth taking -- now?" returned the other with a grim smile. "If I don't succeed you will be no worse off than you are now, while if I do--"

"But, man," expostulated St. John, "unless by some miracle you manage to carry out your scheme -- and probably even if you do -- you're going to certain death."

The prisoner's face grew suddenly sombre. "If I did not believe that I was," he replied shortly, "I would have asked you to send some one else."

The General and Hathorn exchanged rapid glances and, moved by a sudden impulse, the former held out his hand to his captive.

"I don't know who in the devil you are," he said, "or what in the devil your motives may be, but I do know that you've tried to save us once and are trying to save us again in spite of ourselves, and by God, sir, if you come through this alive you can depend on me to see that you get all the credit that's due you, if I have to damn myself to do it. I may be a pig-headed old fool sometimes, but no man's ever been able to say I wasn't just."

For the first time the mask seemed to lift from the stranger's face, and as he grasped St. John's outstretched palm, they could see that he was moved.

"Thank you, General," he said; "I'll try to stay alive for the sake of the army."

St. John nodded vigorously and scrawling rapidly on a sheet of paper, signed his name, sealed the letter, and handed it to the stranger.

"If you manage to come through alive," he said, "make for the seacoast. You'll run less risk of capture than if you should try to get back to our lines. I'll notify Admiral Barrows and ask him to have you picked up. You know the country?"

The other placed a finger-tip on the huge map. "I'll be there in two weeks, if I'm still living."

"Good!" St. John noted down the spot which the stranger indicated. "That letter I've just given you will identify you when you meet Barrows. I'll send him an account of what you did for me and he'll find some work for you, never fear. General Hathorn will start you off in proper style and see that you have everything you need. Au revoir -- and good luck to you!"

He sat staring thoughtfully at the door for some moments after it had closed behind his

Chief-in-Staff and erstwhile prisoner.

"Now who," he repeated, tugging at his heavy moustache, "who the deuce is that man?"

Chapter XI - One Against An Army

THROUGH the early morning hours of the twelfth of March, the Prussians of von Erlen's 2nd division wait, crouching in their shallow, hastily thrown-up trenches, straining their eyes towards the east. A little after half-past three, a crimson star appears against the velvet blackness of the sky. It enlarges rapidly until the red glare lights up the whole eastern heavens and as suddenly dies away again. But even before the signal has vanished, from hundreds of powerful reflectors broad rivers of brilliant light pour over the plain. In the dazzling brightness, the waiting infantrymen can see a dark line rolling towards them like an all-engulfing wave, and from wing to wing the shrill whistle signals wake the trenches into life. With a stunning roar the artillery opens and the great shells scream eastward and burst in splashes of leaping light in the midst of the oncoming flood. In front of the trenches runs a tangled line of barbed wire, heavily charged with electricity, and as the advancing wave rolls over it, blue flashes shoot up into the night sky and the smell of burning flesh mingles with the acrid odour of the powerful explosives. Now the crash of volleys and the rattle of machine-guns join with the deeper note of the artillery. Can anything of flesh and blood live through that hail of death? Yes, for the wave still rolls onward and, as the whistles of the officers shrill again, von Erlen's men lock their long knife-like bayonets to the hot muzzles of their rifles.

Lashed by the storm of steel and lead, blinded by the powerful searchlights, with eyes bloodshot and lips flecked with foam, the yellow men hurl themselves against the steady grey-green line. Uniforms take fire from the point-blank flashes of rifles and pistols. There are laboured gaspings and the groaning of belts straining over taut muscles and a nasty sound of chopping and stabbing. The brown paint on swords and bayonets reddens and peels back as the steel is driven home. Officers snatch rifles from the nerveless, loosening fingers of the dying and send the butts crashing into the faces of their foes. The wounded with agonised screams catch at the trampling feet that grind them into the ground, or throw out helpless hands, vainly trying to ward off the mass of battling men that surges over them and crushes them into silence. Others with lesser hurts wait grimly, clutching sword or rifle. The form of an enemy stumbles on the prostrate body and suddenly pitches forward with a gurgling grunt as the steel stabs swiftly upward. Humanity passes away in that crazing chaos and demons with spouting gashes struggle desperately and then crumple into horrible heaps as life flows out with the crimson tide.

And for the rest, blind hurry and turmoil -- gaping mouths, wild eyes, grimacing features streaming with sweat -- reelings to and fro -- blows struck at random falling on insane figures insensible to pain. No time for thought as to who wins or loses. Strike at your enemy with bayonet or butt. Hurl your empty pistol at his savage face and as his steel slices into your body, grapple with him and drag him down in your fall for the avenging weapon of your comrade.

But now the pressure weakens. In broken masses, like a spent wave, the yellow flood sweeps back across the plain and von Erlen's panting soldiers lean heavily on their smoking weapons or throw themselves on the ground to draw breath for the next attack.

Three times the tide rolls forward before the sun rises over the battlefield, and three times the men of the 20th corps send it surging back again. And all the while the river of wounded flows rearward and the slender stream of reserves trickles forward to fill the gaps in the fighting line.

As morning brightens into noonday, the Japanese bring up more guns. Time is passing swiftly and they must pound the Federation forces into silence before help can reach them. So the great shells shriek through the tortured air and burst in the trenches, burying dead and dying under mounds of earth. And the artillery of the Police replies until the whole world rocks

in welter of stunning sound. The trenches grow slimy with blood and the boots of the soldiers slip as they aim. And still the river of wounded flows to the rear and the thin stream of reserves trickles forward to take their places.

Overhead the long war dirigibles manoeuvre clumsily and dart bright flashes against the brilliant rays of the sun. And as the machine-gun bullets rattle like hail on their armoured sides, bloody rain falls horribly on the unconscious combatants below. Slim shells from anti-aircraft guns scream all about the long hulls and suddenly a pointed gas-bag buckles in the middle and vanishes in a shattering explosion, and the flaming debris hiss downward to the battlefield. In vain the Japanese ships form and advance their sharp rams to the attack. The straight-shooting guns of the Police aircraft tear hulls from supporting gas-bags above, and Police air scouts, circling upward in graceful spirals, dart down deadly kellinite bombs, and hundreds of feet in air, turn savagely and give battle to the 'planes of the enemy flying hastily to intercept them.

Day fades out in darkness. Again the brilliant electric arcs pour their rivers of light over the corpse-strewn plain. But the enemy have had enough and wait sullenly the coming of reinforcements which will enable them to overwhelm that slender, desperate line with the weight of three times the number opposed to them.

All night long the artillery roars and in the pauses of the firing, the exhausted soldiers of von Erlen, crazed with fatigue and lack of sleep, can hear distant and low, but menacing as the note of doom, the dull rumble of the troop trains bringing up the men who on the morrow will sweep them from the earth. And all night long the bearers of the hospital corps move about like shadowy ghosts and the river of wounded, shrunken somewhat in volume but just as steadily as before, still flows rearward. But there are none left now to come forward and fill the gaps in the fighting line.

So the night wears on and when the blackness begins to turn to grey, the wearied infantrymen look at one another with heavy eyes which say, "This is the end."

But hark! Is not the Japanese fire slackening? On the right it dies away into silence and spreading along the battle front, gun after gun becomes mute. And as the light grows stronger, the dark masses of the enemy seem to recede until the plain grows empty and bare except for the silent forms stretched motionless in death. But when two hours later a little group of panting cavalymen, the advance guard of the 9th corps, ride in from the south on reeking, foaming horses, no cheers are raised to greet them. For prone in the trenches they have defended so well, von Erlen's Prussians lie in a sleep so profound that it is well-nigh impossible to distinguish the living from the dead.

After leaving the quarters of General St. John, General Hathorn and his mysterious companion entered a waiting staff automobile and were driven rapidly eastward until they reached the row of temporary steel sheds which housed the aviation corps. Here the General led the way into a brightly lighted room, where a smart-looking non-commissioned officer rose saluting to his feet, and at Hathorn's brief inquiry for "Lieutenant French," disappeared into an inner apartment, whence issued presently a cleanly-built young officer whose disordered uniform bore witness to the fact that he had been snatching a few moments of much-needed sleep.

As Hathorn concisely outlined the object of his visit, the Lieutenant's eyes brightened with interest, and when the General ended, he could not restrain a low whistle of appreciation.

But he merely answered respectfully, "Very well, sir. You wish us to start at once?"

"Yes. You won't have any too much time before daylight. Have you all the necessary apparatus?"

"Everything, sir," returned the Lieutenant with a short laugh as he struggled into his leathern garments. "Our junk shop's very complete. Now, sir, if you're ready --"

Hathorn shook the stranger's hand warmly and turned away as Lieutenant French opened a door leading into the dim sheds which sheltered the air fleet. With the stranger following close behind him, the aviator walked rapidly through the echoing interiors until at the further end of the long row of buildings, he switched an arc-light into sputtering life, revealing a wide-winged, slate-coloured aeroplane bearing a black number 5 on its dull paint.

At that moment a sergeant appeared, carrying a metal box, the contents of which the Lieutenant examined with close attention and then mounted to his place on the machine, motioning the stranger to the seat beside him. The soldier swung back the big doors and the aeroplane glided smoothly out into the night with a subdued hum of well-oiled machinery. When clear of the shed, the aviator tugged at a lever and the huge man-made bird, sliding upward in graceful spirals towards the star-gemmed sky, headed towards the north.

In silence they raced onward. The Lieutenant watched the solemn stars and mentally visualised a map of the countryside unrolling darkly beneath them, while the stranger remained buried in thought and as he pondered, his face grew hard and grim under its thick mask of hair. Presently they turned eastward and when at length the dim shapes of the mountains lifted against the lighter blackness of the sky, the aeroplane circled slowly downward and finally came to rest in a marshy plain bordered by dense woodland.

"You understand how this stuff works?" asked French in a low tone, for the air of early dawn was very still, as he handed his passenger the metal box.

"I've used it before. If your batteries are all right, I'm not worrying about the results."

"They're new Krieders -- could turn over my 'plane engine here, if I wanted them to."

"That's more than I'll need. Well -- I guess the only thing left to say is good-bye."

"Say au revoir, rather. I hope we'll meet again before this war is over."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I hope so too. Well, good luck to you!"

"I should be the one to wish you that," returned the young aviator as the propeller blades commenced to revolve. "I say, you know -- I -- I'd give anything to see this through with you."

"Don't let that worry you. You'll have plenty of opportunity to get killed before the Police leave Manchuria, -- but I must say, I'd like your company."

It is doubtful whether Lieutenant French caught the last words, for he was already high above the ground, but he waved his hand encouragingly and soon he and his machine were nothing more than a vague blot in the uncertain light of early morning. The stranger watched the diminishing aeroplane with a curious, wistful expression, but at length rousing himself with a short sigh, set out resolutely towards the south.

All morning he travelled steadily, skirting wide marshlands and pushing through dense, jungle-like forest, without seeming to feel fatigue or want of sleep in spite of the wakeful night he had passed. But as the afternoon wore on, he advanced more cautiously, keeping a wary eye on the watch for chance cavalry patrols, though the nature of the country he was traversing rendered such a precaution almost unnecessary. From time to time he stopped, straining his ears for some expected sound, and at length in one of his pauses he heard far off the laboured puffing of a locomotive, struggling with a steep grade or heavy load. For a few moments he stood listening, as if to assure himself that he was not deceived by the throbbing of an overheated brain, but satisfied at length that he suffered from no delusion, he plunged deeper into the jungle and impatiently awaited the coming of darkness.

When the twilight deepened into night, he emerged from his hiding-place and moving slowly and with every sense on the alert, at the end of two hours reached the embankment of the railroad where it curved around a hill of white marble before plunging under the range through the black portal of a tunnel. Soon his listening ears caught the dull rumble of an approaching train and, sliding hastily down the bank, he crouched low to avoid the brilliance of the powerful electric headlight.

The train was a very heavy one -- long strings of steel-framed flat cars which had borne the guns of the artillery, endless rows of empty trucks which had carried westward soldiers or ammunition and supplies, at the rear a dozen box cars filled with wounded on their way to the base hospital. One by one the cars were swallowed up in the mouth of the tunnel and as the last one vanished from sight, the soldiers of the tunnel guard resumed their stations and wearily took up again their tiresome vigil. They had not seen, as the train rolled by them, the figure of a fur-clad man, clinging at the risk of his life to the brake-rigging of one of the middlemost trucks. Possibly if they had it would have awakened no more than a passing interest, for the country was filled with the riff-raff that always follow in the wake of great armies, and at all events the train would be searched at the next stopping-place for possible spies. But when it again emerged into the starlit night from the eastern entrance of the tunnel, the place which the man had occupied was vacant.

He had slipped cleverly from between the trucks as they approached the centre of the long bore, and now stands breathing with difficulty in the smoke and vapour-choked interior of the tunnel. But the smoke and vapour are necessary accomplices and serve to shroud the thin pencil of light his electric lantern darts along the rocky walls. Ah! He bends forward, and in the shallow fissure his lantern has revealed, close above the rock-ballasted roadbed, he slips a pointed brass cartridge. To the two poles in the blunt end, he attaches slender wires which he rapidly unwinds from their reel as he hurries towards the eastern portal. Suddenly he stops and throws himself prone between the rails. A bright spark gleams in the thinning smoke as two bright-scraped wire-ends touch. Then the immovable mountain rocks to a shattering roar that seems to wrench it from its everlasting foundations. A throat-gripping, acrid vapour fills the heavy air, mingled with the dust of powdered limestone. Small, jagged rocks rain on the ringing rails and then all other sound is drowned in the deep rumble of huge masses as the bowels of the mountain are torn violently asunder.

As the noise dies away, the stranger rises to his knees and listens. Shouts echo between the tunnel walls and footsteps crunch the close-packed rock of the roadbed. The stranger scrambles to his feet, pauses an instant to whip his long-barrelled pistol from its holster, and starts on a run for the rapidly increasing sounds. A vague shape shows dimly in the dust and vapour before him. A bright flash from his pistol cuts the thick air and something drops to the ground with a groan and thud as he races onward. Again his weapon flashes and this time there is an answering flash and a sudden wind stirs the hair on his temple. A brown bayonet stabs at him uncertainly and rings on the rail as the soldier reels backward under a powerful blow from his clenched fist. He is past them now and running like the wind for the tunnel mouth while behind him, streaks of quick flame tear the blackness and the steel-jacketed bullets whistle through the air and glance from the rocks under his feet. He feels the cool night air on his face and sees the stars above him and turning to the right, plunges boldly into the impenetrable forest. And when at length his wearied limbs can carry him no further, he is many miles from his enemies.

The sun gradually mounts the heavens and tries in vain with vertical rays to arouse the still figure stretched out on the ground beneath. The stars climb to their places in turn and burn through the night in silent majesty, but the quiet form remains motionless under the sheltering trees. But when the grey light of another day begins to dim the cold splendour of the spangled darkness, the prone body moans and stirs and rising to a sitting posture looks with blinking eyes at the brightening sky.

A small stream flows noisily near the stranger's resting place and, at length attracted by the sound, he plunges his bearded face in its ice-edged waters and as he drinks in the cold fluid in long draughts his eyes grow brighter and when his feverish thirst is satisfied, he raises his head and laughs hoarsely.

"I've done it!" he exclaims aloud. "One man against 60,000 -- but 60,000 aren't worth one if they haven't ammunition -- and it'll be a good many days before they can run a train through that tunnel again. Well, there's one more item in the score settled, but it isn't all paid yet -- it isn't all paid! Oh, Lord, how long?"

He stretches his stiffened limbs with a groan, but suddenly arrested by a sharp pain, pulls off his fur coat, revealing a little mass of brown, clotted blood low down on his right side.

"H'm -- so they got me after all! Well, it can't be very serious or I couldn't have come this far. Let's see what she looks like."

With firm fingers he cuts the clothing from around the wound and sponging away the dried blood, uncovers a tiny hole in the white flesh. As he examines it, the crimson wells up in slow drops, staining the clear skin redly, but unmoved, he washes the blood away and deftly binds a water-soaked compress over the wound.

"There's no telling how far in that goes," he muses; "but if it's deep enough to matter, I'll find out soon enough. Anyhow, I'll be damned if I die yet -- before the whole account is paid."

Strengthened by this reflection, he eats sparingly from a small bag of dried meat and, disregarding the pain of his swollen limbs, strikes out resolutely towards the southeast.

Twelve days later, gaunt with famine and ceaseless travel, he sees before him the Sea of Japan.

Chapter XII - Lieutenant Hooker Meets An Old Acquaintance

LIEUTENANT TOMMY HOOKER sat in his comfortable cabin on board the *Ariadne* with his feet resting contentedly on their especial corner of the flat-topped desk and his lips nursing a particularly vicious-looking Burma cheroot. The *Ariadne*, her long gas-bag nearly empty, rocked easily on the low swells and the Lieutenant swayed unconsciously in unison with her movements. Through the open port, the waters of Wei-hai-wei harbour flashed in the sunshine. Near at hand, a little fleet of naval dirigibles, their hulls partially submerged, bobbed gravely, while further off, the slate-coloured forms of four cruisers were outlined sharply in the clear air.

But the Lieutenant was alike indifferent to the work of nature, represented by the bright sunshine and the gleaming bay, and the hand of man, as set forth in the warlike assemblage. His attention was wholly concentrated upon a letter, written in a somewhat irregular feminine hand, which the mail orderly had just left with him.

"Dear Mr. Hooker," the letter began, "it's too bad that you had to start off for the other side of the world just when we were getting to be such good friends, but that's always the way, isn't it? However we'll hope to see you back again before long, loaded with honours and an admiral at the very least -- or don't they have such things in the air fleet? I'd be very glad indeed if you'd write to me whenever you can find the time, as you suggest, and I know I'll be awfully thrilled at getting letters from the actual seat of war. Strange as it may appear, you're the only man I know in the International Police, except of course poor Leslie Gardiner. I don't suppose, by the way, you've learned anything more about his death, have you?"

"Evelyn has been simply wonderful! It's hard even for me to understand how she can bear her terrible loss so bravely. Sometimes she slips away for a little while and when she comes back I can tell that she's been crying, but she's always cheerful and smiling when she's with the rest of us. It makes me very humble sometimes when I think of her and realise how far I'd have to go before I could hope to equal her, but I am trying to be a little more thoughtful and considerate of other people and a little less happy-go-lucky and intent on my own sweet self. Connie -- she's my room-mate -- you remember her, don't you? -- asked me the other day if there was anything the matter with me, which I considered quite encouraging since it showed that my efforts at reform were noticeable at all events. I've been coming down from college every week-end this term, largely on Eve's account. I think it makes her feel better to have me around, and so many of her friends have married and moved away that --"

An imperative rap on the cabin door cut short further perusal and looking up impatiently, the Lieutenant growled, "Come in!" at the same time hastily stuffing the letter into the bosom of his undress blouse. The irritation clouding his usually cheerful countenance vanished immediately, however, as a pleasant-faced young man in the uniform of an army aviator entered in response to the rather ungracious summons, and jumping to his feet, he eagerly grasped the soldier's outstretched hand and shook it warmly.

"Why, you old mosquito driver," he exclaimed joyously, his features expanding in a broad grin of delight; "what the devil are you doing so far from London town? But sit down -- sit down," he added, dragging his visitor towards a capacious arm-chair and thrusting a box of cheroots into his hand. "There! Light up first and then we can talk in comfort."

The army man coloured with pleasure at the friendly warmth of his reception and advancing the end of his weed towards the proffered match, drew in the smoke with great contentment.

"Luxurious beggars, you navy men," he grunted between puffs. "We don't have anything like this when we're in the field -- but that's the advantage of taking your quarters along with you when you're on active service."

"But how do you happen to be here?" repeated the Lieutenant, having recourse to his pipe for the sake of variety.

"Jove, I should ask you that question," returned the other; "but since you asked it first -- here goes!" He puffed a moment reflectively and then continued. "You see, St. John, being what you would call a 'blarsted Britisher,' didn't have any too much confidence in the sections of the aviation corps with the Russians and Germans, so he imported half-a-dozen of us when he came east to take command, myself being one of the lucky number. Then there was Forsythe -- remember him, don't you? -- he was on the Cape station that same year, too. Poor chap! He got pretty badly hurt a couple of weeks ago and it's doubtful if he'll recover. And there was Bagworthy, too -- you don't know him, though. Well, yesterday St. John started me off with a message for Admiral Barrows -- got here this morning -- some one happened to let fall the remark that you and the Ariadne were with the fleet -- made a few inquiries -- and here I am!"

"I thought the Chinese were between St. John and us."

"Oh, I stuck close to the mountains and slipped around their flank. Their air scouts were too fully occupied to bother with a lone despatch runner. Had precious little juice left when I landed, though."

"You fellows use ermic acid for power, don't you?"

"Yes -- pretty good stuff. Wonder they never tried it for dirigibles."

"Oh, it doesn't develop energy enough for a tub the size of this one. We use straight electricity with permanent batteries and re-charge as we run. Of course the batteries give out in time, but they last as long as the lift in our gas does and that's all we want. Come to think of it, though, ermic acid has been tried in a dirigible engine." The Lieutenant grinned at the recollection. "It happened when I was still in the training school. There was a young instructor in mechanics there then -- can't recall his name, but he was God's own idiot. Well, he got it into his head that ermic acid could be made to run the biggest dirigible engine built if instead of mixing it with air in the usual way, it was energised with pure oxygen."

"By Jove!" exclaimed the army officer.

"Just so. He spent about a year working out formulae to prove his theory, and then one day he hitched about a gallon of the stuff up to the biggest twin propeller compound he had in the mechanical laboratory and turned on his oxygen. He got his energy all right. It was the damndest explosion in the history of the school."

"I remember hearing about it," chuckled the soldier. "The man wasn't hurt a bit either."

"It took all the hair off his head and he was as bald as a coot when they dug him out of the ruins. He survived, though, and was dismissed from the Service. Since then they've quit experimenting with ermic acid until they know more about it than they do now."

"In the meantime," suggested the aviator, leaning forward to knock the ashes from his cheroot, "you haven't explained your presence in the Far East."

"Oh, that's simple enough," returned the Lieutenant. "The whole Federation fleet's out here except a small squadron Barrows left in the Black Sea to amuse the Turks. About all we've had to do is hang around the Sea of Japan and pot Jap cruisers. It's put me up a step though." He tapped the gold diamond on the black braid of his collar. "I'm a division commander now."

"You don't say!" exclaimed the other with interest. "Congratulations, old chap. How did it happen?"

"I was clever enough to stay alive -- that's all. You see, when we arrived, the Japanese fleet was waiting for us in Korea Strait and Barrows found it a pretty tough nut to crack. He had the whole Pacific fleet and the air squadron of the Atlantic fleet besides, so he was superior in strength to say nothing of our men being rather better shots. In spite of that, it took us a good

eight hours to win that fight and some of our boats were pretty badly shot to pieces. The Denmark -- she was one of the old timers -- was sunk by a submarine, and besides her, we lost the Austria, London, and Minneapolis -- all good ships. By evening the Japs decided they'd had enough and drew off to the north. They'd lost three first-class battleships, five cruisers, a scout cruiser, and some miscellaneous junk and were rather badly crippled. Barrows sent the second cruiser squadron to keep them on the run and went on with the rest of his fleet to bombard the forts here, repairing damages as well as he could on the way. One thing that helped to beat the Japs was that they were far inferior in airships. Apparently only about half their air fleet was ready when the war broke out and what they had, they handled too carefully to hurt us much. They got the Freya, though, and as Bailey had made her his flagship, he was killed along with the rest of the crew and that's how I got my step. The day after the battle, Barrows sailed in here and commenced hammering the forts with his big guns, while we dropped bombs from above and the marines landed and attacked from the rear. The Chinese couldn't stand that for very long, though I will say that they fought like devils incarnate."

"Where was the Chinese fleet all this time?"

"Oh that was another bit of luck for us. You see, the allies didn't expect the war would begin until summer, and the Chinese fleet was still fitting out in Port Arthur. A couple of big battleships and three battle cruisers were with the Japanese, but the rest weren't in any condition for sea so they naturally stayed where they were. After Barrows captured this place, he sent a submarine mine-layer over to Port Arthur and sowed the entrance to the harbour so thick that a fish couldn't swim through without hitting something. Great man, Barrows. He's making a reputation for himself this year if no one else is."

"Hold on there, Tommy. Aren't you pulling my leg?"

"You aren't to blame for the mistakes of your superiors."

"I know that, but 'tisn't etiquette for me to sit tight and let you run down my commander-in-chief."

"But good god, Dick, every one admits that St. John bungled that northern campaign horribly, and was only saved from disaster by the intervention of Providence."

"Providence -- and one man! You heard about that, didn't you?"

"I only heard that Michaloff got there just in time to save von Erlen's 2nd division."

"That's only half the story. The rest isn't generally known, but you aren't a talkative chap --" The Lieutenant grinned understandingly. "I understand -- sail ahead."

"It almost seems miraculous," French resumed; "though according to this atheistic age, I suppose there must be an explanation somewhere. About a day before the battle began, an unknown man suddenly appeared at headquarters and offered to blow up a tunnel on the Harbin-Vladivostok line so that the Japanese would be cut off from their ammunition supply. No one knew who he was or where he came from, but he bore all the earmarks of a European and talked English like -- like an American."

"Much obliged for the compliment. And he did the job?"

"Well, rather! The way I learned about; it all was that Bagworthy had been killed and Forsythe badly wounded on reconnaissance duty, so St. John detailed me to carry the mysterious stranger around the enemy's lines and set him down near the scene of action. I landed him early on the morning of the day the Japanese came down on us. He must have stayed in hiding all that day and when night came on, slipped out and cut the railway. Anyhow the Japs ran out of ammunition just when they were about to wipe us off the earth, and by the time they got the tunnel open again, we were ready for them with over a hundred thousand men."

"May -- I -- be -- damned!" said Hooker slowly.

"Not half bad, eh?"

"Did the man escape all right?"

"No one knows -- or rather I should say that I don't, which practically amounts to the same thing, if you except the Commander-in-Chief himself -- and I really believe that in this instance he's no wiser than the rest of us. Of course there must have been some arrangement made about picking him up if he survived -- the mysterious stranger, I mean -- but I'm quite certain he hasn't returned to our lines yet."

"He didn't volunteer any information about himself while he was with you?"

"No, and I rather felt it wouldn't be quite the decent thing to do to ask questions. Hang it all, Tommy, the man was a gentleman -- you could tell that the minute he opened his mouth, even if he did look like a moth-eaten Esquimau; and it really wasn't any of my business. We're all liable to ups and downs in this life."

"Then he struck you as being a fellow that'd had hard luck or something shady in his past and for reasons best known to himself, had decided to drop out of the procession, either temporarily or permanently? -- say an International who'd been dismissed the Service for 'conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman'?"

"Must confess it seemed so to me -- but then anything's possible in this world."

"Yes, of course. What did your friend look like -- physical appearance, I mean? "

"What the devil, Tommy! You haven't any reason for supposing you know the chap, have you?"

"Not in the least -- just my natural curiosity, that's all."

"Well," replied Lieutenant French, puzzled but obedient; "he was about my height -- blue eyes and face practically hidden by a heavy blond beard. You must remember I only saw him in half light and hadn't an opportunity for a really good look at him then."

"Did he seem to know army ways?"

"Oh, I can't really say as to that. I started to explain the way to explode a kellite blasting cartridge, but he said he'd used the stuff before -- but then any civil engineer could say as much."

"I see. Much obliged to you."

Hooker smoked in silence for an interval, apparently buried in deep thought, while Lieutenant French idly examined the disorderly display on the naval officer's desk to pass the time. Presently his attention was attracted by an artistically engraved gold frame inclosing a snapshot of a pretty young girl, clad in a rough, white coat and short, dark skirt, with a pair of skates slung from her gracefully-curved arm.

"Your sister?" he asked by way of re-opening the conversation.

"No -- just a friend of mine," replied Hooker, reddening slightly under his tan. "College girl I met last Christmas at a house party."

"Oh, I beg your pardon."

"No occasion for it. Though I can't stand womenfolk as a rule, I will say that she's a pretty fine little girl, and that's more than I've ever confessed to any one else."

French appeared to understand, for he suddenly held out his hand to his friend. The Lieutenant took it with considerable embarrassment and turned with an air of relief as a sharp rap came on the cabin door. At his short summons to enter, the door opened admitting a naval cadet, who advanced four paces into the room and saluted stiffly.

"Admiral Barrows' compliments, and will Mr. Hooker please report to him at once."

"Present my compliments to Admiral Barrows and say that I'll be there immediately. Will you come along, French, or would you rather wait here? "

"I think I'd better accompany you and find out if your chief has his reply to St. John's despatch ready for me to take back yet."

"Just as well. Barrows is as likely as not to keep me all day."

They quickly reached the narrow steel deck and swung down the Ariadne's low freeboard into the waiting launch. Hooker rapidly spun the wheel and jerked the starting-switch as a blue-clad sailor jumped in forward and the swift little craft headed shoreward, her sharp prow cutting the water cleanly as she slipped over the long swells.

Once ashore, the friends parted with brief but none the less sincere expressions of mutual affection and esteem, and Lieutenant Hooker took his way to headquarters, where he was at once ushered into the presence of the doughty admiral himself. The lean Yankee naval chief was studying a chart of the northern coastline, but he looked up quickly as Hooker entered and perfunctorily saluted.

"Hello, Lieutenant," he exclaimed, disregarding the officer's salutation, for the practical-minded admiral abhorred anything that savoured of the martinet; "I've got a little job for you. By the way, did you happen to hear how St. John was yanked out of that devil of a mess he got himself into a couple of weeks ago?"

Hooker smiled inwardly, for it was quite characteristic of his adored commander to express whatever opinion he might entertain, with the most unconcerned disregard of what exalted personage that opinion had reference to, or who heard it. But he answered seriously enough, "You mean the cutting of the railroad? Yes, sir, I heard about that."

"Oh, you did, did you?" And the Admiral regarded him keenly. "I wasn't aware that Lieutenant French and you were such close friends. However, that's aside from the question. It appears that the fellow who did the trick was to be given two weeks to reach the seacoast, if he survived, and St. John promised to notify me and have a dirigible sent to pick him up. St. John says in his despatch that he believes the man will be useful to me in a little plan I'm concocting for later on in the year. Well, I guess if he was clever enough to cut that railroad and stay alive to tell about it, I will be able to use him. Anyhow, here's where he's to be -- easy bearings to remember. Think you can find that in the dark all right?"

"Yes, sir, I know I can."

"Good enough. When you're off the place, you'll show the Police private signal and he'll answer with a blue flare. Anything else you'd like to know?"

"No, sir."

"Better hang round a day or so, if the coast's clear, to give him a little leeway in case he isn't on the spot when you get there, and bring him to me as soon as you get back. Of course you're to keep away from the enemy as much as you can, but if you should happen to run across a Jap cruiser and feel like taking a shot at it, I won't reprimand you."

"Very well, sir. I understand."

"Get under way immediately." The admiral paused and looked up with a quizzical expression. "Glad of the chance for a little active work?"

"You bet I am," said Hooker fervently, quite forgetting the respect due his superior, but Barrows seemed pleased.

"It's a sign of my appreciation. When I like a man, I usually try to keep him twice as busy as any one else. That'll do, Lieutenant."

Hooker saluted and withdrew in high glee to make his preparations for departure. Outside the door, he encountered Lieutenant French, who was waiting to see the Admiral and receive his despatch.

"I'm off to pick up your mysterious stranger," said the naval officer, with a delighted grin. "Shall I give him your regards?"

"Congratulations! -- yes, please do. Good luck to you -- and, Hooker --"

"Yes?" The Lieutenant was halfway down the corridor.

"I'll expect a wedding invitation when the war's over."

But the corridor was empty.

Chapter XIII - The Mask Is Lifted

AT a little after four o'clock the Ariadne, her ensign snapping in the fresh breeze, slipped away unostentatiously from her moorings and headed for open water. In the pilot-house, Lieutenant Hooker stood at the control-board, spinning the small, brass-mounted wheel which governed the sea-rudder with skilful fingers and watching the slowly mounting column of oil in the gasbag pressure gauge. The gas hissed and sputtered as the clacking pump forced it through the expansion valve against an ever-increasing pressure, and with every stroke of the piston, the slender hull, vibrating with the thresh of the underwater screws, lifted a trifle until, as they cleared the harbour, the wet, glistening bilge from the bow to nearly amidships barely skimmed the surface of the water, and threw up great spouts of dazzling white spray as it cut into the rising seas. Without taking his eyes from the narrow oval window in front of him, the Lieutenant reached out his left hand and switched in the port high-speed gas-pump and with hardly a pause, shoved the long, red hand of the engine-room telegraph to "half speed ahead" and turned the shorter, black hand to "stop." As the underwater screws ceased to turn, the big aerial propellers began to revolve rapidly and pointing her nose skyward, the Ariadne soared into the air in a beautiful, perfect curve. With a smile of satisfaction, Hooker eased the horizontal rudders and pushed the red hand of the telegraph on to "full speed ahead," and the Ariadne, settling down to a steady sixty miles an hour, headed northeast on a long slant across the Yellow Sea.

The pilot-house door banged and Hooker's cadet entered, saluting gravely.

"Got everything secure, sonny?" asked the Lieutenant. "Yes, sir."

"You can take her, then, until six bells. There's your course. I'm going to turn in for a while. Call me if you see anything that looks suspicious."

"Yes, sir."

"-- And mind, sonny -- no running lights to-night."

"Very well, sir."

The cadet took his place at the control-board, conscientiously verified the course and the rate of sailing as indicated by the number of revolutions and the wind pressure, and fixed his gaze on the thick-glassed window in front of him -- a model of watchful alertness. Hooker had already turned away to leave the pilothouse, but a sudden impulse made him pause and regard his subordinate's motionless back with an expression of pity. For some seconds the impulse struggled in vain against his unwillingness to risk wounding the sensibilities of another, but at last he could hold in no longer.

"For the Lord's sake, son!" he burst out; "fill your pipe and make yourself comfortable -- we aren't running through a thick fog with a hostile fleet waiting for us just round the corner!"

Then, seeing the dull crimson slowly flood the smooth cheek of his startled junior, he quickly stepped to the young man's side and placed a kindly hand on his shoulder.

"I'm not criticising your work, son," he said. "As far as your duty is concerned, you're all that a man could wish for. But you mustn't take life in general and yourself in particular so seriously, or you'll never survive to wear an admiral's stars on your collar. Of course there are times -- lots of 'em -- when you've got to be as serious as you know how to be, but just for that very reason it's necessary to ease up some when you're able to, if you want to keep your equilibrium. A man can't keep speeded up to his maximum revolutions all the time any more than a dirigible can, without going to smash long before he should. You're a good boy, Leroy, and I believe you've good stuff in you, or I wouldn't be giving you these words of wisdom. Just keep in mind as much as you can that the technical part of your training-school information is all that's worth remembering and you'll come out all right."

And leaving the young officer this advice to ponder over through the hours of his vigil, the

Lieutenant tramped off to his cabin for an equal period of rest before the long night of watchfulness that lay before him. It is worthy of note, however, that instead of taking immediate advantage of the short time that remained to him before going on duty again, he seated himself at his desk and contemplated the gold-framed photograph thoughtfully, turning over in his mind the while the last words of his friend, Lieutenant French.

"Of course it's utterly impossible," he reasoned with himself; "a dainty little thing like Mabel -- and I'm a pretty rough specimen, when all's said and done -- never had much to do with womenfolk -- don't understand their ways." He mechanically filled his pipe and puffed rather mournfully. "She ought to marry some nice young fellow that's lived her kind of life and knows the kind of society she's used to. I wouldn't be the right person at all -- couldn't stand my sailor manners. There was Gardiner, now -- different with him -- something in the make-up, I guess. My family's just as good as hers, but ten years in the navy take the polish off a man. She'd be disgusted with me twenty times a day. And youth takes to youth -- only natural -- understand one another better. And the life of a naval officer's wife is just plain hell, anyhow. No, it's selfish of me to even think of it."

He rose from his chair sorrowfully and, knocking the ashes from his pipe, stretched himself on his narrow couch and fell asleep immediately. The air, brushed aside in the Ariadne's rapid progress, whistled past the open porthole of his cabin, sending in little vagrant gusts that stirred the hangings suddenly. The marine clock on the wall ticked away steadily, chiming the half hours with regular persistence and still the Lieutenant slumbered heavily, oblivious to all outward things. But when the silver-toned bell rang its three double strokes sharply, his eyes opened and he sat up, alert and ready on the instant.

In the pilot-house, the cadet briefly indicated the course he was steering and the ship's position, as Hooker took the wheel, and then retired to his own cabin while the Lieutenant settled himself for the night and dug down into his pocket for the leathern pouch filled with strong navy tobacco. The stars glinted coldly in the winter heavens as they moved across the black, vaulted earth roof in solemn majesty. The night wind sang keenly through the steel guys that bound the narrow hull to the huge gas-bag above. Below the keel, hill and valley lay flat and indistinct like the darkened surface of an immense map, spreading out immeasurably.

When the chronometer hands began to approach the hour of one, the Lieutenant's nostrils caught the first whiffs of salt-laden air and presently the dark waters of the Sea of Japan lay beneath them. The silent officer signalled the engine-room for half speed and, sliding back the big steel shutter on the port side of the pilot-house, leaned out and scanned the dimly-seen coastline. Satisfied of his position, he had the engines slowed down until the Ariadne was moving with barely speed enough to give her steerageway, and summoned his cadet and the quartermaster. Turning the wheel over to the former, he took his place at the port shutter and gazed intently shoreward, while in obedience to the veteran quartermaster's skilled hand, the electric bulbs swinging from the port spreader flashed out the Police private signal in an ever-changing gamut of red, white, red, white. Three times the lights blazed out, but the darkness of the shore remained untroubled by any answering sign. Hooker swore impatiently and called over his shoulder to the cadet.

"Bring her down, sonny. We're too conspicuous blazin' round up here."

With a jar and rattle the pumps waked to life and as the sucked-in gas moaned through the compression chamber, the Ariadne settled easily until her sharp hull entered the water and the waves slapped her straight sides. Trembling to the beat of her under water screws, she forged slowly ahead, the seas parting from her clean cutwater in two widely-diverging furrows.

"Searchlight off the starboard bow, sir," reported the cadet at the wheel.

"Damn the searchlight!" said the Lieutenant, with half his body through the open port. "Try him again, quartermaster."

An instant later he exclaimed, "By God, there he is!"

A brilliant blue flare burned up from the dim line of the shore and hung like the flame of some monstrous candle, lighting up the scenery all around it. Long before it died away again, Hooker's commands were flying like the shells of a quick-firer.

"Leroy, get the launch away and go ashore after that fellow. Quartermaster, switch on our port running light to mark our position. You'll have to make it in the dark, Leroy. I daren't turn our searchlight loose with that son-of-a-gun off there on the horizon. Be as quick as you can. I want to get out of here."

He leaned over the side and watched while the launch was swung outboard from its snug nesting-place aft of the pilot-house. The blue-clad crew tumbled in quickly, fending off with their hands and as Leroy jammed the wheel hard down, the little boat shot away and was swallowed up in the darkness. An interval of anxious waiting and she appeared again, with a closely muffled figure seated in the stern beside the cadet. The falls rattled through the blocks, and with an exclamation of relief and a last glance at the long pencil of light that was sweeping the sky, the Lieutenant rang up the engine-room, handed the wheel over to his returned subordinate, and went below to meet his passenger.

The man was seated in the wardroom with his head bent forward in his hands, but he looked up as Hooker entered and drew back with a gesture of uncontrollable surprise. An instant later he was master of himself once more and rising, advanced to greet his host. The Lieutenant grasped his outstretched hand and shook it warmly.

"I've heard of your doings," he said; "and I want to say, sir, that history will have to stretch itself to match them. But I'm forgetting myself -- it's grub you want more than praise just now. I guess you're pretty hungry after your trip."

The combined tact and cordiality were irresistible, and the stranger returned a smile of appreciation.

"I was just thinking, Lieutenant," he replied, "that I'd be willing to trade all my satisfaction at outwitting our enemies for one square meal."

"Luckily there's no earthly reason why you shouldn't have both," answered the naval officer, ringing for the Filipino wardroom boy. "If you've no objection, I'll give myself the honour of dining with you. I've been on most of the night and could do justice even to navy fare."

Throughout the meal, the stranger maintained an attitude of reserve and half-veiled suspicion as if he expected to be questioned as to his identity and past life, an expectation only natural in view of the anomaly he presented. But the Lieutenant appeared not to notice and after drawing from his guest a rather reluctant account of the blowing up of the tunnel and his subsequent journey to the coast, discoursed in general terms on the military and naval situation to date and the probable duration of the war. Little by little the stranger unbent and when at the close of the dinner, Hooker unlocked a cupboard and produced a cob-webbed bottle of ancient port -- "contrary to the rules of the service, you know, but it's war time" -- he leaned back in his chair luxuriously and allowed the rays of the bunched electrics to light up the rich colour of the wine with intense satisfaction.

"Lord!" he exclaimed; "it's good to enjoy the refinements of civilised life once more."

"Must be," returned his host absently. "Come into my cabin and have a smoke."

The stranger followed with alacrity and lighting the cigar tendered to him, inhaled the smoke with the delight of one who has not tasted good tobacco for many months. Warm and well-fed and utterly at peace, he forgot his suspicions and permitted his gaze to wander idly about the comfortable cabin, while the Lieutenant, sending quick, nervous smoke wreaths from his pipe, watched him keenly. At length the man's eye fell upon the gold-encircled photograph of Mabel Thornton above Hooker's desk and rested there in some astonishment.

"Don't you think," inquired the Lieutenant casually, intently noting every expression of his

guest's features, "that in some ways she's a better looking girl than her sister?"

"Why, I wouldn't say so," began the other absently. He stopped abruptly and stared at his questioner with hanging jaw and frightful eyes.

"My God!" he cried softly and buried his face in his hands.

"Gardiner!"

In the tense silence, the ticking of the marine clock on the wall beat on the brain like the strokes of a hammer and the wind of early morning moaned through the open port like the memory of old joys long forgotten and awakened under the lash of present pain. At length the Captain raised his head. "Why in hell couldn't you leave me alone, Hooker?" he asked thickly. "Damn you, why couldn't you let me stay dead to the world as I wanted to be? I couldn't have lasted much longer."

"Why should you stay dead to the world with one of the finest girls God ever made waiting for you in America? She's loved you well, Gardiner, and suffered more than any one can tell, believing in your death. Don't you think you owe something to her?"

"Think of her! It's because I do think of her that I've done -- what I've done -- it's because if she knew that I was alive -- if she knew why I was alive -- she'd suffer even more --"

"So that's it," said the Lieutenant dully. "I might have guessed -- it'd take something more than ordinary to make a man like you drop out --"

"-- More than ordinary!" repeated the other bitterly; "my God!"

The Lieutenant tugged desperately at his shaven lip and suddenly leaned forward, laying a friendly hand on the Captain's arm.

"See here, old man," he said; "suppose you tell me the whole story. Of course it's none of my damned business, but I'd like to help you if I can and I'd like still more to help that little girl in the United States. Two heads are better than one -- especially when one of 'em's got something on his mind that's driving him nearly crazy -- and it's just possible we may be able to see some way out of this tangle that hasn't occurred to you."

The Captain shook the hand off fiercely. "Tell you!" he flashed. "D'you think I'd have condemned myself to hell for these past four months if I'd been willing that another man should know my shame?"

Hooker went white to the lips and drew back as though he had been struck in the face. "Of course you don't have to say anything if you don't want to," he said stiffly. "My offer was purely out of kindness, but if you don't trust me --" He hesitated, searching for a suitably dignified ending. But as he looked at the ragged, bowed figure of the Captain, so abject and broken by grief and suffering, his quick anger vanished utterly.

"Come, old man," he said compassionately; "suppose you turn in for a few hours. I should have known better than to rub you on the raw when you were all worn out. When you get a little rested we can talk this matter over again, or if you'd rather, I'll say nothing more about it."

There was no mistaking the real sympathy in the kindly blue eyes, and in spite of the iron hold he was endeavouring to keep upon himself, a mist gathered in the Captain's eyes and a choking rose in his throat.

"I'm -- I'm a damned ungrateful beggar, Hooker," he stammered huskily; "but I'm -- hardly master of myself --" He stopped suddenly and his lips quivered. "I've suffered some," he ended, looking up piteously.

The Lieutenant winked rapidly and pulled with energy at his pipe, but at length becoming aware that it had long been cold, he swore unsteadily and fumbled for a match with uncertain fingers.

"I understand, old fellow," he replied hastily; "you needn't say any more -- no man's accountable when he's been through what you have."

"No," returned the Captain slowly; "you don't understand -- you couldn't unless you knew --"

and perhaps not even then."

He paused, and not knowing what to say in reply, Hooker waited in silence.

"I think I'd better tell you," Gardiner continued more strongly. "No--" as the other seemed about to dissent, "-- I'd much rather. I meant to bear it alone until I died -- but death hasn't come and -- and I can't bear it much longer."

The Lieutenant bowed his head silently, but without noticing him, the Captain went on.

"You heard that the mission to Peking came within an ace of failing utterly. You may have heard also that Major Wilkie sacrificed himself on the bare chance that the papers we were sent to get might be hidden until in some way they could be recovered and forwarded to London. That was the duty he left with me."

"I heard about the Major," said Hooker quietly. "Well?"

"They knew that I knew where the papers were hidden. They brought me before their council and tortured me to make me tell. God! how they hurt me!" He twisted his mangled fingers together in agony at the recollection and in spite of himself, the Lieutenant shuddered. "For a whole long night they tortured me, but I wouldn't tell -- and then -- and then they said they would kill me by inches unless I did. Oh, it wasn't the pain," he cried; "I could have stood that! It was the thought that I would never see her again-- never hold her in my arms -- never feel her lips on mine. All the while they tortured me, I saw her face as plainly as though she were close in front of me -- her eyes -- as when I said good-bye to her the last time -- asking me to come back to her -- I couldn't die!"

"So you told?"

The Captain bowed his head and his shoulders shook.

"I can't understand," said Hooker hoarsely; "I can't understand!"

"I knew you wouldn't -- not one man in a thousand would -- no one who wasn't cursed with my temperament and imagination -- no one who didn't love as I loved."

"I don't understand," repeated the Lieutenant, striving for words; "I can't see -- if I loved a woman truly -- I would feel that my love was unworthy of her -- that I myself was unworthy of her -- if to possess her I sacrificed my honour."

"Love! You don't know the love that bound me. Beside it honour -- my very soul itself -- were as mere nothings -- trifles to be whistled down the wind with no thought of loss as long as I had her."

"Pray God I may never love like that," said the Lieutenant in a low voice.

"Pray God you never will. For her I was ready to go down into the deepest hell -- as I have done."

"If that is so -- if you cared for nothing but your love for her -- why did you not go back to her when you were free? Why are you here?"

"If that is so, did I say? Ah, but I was wrong. It's not so now."

More and more puzzled, the Lieutenant felt in his pocket and filled his pipe afresh as if seeking by that means to aid the confusion in his whirling brain.

"Listen," said the Captain, bending forward and speaking more rapidly; "when they released me, I went to the house of one of our native spies who lived close by -- he who found the papers in the Major's body and took them to London. He let me hide there until I was stronger and before he left, I made him promise to let it be thought that I had died -- I had had a few hours to think and I had already begun to see that it was better so."

Hooker nodded energetically and his brow began to clear.

"I stayed in hiding until the war broke out -- thinking -- thinking always. And the more I thought, the more clearly I realised that I had been mistaken in my love for her -- that there was something far better than possessing her and that was to be worthy of her. If I had only realised that before! I had won her too easily. My first love for her was a blind and selfish

passion. True love -- the only love worthy of a woman -- would have suffered anything -- would have even renounced her, rather than have her touched by the slightest breath of dishonour or shame. I can see that now -- how clearly I can see that now! And I thank God that I have been given the strength to prove that I really love her by remaining dead to her until death comes." He stopped and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "But that isn't all. I still owe my life to the cause I knowingly betrayed -- and that debt is unpaid."

The Lieutenant rose from his chair and paced the floor of the cabin, torn by many perplexities.

"See here, Captain," he burst out at length; "I -- God knows I honour you for the attitude you've taken in this matter, but -- but I'm damned if I don't think you're carrying it too far. If the girl really cares for you -- and I sincerely believe she does -- she'll understand and forgive you and love you all the better for what you've suffered because of her. I'll confess I can't quite understand, even after what you've told me, how you happened to slip up, but Lord knows you've paid for that twice over by what you did two weeks ago. Anyhow, men aren't built the same and I realise that you're more finely strung than I am. Good God, Gardiner, we're only human and bound to make mistakes sometimes and there's no mistake so bad that it can't be cured in time. What would life be worth if one error could damn us forever?"

But the Captain shook his head and smiled sadly. "I know you mean it kindly, Hooker," he replied; "but if you were in my place -- if you had on your soul what I have on mine -- would you be willing to say 'I'm sorry,' and let it go at that?"

The Lieutenant ran his hand through his curly hair despairingly.

"No," he said as though every word was being dragged from him, "I -- don't -- believe -- I -- would."

"Then," said Gardiner quickly, "you'll let me see this business through in my own way and keep my secret?"

The Lieutenant turned to the open porthole, already bright with the approaching day, and then back to the cabin again, and finally resumed his restless pacing of the worn carpet.

"Damn it all!" he exploded; "there must be some middle course we can steer if we could only find it. If you'd let me write --"

"No," interrupted Gardiner hastily; "no one must know -- I trust to your honour that no one except yourself will ever know this -- what I have told you."

Hooker hesitated in his uneasy walk and finally seated himself on the desk close to the Captain.

"Let's make a bargain, Gardiner," he suggested. "I'll promise to keep my mouth shut and furthermore to do any lying for you that may seem useful and necessary up to the end of the war. After that, you'll let me tell all this to some one of your friends at home -- Evelyn herself for choice, or possibly Mabs -- her sister would be better to begin with, or even Professor Merriam -- he seems to be a good friend of yours. That'll relieve my conscience a heap and smooth the path out for you a bit. Great guns, Captain, you might as well say yes while you can. I'll probably do it anyhow, and by that time you'll either be dead or have redeemed yourself beyond all possible question."

"That won't do, Hooker," said Leslie steadily; "I must have your absolute, unequivocal promise that you will not repeat a word of what has passed to-night to any one -- any one, you understand -- unless I give you permission."

The Lieutenant made a helpless gesture.

"Oh, all right," he said grudgingly, "I'll promise -- needs must when the devil drives, as the old saying goes. Jove, you high-spirited, conscientious fellows are enough to drive a man wild. When you once get some fantastic ideal of conduct in your head, there's no doing anything with you. But I'll be damned if I don't respect you for it."

He slipped to his feet from the desk with a sigh -- half admiration, half commiseration.

"Hope you haven't any conscientious scruples against going to bed," he grumbled, opening the cabin door; "because you're going if it takes the whole crew to get you there -- no, you're not turning anybody out. It's my sub's quarters and he'll be on duty most of the time until we make port. Good-night -- or I should say, good-morning, seeing that the sun's just risen."

He turned to go, but Leslie caught his hand in a strong grip.

"You're a damned good-hearted fellow, Hooker," he said huskily; "and you've helped me more than you realise. I won't forget."

But the Lieutenant freed himself, blushing with embarrassment to the temples, and fled to his cabin. He seated himself on his couch and rapidly divested himself of his coat and shoes and loosened his belt. His eyes encountered the alluring, tantalising face of Mabel Thornton laughing out from her golden frame, and he remained bolt upright, lost in thought, unconsciously holding his heavy automatic navy pistol, which he had just withdrawn from its holster, in a position which, to the casual observer, would have suggested premeditated suicide.

"Poor Gardiner!" he said half aloud; "whole life ruined by a woman -- and yet it certainly wasn't her fault. She's had just as hard a time of it as he has, though in a different way, of course. Still if it hadn't been for her --" He shook his head mournfully and becoming aware of the vicious-looking weapon he held in his hand, rose and laid it mechanically on the desk, still staring at the picture. "I wonder if it's worth it," he exclaimed suddenly; "worth risking one's soul as Gardiner did -- or one's peace of mind -- or the Lord only knows what, on the chance -- not even the certainty -- just the chance, that one may get a larger measure of happiness? It was woman who first brought trouble into the world according to the old legend, and Lord knows, her descendants have kept up the family reputation -- only they blame it all on the unintelligence of mankind." He made a movement as if to tear the picture from the wall, but checked himself and allowed his empty hand to fall to his side. "No," he said, "after all it wasn't her fault. She didn't know how it would affect him. Anyhow, Mabs"-- he flushed a little at the free use he had permitted himself to make of her name -- "is a girl who would push a man forward -- not hold him back."

With this reflection he finally curled himself up on his couch, and despite the bright sunlight that streamed through the porthole, fell asleep instantly.

Chapter XIV - The Horse Marines

"WELL, you old amphibian," hailed Tommy Hooker lazily, folding up the letter he had been perusing in the warm sunshine and stretching himself; "how are the horse marines coming on?"

The Lieutenant was seated in a most undignified attitude on the smoothest portion of a ragged mass of concrete which had formerly constituted a small portion of the Pei-ho defences at Taku, the rapid disintegration of which bore eloquent testimony to the accurate shooting of the navy big guns. On his left, the yellow-brown river curved muddily between its low banks, bearing on its dingy surface a little cluster of navy dirigibles, while further on around the bend, the masts of several gunboats broke the monotonous view.

Leslie checked his unlovely mount and swung himself gracefully from the low saddle. The past few months had improved his appearance wonderfully. His heavy blond beard was carefully trimmed and he wore a neatly-fitting, albeit dusty and sweat-stained, grey-green uniform with the scarlet piping of the marine corps.

"I think a friend of yours has come to town," he remarked, ignoring the Lieutenant's enquiry.

"That so?" asked Hooker with interest, coming suddenly to attention. "Who is it?"

"I saw an army aeroplane outside headquarters as I passed and one of those beardless children whom the navy department delegates to help boss around real men in war time, volunteered the information that a despatch runner from General St. John had just come in."

"Wonder if it can be Dick French?" pondered the Lieutenant. "Hope it is. I haven't seen him since just before I started out to pick you up."

"Well, I kind of thought you'd be interested," admitted Gardiner; "so I instructed the cherub who gave me my information to lay hands on the messenger when he emerged and if it was French, to tell him you were over here."

"Must say I'm obliged to you," acknowledged Hooker, lapsing into an unconcealed yawn. "Ye gods, I hope his message means active service. This lazy life is slowly killing me off by degrees. If something doesn't happen pretty soon, I'll volunteer for the flying-fish brigade myself. How'd the drill go to-day?"

"Was that a letter from Mabel you were reading?" asked the Captain irrelevantly.

"Why -- ah -- that is to say, yes," replied the navy man with heightened colour. "I'll not try to deceive you -- it was."

"Did she say anything about --?"

"Here -- read for yourself," said Hooker, handing over the precious letter without hesitation; "and I hope it may help to bring you to reason," he added under his breath, and aloud, "Hello! Here's the mosquito driver in person."

In fact it was the aviator himself, who, scrambling over the rubbish that marked the site of the one-time battery, shook the Lieutenant's hand warmly and turned to Leslie with an air of doubt.

"Allow me to present Captain -- ah -- Smith of the horse marines," said Hooker hastily; "Captain Smith -- Lieutenant French of the aviation corps. You can easily tell, Dick, by a casual inspection of the Captain's mount that the poor beast's principal diet consists of corn and beans."

"Wish mine did," returned the aviator with a short laugh; "I don't feed on anything half so filling. But haven't we met before, Captain?" he asked bluntly.

"I think we have, Lieutenant," answered Leslie soberly; "you've sharp eyes. You carried me on a rather important mission a few months ago."

"I thought so," said French with a satisfied air. "Jove, Captain, you've altered a trifle since then."

"Oh, he's a person of importance now," broke in the irrepressible Hooker; "member of Colonel Gordon's staff."

"I shouldn't think he'd require any reflected glory," said the army man sincerely and then perceiving Leslie's embarrassment, he went on hastily, "But you chaps must give me an account of yourselves. My only object in coming over here in the first place was to be entertained."

"Well," began Hooker, taking the duty upon himself, "as you can see, we came, saw, and overcame quite after the fashion of the ancients. But I'll admit, it took some hard fighting to do it. Those Chinese know how to shoot."

"And now you're all ready for a raid on Peking?"

"Well," said Hooker, pulling at his upper lip; "as to that, I can't say. It was a common rumour through the fleet when I came here a month ago, but we're still waiting for sailing orders. But Barrows has been going around the last few days with a grin on his face like a Cheshire cat and that usually means he has something or other up his sleeve. It oughtn't to be a hard job, now that all the first line troops are in Manchuria."

"What force have you got?"

"About 12,000 sailors and marines and two regiments of American reservists on the way from the Philippines. We're rather weak in artillery, though."

"Cavalry?"

"Couple of squadrons and some horse artillery coming with the Americans. Oh, and we have the horse marines -- I nearly forgot those. That's your story though, Captain."

"Horse marines?" French turned to Leslie enquiringly.

"An idea of Admiral Barrows'," said Gardiner, smiling. "You see, we were pretty short of cavalry for an enterprise of this kind, so he conceived the plan of rounding up all the horses and ponies he could lay his hands on and mounting about 4,000 men of the marine corps. According to Barrows, a marine should know a little of everything, and if horsemanship, through some strange oversight, hadn't been included up to date, it was time that it was. So for a while horse stealing was part of our daily routine and cavalry drill as common as rifle practice. And you know, the beggars really took to it wonderfully, and now that they're over being saddle-sore, you'd almost think they'd never seen deep water."

"What was your part in all this, Captain?"

"Oh, Barrows hadn't any use for me right away, so I got tired of sitting around doing nothing and volunteered for the deep-sea cavalry. I used to ride quite some when I was -- that is, when I was at home. And Barrows recommended me to Colonel Gordon for one of his staff officers. So I got a uniform and the honorary rank of captain of volunteers, and now I'm a full-fledged horse marine until something better turns up."

"Doesn't sound half bad," said the aviator rather enviously. "Anyhow, it's a sight better than squatting on your hunkers and scratching flea bites. Do you suppose, Tommy, there's such a thing as a bathtub in all this fine, big fleet? I haven't had my clothes off for over a month."

"I guess so," replied the navy man, rising. "Will you have it now? My stone's getting too hard for comfort anyway."

"What's the military situation?" asked Leslie, as they moved towards the river bank.

"Not bad," said French. "At least it's a good deal better than it was. Remy with ten corps is driving the Japanese back on Vladivostok in the north and I expect they're in rather a tight place. Isn't that so?" he asked, appealing to the naval officer.

"Guess you're right," said Hooker. "Most of our big ships are up there now shelling the forts, and the Japs are having the devil of a time getting supplies. They counted on smashing the army before the fleet could get there."

"In the south," went on French, "St. John with 400,000 men more or less is holding the

Chinese on the upper Sungari, and the last few days he's been taking the offensive. Yes, I think the situation on the whole is improving."

"There's a long way to go yet," said Leslie; "even if the Japanese have to give up, the Chinese won't for some time. It's a fight for life with them and they know it."

"Do you really believe the Japs will quit soon?" asked the naval officer.

"What else can they do, Tommy? Suppose Remy corners their first army in the north, as he's reasonably sure to do, unless something happens. Well, that's the last we'll hear from them in this war. A million men in Nippon won't do them any good as long as we hold the sea. The Japs are some of the best little soldiers on earth, but they're not fools. They won't hold out after they're beaten. You just wait and see."

"It's my belief," observed French thoughtfully, "that the Japanese would have kept out entirely if they hadn't been tied hand and foot by their treaty. They knew when we declared war a full half year before they intended that we should, that the game had been lost before it had even been begun. They're deucedly patriotic and all that, but as the Captain says, they're not fools. Now with the Chinese, it's different. It isn't so much a question of ambition with them as just plain hate. As long as they think they can still hurt us, they're going to keep up the struggle, even though they know that they haven't a single chance of winning out in the end. But where's that bathtub, Tommy? That interests me a good deal more just now than even the probable duration of the war."

"The commander of the Manchester's a friend of mine, so I guess I'll take you over to her," said Hooker, stepping into the Ariadne's launch, which swung at the temporary landing-stage. "Aren't you coming along?" as Leslie paused on the bank.

"No, thanks. I'm clean enough for a while. Besides I want to have a talk with Gordon."

"You'll join us at dinner this evening on the Ariadne, won't you?" called the Lieutenant as the launch headed out into the muddy stream.

"Yes. I'll be there."

He watched the little craft for a moment longer and then turned with something like a sigh and, mounting his uneasy pony, set out at a foot pace for the headquarters of the marine corps. It suddenly occurred to him that he still had Mabel Thornton's letter to the Lieutenant in his pocket and with an exclamation of annoyance, he drew it forth and turned it over idly in his hands. For an interval he hesitated, but reflecting that Hooker had given it to him without the slightest reservation, he unfolded the missive resolutely and commenced to read.

"-- We are planning to go to Vermont this summer. Jim Merriam has been spending his vacation at Dorset and writes so enthusiastically of the place and says the summer colony there is so pleasant and the young people have so much fun that he has gotten us all excited about it, and mother said only last night that she had decided to go. We all think it will do Eve lots of good to go to a place she's never been to before, where there's lots of things going on all the time -- take her away from herself, I mean. I'm awfully glad she and Jimmy Merriam are to be together this summer. He understands her so well and they've always been almost like brother and sister and Eve said just the other day that she had such a restful, contented feeling when she was with him--"

The Captain stopped reading and the paper rustled as his hand contracted in a quick spasm of pain. To renounce her himself was one thing, but this was a possibility he had never taken into consideration.

"But after all," he said to himself after a moment, calmly enough, "there's no reason why she shouldn't if -- if she cares for him. Evelyn's a girl who ought to have a home and children of her own -- it's the only kind of a life in which she'll be really happy -- and Jim would make her a good husband -- none better. I'd rather it would be some one like Jim -- yes, I'd a good deal rather it would be some one like Jim."

But his face was not at all contented as he said it. It is hard for a young man to give up the hope of happiness even when pursuing a very commendable ideal of conduct; and Leslie was not yet thirty-two.

"Come on, little horse," he said at length, setting his bearded jaw firmly; "let's be moving -- Hello! What's up now?"

A slate-coloured hull moved slowly across the brown water inside the bar, followed by another and yet another. Not warships, certainly.

"By George!" exclaimed the Captain as his unwilling pony broke into a sharp canter; "I believe the Americans have arrived at last."

At headquarters, under the guise of much confusion, things were transpiring swiftly. Colonel Gordon, the commander of the marine detachment, was there, deep in conversation with Rear Admiral Scott, the chief of the second squadron. Staff officers moved about importantly, and even the marine private on guard was swollen with suppressed information. As Leslie rode up and dismounted, Colonel Gordon hailed him.

"The Admiral wants to see you directly, Smith. Just sent a cadet over to your quarters to look you up."

"Very well, sir." Leslie saluted, tossed his bridle to a waiting orderly, and strode into the building. A brief word to the sentry at the Admiral's door and he was at once admitted into the presence of the Commander-in-Chief. Barrows was studying a map as Leslie entered, but looked up quickly and nodded recognition.

"Got some work for you, Captain," he said shortly. "You know the country between here and Peking pretty well, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I'm planning to start a force off to-morrow to capture Peking and I hope with it the central government. You understand, it'll simply be a raid. We couldn't hope to hold the place with the men we have here, but if we can be quick enough, I think we should be able to get there and back again before the Chinese can get sufficient reinforcements to make us any trouble. Practically all their first-line troops are up in Manchuria and though there's a garrison at Tientsin, I don't believe we'll have much difficulty in disposing of it. So far as I know, there are no regular troops in Peking at all. Now the men we want to get hold of aren't in the government buildings. They have a secret council chamber of their own somewhere in the city where they can meet without any danger of being spied upon and where they can hide temporarily if an expedition like the one we're planning attacks the place unexpectedly. You can see yourself that unless we know just where to put our hands on them, we wouldn't be any better off if we did reach the city. By the time we'd gotten by the walls and searched the town, they'd either be safe in the hills or we'd have an army down upon us that it would be folly to stand against. Now, Colonel Villon writes me that there's a native spy in the city, a fellow named Li, who knows where this secret meeting hall is. I've been trying to get in touch with him for some time, but I haven't been able to so far and I must confess I'm shy about trusting natives with our plans. If the Chinese should happen to get wind of the raid beforehand, it'd be all up with it. Now I want you to get into Peking in some way -- that's your lookout -- hunt up this man Li -- I can tell you where to find him--"

"Beg pardon, sir," interrupted Leslie; "but that won't be necessary. I know where the meeting-place is."

"Good God!" said Barrows hastily. For several seconds he regarded the Captain intently, plainly at a loss, but Leslie bore his superior's gaze without flinching although his own face grew slowly crimson.

"See here, Smith," began the Admiral at length; "I've accepted you on St. John's recommendation and you must admit I haven't tried to open up your past history at all, even

though your position is vague, to say the least. It's come to the point now, however, where I'll have to require a little more of an explanation before I feel like trusting you entirely. You come to me as a soldier of fortune, probably under an assumed name, with your past shrouded in mystery and yet you say that you are in possession of a secret that is known only to the head of the Intelligence Department and one or two of his most trusted agents. You must own, Captain, that under the circumstances your statement is incredible, to put it very mildly."

For a while Leslie appeared to be debating with himself and the Admiral waited patiently, keenly studying his every expression. At last the Captain raised his head and moved a step nearer to his superior.

"Admiral Barrows," he said evenly, "you can readily understand that when a man like myself wishes to conceal his identity, the reason is no ordinary one and the occasion must be more than ordinary which will induce him to put aside that concealment."

"The gravity of the occasion is for you to decide yourself," replied Barrows shortly; "I've said all that I feel at liberty to say -- as yet."

"Of course," went on Leslie, "I could simply offer my help, with the services I have already rendered the Federation as a guarantee of good faith, and if you did not choose to accept it on that basis, I could go my own way as I did before and leave you to work out your own salvation."

"Pardon me, Captain," returned the Admiral; "but this matter can't be settled as easily as all that. Either you're lying -- forgive me if I speak rather plainly -- in which case I certainly don't feel justified in trusting you, or in some manner you've obtained possession of a secret you've no business to have. In either case, you're a dangerous man to have going around loose and I shall feel it my duty to detain you until I know more about you than I do now. Come, Captain," he added, sitting back in his chair and regarding Leslie with friendly eyes, "you have too much sense not to understand that with all the responsibility I have on my shoulders, I can't afford to take any chances. Be square with me and you won't regret it. On the other hand" -- he suddenly leaned forward and his eyes blazed dangerously -- "I warn you that I'm not a man to be trifled with, as perhaps you may have heard."

"All I ask," said Leslie quietly, "is that if I tell you about myself, you'll promise that no one else will ever know my secret."

"I'll promise to keep quiet as long as it's compatible with my duty to the Service."

"That's fair enough," replied the Captain readily. "Now as far as you know, how many were in the secret of this hidden meeting-place?"

"Colonel Villon, for one," said Barrows, puzzled at the turn the conversation was taking; "Major Wilkie and Captain Gardiner, who went there in the first place, and the spy -- that's all."

"That's all," assented Leslie. "Now I'm not Colonel Villon or the native, and Major Wilkie was killed, as is generally known --"

"By all that's holy!" cried the Admiral; "you don't mean to tell me that you're --"

Leslie bowed his head. "I am," he said in a low voice.

"But -- but, great heavens, man!" exclaimed the astounded naval officer; "you were supposed to have been killed too -- at the same time Wilkie was."

"I should have been," said Leslie with white lips; "but unfortunately I wasn't."

"H'm," reflected the Admiral. "Have you any means of proving that you really are Captain Gardiner?"

"Lieutenant Hooker of the Ariadne knows me," said Leslie; "you can ask him."

"Hooker knows why you have -- well, preferred to stay dead?"

"Yes."

"And he approves?"

"Yes."

"Then I guess you're all right, Captain, though of course I'll want to have a talk with Hooker before I definitely decide to send you. And now let's get down to business again. When we commence the assault on Peking, you'll take a small detachment, get into the city on the other side and capture these fellows before they can get away. I needn't tell you it'll be risky work, but I believe you can do it if you're quick enough. Of course they may bolt before we reach the city, but we've got to leave something to luck and I rather think they'll hang on till the last minute, trusting to our being interrupted and believing they can escape whenever they want to."

"Very well, sir, I understand. By the way, I should think Colonel Villon would have given you a plan of the city, showing the location of this council hall so that--"

"Why, so he did," interrupted the Admiral, opening a drawer of his desk; "but we'd lose too much time if we tried to go by that alone. Here!" And he pushed the paper across to the Captain. Leslie glanced over it and smiled grimly.

"I think I understand why Li didn't report to you -- always supposing he hasn't been caught and killed. Admiral Barrows, this thing's no good -- now."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that they changed their quarters after our visit, as they naturally would. Li probably found that out as soon as he got back from London and hasn't been able yet to unearth their new hiding-place. I imagine he wasn't anxious to admit to Colonel Villon -- or you -- that he was at fault as long as he still had a chance to dig them out."

"Do you know where they are now?"

"Yes. I was acquainted with one of the men in the council and after our mission had -- was over, I stayed in the city and tracked him -- for reasons of my own. And in that way I discovered where their new meeting-place was."

"So you're the only man who has this information now?"

Leslie nodded, and the Admiral uttered a low whistle.

"Well, just indicate the correct location on here." He hesitated and reflected while Leslie complied with his request. "I guess that's all, Captain. You can trust me to keep your secret for you. Don't get yourself killed before the time comes."

Leslie saluted and withdrew, leaving the Admiral staring straight before him, buried in deep thought.

Chapter XV - The Last Of The Ariadne

WHEN the Chinese planned the defences of Tientsin, they looked forward to a possible attack by a much larger force than Admiral Barrows' expeditionary army. A strong semicircle of fortifications, running in general northeast and southwest, covered the approaches to the city on the Taku side and heavy batteries protected the Pei-ho, railway and highroad. To the north of the native city, another fort guarded the junction of the river with the Grand Canal and near the site of the old mud wall, still other groups of big guns kept watch on the west and south. At this time, however, the well-designed lines were poorly manned, for the fighting in Manchuria had drawn heavily on the trained troops of the regular army; and although the Tientsin garrison was perhaps equal to the Federation force in numbers, it was for the most part greatly inferior in organisation, discipline, and equipment and also, it must be confessed, in fighting quality. However, Rear Admiral Scott by no means underestimated the task that lay before him. The reduction of Tientsin was but a means to an end and he did not propose to fatally weaken his fighting force by a needless expenditure of men.

On the morning of July Fifteenth Admiral Scott's advance came in touch with small parties of Chinese and drove them back on the fortifications, after an interchange of shots which did little damage to either side. The American brigade, heavily supported by sailors and marines, was then massed for an assault on the centre of the Chinese position, and the navy dirigibles were ordered to blow up the forts and prepare the way.

In the pilot-house of the Ariadne, from whose port and starboard spreaders fluttered the flag of the division commander, Lieutenant Hooker waited impatiently for the signal to attack. As the first level rays of sunlight turned the dingy earth to molten gold, a puff of black smoke appeared in the air behind the motionless columns of the troops and hung there, an ugly blot against the brilliant glory of the new-born day. And turning to his cadet, the Lieutenant said briefly, "Let her go!"

Like huge birds intolerant of earth ties, the mighty dirigibles soared into the sky. Lightly they hovered, resting on the bosom of the air as easily as though they had never known a medium more substantial, and the morning sunlight tinged their slaty hulls and sparkled in golden spray from their whirling propeller blades. A beautiful race of unearthly beings they seemed, born of the bright sunshine and clear breeze under the arching roof of heaven, rising in their joy and strength to greet their flaming master in the east. Wonderful creatures, indeed, but bearing destruction and death. For from their rounded barbets, the slender quick-firers thrust hungry muzzles and low down on their gracefully curving sides, squat bomb tubes grinned through the open ports fore and aft.

"It'll be easy work," remarked Hooker to Leroy. "Nothing to look out for but anti-aircraft guns, and not very many of them. We ought to be through in an hour or so."

The cadet did not reply. He was staring uneasily towards the spread-out city that lay map-like before them; staring at some vague shapes showing dimly behind the regular lines of the fortifications.

"Lieutenant," he said suddenly, "what d'you make of those things?"

Hooker lifted his long-barrelled marine glasses and peered intently.

"Dirigibles!" he cried with a startled oath. "One -- two -- three of 'em! Sonny, those damned Orientals have sold us good and proper! We didn't dream there was an airship within five hundred miles!"

The boy's face paled slightly, but his fingers were steady as they rested on the wheel.

"What are you going to do?"

But Hooker was already shooting rapid commands at the veteran quartermaster.

"Signal the Aphrodite and Brunhilde to obey previous orders and attack the forts. Daphne

and Ariadne will engage the enemy's dirigibles. Turn her over at full, son -- we've got to get those fellows before they can interfere with the bombardment."

"Couldn't we engage with the whole division and attend to the forts later, sir?"

"Can't risk having all our ships crippled. That could easily happen and then it'd be all up with the expedition. The soldiers alone couldn't take those forts in a month."

Leroy nodded with compressed lips as the wheel turned in his expert hands.

"Orders, sir?"

"Tackle that big fellow with the yellow gas-bag first. Keep off to port a trifle so we can give the other one a dose from our stern battery."

They were nearing the forts and the Aphrodite and Brunhilde obediently slowed down, while an eruption of thin projectiles spouted all about them. Side by side the Daphne and Ariadne raced onward. There was a flash from the largest of the Chinese dirigibles and the Ariadne's hull rang and quivered as the shot glanced off.

"Those beggars can aim," observed Hooker, unmoved, and directed his main battery to commence firing.

With the first sharp reports of the Ariadne's guns, pandemonium broke loose. The Chinese dirigibles sheered off to starboard and lashed the Federation ships with a storm of steel, while the Daphne and Ariadne blazed like overcharged thunder-clouds. The narrow hulls trembled under repeated blows. Slim shells hammered on armour-plate, seeking for a spot at which to enter, and the slender steel guys twanged and snapped like overtuned piano wires. Already the smallest of the Chinese ships was drifting helplessly, vomiting flame, and as the licking fire reached her gas storage tanks, the air was shattered by a rending report and bits of twisted steel and splintered wood and the mangled pieces of men rained down to the earth beneath.

Leaving the Daphne to settle with the smaller of the remaining two dirigibles, Hooker boldly attacked the monster with the saffron-hued gas-bag, whose enormous size made the compact, graceful Ariadne seem by comparison considerably smaller than she really was. Not only was the Chinaman larger, but, designed for shorter flights and land operations only, she carried heavier batteries than the Federation ship, and Hooker quickly perceived that in a game of straight hammering, he could hardly fail to come out second. So manoeuvring rapidly, he endeavoured to secure an opportunity to ram. But the Chinese airship, admirably handled, gave him no opening and the Chinese shells were beginning to tear great gaps in the Ariadne's plating and glance dangerously from the rounded surface of her armoured gas-bag.

In the ward-room, converted into a temporary sickbay, the boyish assistant surgeon toiled steadily, vainly endeavouring to keep pace with the stream of wounded constantly pouring in. The gun-deck was slippery with blood and more than one weapon had to be served slackly for lack of shellmen and loaders. At No. 3 gun in the starboard battery, half the crew were heaped about the mount, mowed down by a single bursting shell. The gun captain, a young Southerner, paused a moment to wipe the sweat and blood from his eyes. A splinter of that same shell that struck down his crew had ploughed a ghastly gash in his cheek. But without heeding the welling crimson flood, he sighted swiftly. "An' I reckon that'll do for you!" The gun barked and slid back with the recoil, and up in the pilot-house the Lieutenant gave a hoarse cry of joy. Without the urging drive of her propellers, the Chinaman lost headway and a current of air drew her slowly across the Ariadne's bows.

"Prepare to ram!"

A tempest of shell swept the flagship as she began to forge rapidly ahead. The Chinese captain knew that his one chance lay in crippling the Federation dirigible before she could reach him and he trusted that his heavy guns would make that chance a certainty. Hooker,

every nerve drawn taut, eagerly watched the diminishing distance between the two ships. He saw the risk he ran -- saw, too, that that risk must be taken. Suddenly the windows of the pilot-house were illumined by a blinding flash. Warm rain spattered in the Lieutenant's face and when he could collect his senses again, his cadet lay dead at his feet. For an instant he covered his eyes with his hand. Then he quickly pushed the boy's body aside and sprang to the wheel.

A ripping, rending crash as the Ariadne's sharp ram tore through the Chinaman's yellow gas-bag -- a shock that hurled the Lieutenant to the pilot-house floor and piled the gun crews, who had thrown themselves flat to await the concussion, in tangled masses of men. Screams of hate and despair 'arose above the noise of the collision from the shattered ship beneath. And the Ariadne wrenched herself free and passed onward, while her enemy plunged down to the earth lying far below.

The Lieutenant picked himself up and heedless of stray shots, slid back the starboard steel shutter and leaning out, looked astern. The Daphne had easily disposed of her smaller opponent and now her semaphore began to wave as she signalled to the flagship.

"Steering-gear and both propellers shot away," she reported. "Want three hours to make repairs."

"Tell the Daphne to get to work," said Hooker briefly to his quartermaster; "and rejoin the fleet as soon as she can. We'll go back and see if the others need any help. When you've signalled that, quartermaster, get another man and take this -- take Mr. Leroy down to his cabin."

He turned again to the wheel and spinning it rapidly, rang up the engine-room. But though the Ariadne moved ahead obediently, she refused to alter her course and the furious Lieutenant had the engines reversed to check her headway, and then stopped. At that moment the pilot-house door opened and the chief engineer appeared with a very grave face.

"Lieutenant Hooker," he said, "we're all on fire aft the engine-room -- shell burst in No. 6 compartment and started the oil and supplies in the storeroom. I've had all my force fighting it for the last fifteen minutes and I ordered the crew to fire quarters as I came up."

"How does it look?"

"Bad, sir. It's just hell down there now and the extinguishers can't stop it."

Hooker's brows contracted. An airship on fire is lost. She has not, as a vessel on the high seas has, the alternative of flooding the blazing compartments and drowning out the conflagration even at the risk of becoming water-logged. If the fire cannot be checked by extinguishers before it is well started, still more, if it has not broken out at a safe distance from the battery compartment and gas storage tanks, there is no hope for her.

The engineer glanced quickly through the open shutter.

"Better signal the Daphne to stand by, sir, and take us off. We haven't any time to lose."

"She can't, Powell -- she's disabled -- and our steering-gear's out of commission, too. We'll have to drop for it. Tell the men."

The chief saluted and hurried below as the Lieutenant tugged at the emergency valve that, when wide open, could empty the big gas-bag in five minutes. More and more rapidly the long hull sank. Shriller and shriller the eager gas hissed into the quivering air. Leaning from the pilot-house, Hooker watched the ground flying upward to meet them and swiftly calculated the probable impact when they should alight. Then, struck by a sudden thought, he stooped and whipping out his knife, cut a heavy strand of glossy black hair from the head of the dead officer.

"His mother'll want that," murmured the Lieutenant, his hand again on the valve. "Wish I could save Mabs' picture, too, but there isn't time."

Fanned by the breeze of the rapid descent, the fire gained fiercely and the thin-walled hull

became one roaring furnace. Those of the crew who had survived the battle, fled forward and crowded in the bow, though even there the steel plates burned the bare flesh. God pity the wounded caught in that infernal fire-trap! A few -- but oh, how few! -- had been dragged out by their comrades and the blood from their open wounds hissed on the steel deck. With set lips, the Lieutenant prayed that the imminent explosion might destroy the others before they were roasted alive. A last glance over the side, and his firm fingers screwed the emergency valve tightly home in its seat and started the gas pumps. There was a jarring shock as the keel grounded. The clinging crew were torn from their holds and slammed on the hard-packed earth. Hooker was thrown to the floor with such force that blood gushed from his nostrils, but he sprang up again in an instant and dashed to the pilot-house door. He tore at the knob, but the shock had jammed the door, and with a quick breath, he turned and raced for the open shutter on the starboard side.

Then the Ariadne lifted, as a shattering explosion ripped up her vitals. The Lieutenant was vaguely conscious that the steel-walled pilot-house had opened out like a wet cardboard box and an irresistible force drove him forth. Jagged things, flying in the air, slashed his uniform and gashed his flesh. The sky was blackened by heavy, stifling smoke and cutting through the dull, overpowering roar of the holocaust, the sharp reports of the shells rang out as the fire raged in the magazine. It seemed to Hooker that for many ages he drifted in space amid the raining debris of his ship. Then countless brilliant lights flickered before his bewildered eyes and the world went out.

When he awoke again, he discovered that he was lying on a blanket placed on the hard ground. Another blanket covered him, and at his side a canvas wall sloped upward sharply and disappeared in the dim shadows which the single lantern cast. His head pained severely and raising a feeble hand, he was astonished to find that his fingers touched the fabric of a bandage. But the effort hurt him so much that he uttered a groan and lay still.

At the sound, the shadows seemed to rush together and a bearded face appeared before his eyes while the lantern light grew so strong as to almost dazzle him. He regarded the phenomenon with grave surprise, which gradually began to give place to intense irritation. He wished very much that they would let him lie there in peace. He was quite comfortable and contented, if only his head wouldn't throb so and if -- It suddenly occurred to him that this exasperating apparition might be in some way connected with the means of satisfying his burning desire. At all events, the desire was too insistent to be disregarded. How provoking it was that even his own self had to disturb his rest! He felt that it would take a tiresome amount of effort to articulate and suddenly, greatly to his surprise, he found that his hips were moving.

"Water!" he said.

The face vanished abruptly and presently something blurred before his eyes and he sensed a cool touch on his hot lips. He was glad he had made the effort. After all, it was more important to moisten his burning throat. When he had attended to that, he could be quiet again. As he drank, the haziness that dimmed his vision seemed to clear somewhat and the shadowy face bending over him took definite shape and form. He drained the cup dry gratefully and let his head sink back on the blanket once more.

"Gardiner," he said clearly.

The Captain started and the stooping closer, laid a cool, steady hand on his hot wrist.

"How -- how in hell am I?"

Leslie shook his head dubiously. "'Fraid you're broken up pretty badly, old man -- and you got a wipe on the head that'd ha' done for any other man right on the spot."

The Lieutenant considered this information gravely.

"I'm going to cash in?"

The Captain did not answer.

"Oh, it's all right," said Hooker calmly. "It really doesn't matter very much, you know -- only I'd sort a' liked to have gone when the Ariadne did -- poor old tub! Say, Gardiner, how about the others -- Aphrodite, you know -- and --"

"They did their work in good shape, old man. We smashed the Chinese centre two hours after the ships let their first bombs go, and to-morrow we'll clean the remnants out of the native city and go on to Peking."

"To-morrow --" Hooker struggled weakly to raise himself on one elbow, but suddenly allowed his broken body to fall back again. "Oh, hell," he said with a grim smile curving his dry lips; "what's the good of my thinking about to-morrow? By to-morrow I'll be dead."

"Perhaps not, Tommy -- the doc says there's just a chance --"

"Might be if I was in a New York hospital -- not here in the field -- I know."

He was silent for several moments and Leslie began to be afraid that he had lapsed into unconsciousness again, he lay so still; but all at once he spoke in a clear, strong voice.

"Gardiner, I -- I wish you'd promise me to go back home when the war's over. I know it's -- it's a damn' mean thing to do -- a dyin' man like me, I mean, to ask such a thing -- so much harder to refuse -- but I'd feel a blasted sight easier if you would."

"God, Tommy," cried the troubled Captain; "I -- you don't realise --"

"Of course if you can't -- anyhow it was hardly a fair thing to ask."

"But isn't there something I can do for you?" asked the army man eagerly. "Don't you want to send some message to Mabel -- or --"

Hooker's eyes darkened for an instant and the muscles stood out in ridges on his strong jaw, but he made a negative movement with his bandaged head.

"No," he said aloud, "it'd only trouble her if she knew that -- that I cared. Better to leave things the way they are -- better the way they are."

He moved his hand restlessly, picking at the blanket that covered him as if seeking for something. Leslie bent forward enquiringly.

"I had it just a moment ago," said the Lieutenant fretfully. "You shouldn't take things out of my cabin, Leroy -- you've no business in there, anyhow -- he's a good boy, Mabs, but he will take things too seriously -- never live to wear an admiral's stars -- told him so months ago -- not like you, dear -- but you might have left me the picture until I died -- I wouldn't have asked you to do more -- some younger man with more polish to him -- just a rough sailor -- couldn't stand my manners -- no, son, keep her away a bit more -- we've got to ram, I tell you! -- done for if we don't -- damn you! are you all asleep below there? -- only I can't save it, Mabs, dear -- there isn't time and the poor boy bleeds so fast -- a little too serious-minded, but I was fond of him -- but he shouldn't have stolen the picture -- just a moment ago--"

The hands felt about anxiously and, struck by a sudden idea, Leslie took up from the small folding table near him a thin, square, canvas-bound book, on the cover of which were stencilled the words "North China Field Force -- Medical Department," and placed it in the Lieutenant's hands. Hooker's fingers curved happily around the rough fabric.

"I was afraid I'd lost it," he said quite naturally, and smiling contentedly, went quietly to sleep.

Chapter XVI - Peking

THE twenty-second of July saw Rear Admiral Scott's little army outside of Peking. The progress of the raid had been somewhat slower than was expected, for the Tientsin garrison, driven from their fortifications with heavy loss, nevertheless fell back on the capital in good order and paused twice to give battle to the pursuing force, the first time at Pei-tsang, where they held the Federation troops in check for five hours, and again at Yang-tsun. These delays, when rapid movement was essential to success and every hour precious, made the commander anxious and determined him to press forward rapidly in spite of the fearful heat, so that by the time the expedition came within sight of the city wall, counting out the men who had fallen by the way from exhaustion and those left to guard the lines of communication from wandering bands of the enemy, it numbered scarcely 10,000. However, Peking was practically unfortified, the Chinese depending on the excellent works at Taku and Tientsin, and the enemy was so badly demoralised by successive defeats that Admiral Scott entertained little doubt that he would be able to force his way into the city.

Early on the morning of the twenty-third, the American artillery commenced battering at the hastily-barricaded Chi-ho gate in the Tartar wall, while two battalions of Americans, with a battery, were despatched to the Tung-pien gate of the Chinese city to effect an independent entrance if possible while the enemy were occupied with the main attack. The Tung-pien gate was quickly breached by a few well-directed shots and though swept by heavy rifle fire, the Americans gamely fought their way to the top of the Tartar wall and advanced towards the Hata gate, driving the Chinese along the wall before them. At the same time, loud cheers from the main body announced that the Chi-ho gate had fallen and, thoroughly disheartened, many of the Chinese soldiery threw down their weapons and took to their heels while others, more courageous or more desperate, sought refuge in the houses, whence they fired on Scott's men as long as a cartridge was left to them.

Meanwhile, where was Leslie? Long before the guns at the Chi-ho gate had fired their first shot, he had collected his little detachment of fifty volunteers from the horse marines and ridden rapidly around the northern end of the city to where, near the Si-chih gate, the Tartar wall had been breached six years before for the electric railway line to the Ming tombs. At the outbreak of the war the Chinese had torn up the track and thrown a barricade of heavy planks, sheathed with iron, across the inner portal of the forty-foot tunnel; but a single blasting cartridge shattered the slight defensive works and the volunteers poured swiftly through the brick-faced archway into the Tartar City. At a fast trot the small band of horsemen rode eastward, the terrified inhabitants scurrying away like rats in front of them. Now and then the crack of a rifle rang out as a hidden sniper took a hasty shot at the close-packed troop and once a volunteer clapped his hands to his head and pitched sideways from the saddle of his pony. But there was no time for reprisals. A comrade pulled up, dismounted, and careless of the bullets that dusted about him, threw the body across his saddle and galloped after his fellows. Once one of the rearmost troopers swore vehemently and his right arm dropped to his side, smashed by a soft-nosed bullet. But a corporal checked the spurting blood with a rude tourniquet and the man rode on.

When they reached the wide thoroughfare leading to the Shun-chih gate in the south wall, Leslie pulled his pony to the right and drew rein before the high stone front of the new government military college. His men threw themselves into the little park surrounding the building, drawing a strong cordon about the walls, and with half-a-dozen eager marines at his back, the Captain dashed up the broad steps and hammered on the big, iron-bound door. Whipping his pistol from its holster, he emptied the magazine into the lock and a marine, pushing forward, roughly elbowed his commander aside, and with hoarse breaths, swung

aloft a heavy sledge. Crowbars and axes appeared. In five minutes the door crashed inwards and the panting attackers flung into the dim entrance hall. Here Leslie collected his men and bidding them fill their magazines, began a systematic search of the huge building. Room after room they hunted through. Doors flew in splinters under pounding rifle-butts. Dark turns and corners were fearlessly ransacked, and frightened clerks and underlings fled in swarms, or with trembling knees chattered stammering denials to the questions fiercely shouted at them.

At length the little party were halted by a steel door which barred a vaulted passageway under the foundations. Leslie with difficulty forced his troopers back into the low-roofed chamber from which they had come and a black-bearded French lieutenant knelt before the barrier with a pointed brass cartridge in his hand. But ere he could adjust the innocent-looking destruction which he held, the door swung backwards and the astonished marines gazed into a large stone apartment, around the sides of which were ranged polished wooden benches filled with councillors in silken robes, while at the far end, behind a raised table, sat a dignified old mandarin, who looked up gravely as the Federation men crowded into the room. For a few moments there was silence. Leslie swept the motionless throng with his keen glance for the one face he most ardently desired to see -- the one figure which to him spelt the success or failure of the entire expedition, and the marines, somewhat awed by this calm and unterrified reception, shuffled their feet nervously and thudded subdued rifle-butts on the concrete floor.

"What do you wish with us?" enquired the aged president at length, in excellent English and without a tremor in his even tones.

"I represent the International Federation," returned Leslie quietly, impressed in spite of himself by the demeanour of his captives; "and in the name of the Federation, I make you all my prisoners."

The mandarin arose and the councillors, with a low rustling of their robes, stood in their places as their chief came down from his platform and advanced towards the Captain.

"The Western nations have always compelled us by force to yield to their countless injustices," said the old man bitterly; "we have no recourse but to yield now."

"The Western nations," answered Leslie severely, "have done you harm because you were willing that harm should be done to you. But I have no time to discuss this matter now. Our races have never understood one another and never will." He paused an instant. "I don't see Prince Wu among you," he continued sharply; "if he is missing, others are likely to be also. Where is he?"

For a moment the old mandarin appeared to be nonplussed, but he quickly recovered himself and replied readily enough, "Prince Wu is no longer a member of our council. I am not answerable for his actions."

"That's a lie," returned Leslie coldly. "He is and has been for some time one of your chief advisers. You thought," he went on, growing more and more angry, "that we would not be familiar with the men who made up your secret body -- that we wouldn't detect the absence of the most important members until they had time to get away. Well, my friend, you made a mistake there. I know Prince Wu well, and I know that he has escaped and several others with him, trusting to you to hold us here until they were safe." This last was pure supposition, but the Captain felt reasonably sure of his ground and in spite of the attempted impassivity of the other, he could see that the shot had told.

"I know nothing of him," persisted the old man doggedly. "We are all here before you."

"I know better," replied Leslie furiously as he saw the precious minutes slipping away. "Come now -- will you tell me where he is, or must I make you?"

"I will not tell," said the old man calmly; "and you cannot make me."

Leslie regarded him for a moment, but the aged president returned his gaze without flinching.

"That's true enough," said the Captain with something of admiration in his tone. "But if you won't, there are others who will." He hesitated and surveyed the silent group of councillors keenly. "Bring that man here!" he commanded.

Two of the marines dragged forward the unfortunate individual whom the Captain pointed out to them, and Leslie looked him over with considerable contempt. The unhappy Chinaman was green with fear and his knees shook so that he could scarcely stand. Gardiner smiled grimly. The man was plainly an arrant coward and if terrorised sufficiently, would be sure to tell -- always supposing that he knew.

"Three of you stay here on guard," Leslie ordered briefly. "You, corporal, and you -- and you -- come with me and bring that fellow along with you."

He led the way into the outer apartment and at his direction, the trembling councillor was forced to a kneeling posture and his upper garments roughly torn from his back. The soldiers waited, their eyes shining ferociously as they contemplated the work that lay before them. The scene had called forth their worst passions and the frightened captive knew that from them he could expect no pity. Yet two of them were citizens of one of the most highly civilised nations on the globe, and the third was ordinarily a kindly man enough.

"Now," said Leslie harshly to his victim, "I'll give you one chance to tell us what we want to know. If you won't, we'll have to try a little persuasion and I'll guarantee our methods won't be any too gentle. Where has Prince Wu gone, and how many are with him?"

The Chinaman's teeth were chattering, but his terror of the future vengeance of his companions overcame his fear of the foreigners and he shook his head. Leslie had spoken in Chinese, but the urgent tone of his question and the refusal of the prisoner were perfectly obvious. With a low-growled oath one of the guards, the swarthy Russian, flung up his rifle, but the Captain cursed him savagely and struck the weapon up as it spat flame.

"The man's no good to us dead, you damned fool!" he raved. "We've got to keep him alive until he speaks, anyhow. One of you bring some of those empty ammunition cases we saw back there and start a fire. You, corporal, get a cleaning rod out of one of those rifles in the rack. We'll see if our friend won't give up his information with a little assistance."

He watched with cruel eyes while one of the soldiers kindled the fire and the corporal thrust the cleaning rod into the flames to heat. Hate and bitterness and a burning thirst for revenge had seared away the years of civilisation, and for the time being the Captain was no better than an animal with all an animal's brutal pleasure in the sufferings of its victim. Wrapping a piece of silk from the prisoner's torn clothing about his hand, the corporal drew the cleaning-rod, dyed a cherry-red, from the crackling fire and approached the miserable captive. But as his nostrils caught the smell of the glowing metal, the man screamed shrilly and burst out in a torrent of words and Leslie, motioning his subordinate back, leaned forward eagerly and listened with brightening eyes.

"That's all right," he exclaimed when the councillor had finished. "Take him back to the others. Tell the lieutenant I want him. Thank the Lord," he added aloud to himself when the soldiers had gone, "they've only a few hours' start of us. We'll get them yet."

As he ended, the Frenchman appeared and saluted grudgingly, for Leslie was considered, among the lower officers of the expedition, a rank adventurer who had climbed into favour by some inexplicable means known only to himself and who, although only a volunteer, had been placed in command over men of the regular service through a strange whim of the Admiral. However, since he was in command, he had to be obeyed; and as long as his orders were carried out, the Captain did not trouble himself greatly over the attitude of his fellow-officers. In his present state of mind, popularity meant little to him and the favour of the world at large a thing not worth wasting a moment's thought about. So he took no notice of the lieutenant's thinly-veiled hostility and gave his commands with the cold precision which had gained him

the very general appreciation and dislike of those of the commissioned rank who were subordinate to him. Among the enlisted men, it might be added, he was admired, respected, and a trifle feared.

"Bring the prisoners to headquarters as soon as it's safe to move," he said shortly. "I'm going to report to Admiral Scott now, and I'll send a man to let you know when the city's in our hands."

He turned on his heel and running up to the entrance hall, left a few words of caution with the guards at the door, mounted his pony, and rode off rapidly, heedless of the fact that the streets were filled with fleeing Chinese soldiery, many of whom paused in their retreat to crack off a shot at this mad officer who was so recklessly taking his life in his hands. But with no thought of his own safety, Leslie urged his mount at top speed along the way he had come, and circling the northern wall of the city unharmed, galloped up to the little group of staff officers surrounding the commander of the expedition, who beamed with satisfaction as he watched his men pour through the shattered gate and heard the crash of the volleys which drove the broken Chinese pell-mell through the narrow streets.

"Ah, Captain," said the Admiral cordially; "have you managed to round them up all right?"

"I've got some of them, sir, but eight of the principal ones, including the Minister of War, left the city by rail four hours ago for Nankow pass."

"Too bad," observed Scott regretfully. "However it can't be helped, and at all events we won't go back empty-handed --"

"Beg pardon, sir, but if I start now, I believe I can catch them before they get clean away. They've only gone as far as Nankow -- waiting there until we retire -- thirty miles -- I can go and come in two days, at the most."

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that, Captain. If they hear that you're coming, they'll move on, and I daren't stay here while you chase them halfway through Mongolia."

"But, sir, they won't be looking for a pursuit -- at least not so soon. I feel sure that I could surprise and capture them. Give me twenty good cavalymen and I'll answer for the result."

"You wouldn't have a single chance, Captain. The country all around here is swarming with the remains of the Tientsin garrison and you'd be cut off and surrounded before you even got there. Even if you managed to make the capture and get back to Peking, which is very doubtful, we'd be gone and there might be a whole division between you and Tientsin by that time. No, Captain, I appreciate your courage and enterprise in making this offer, but you've done enough. Don't attempt the impossible."

"Admiral Scott," replied Leslie, with the calmness of desperation, "if you won't let me have the men, by Heaven, I'll go alone. I'll be killed, of course, but I'll take one or two of them to hell with me to keep me company."

The Admiral looked him full in the face and whistled.

"Jove, Captain, that sounds to me as though it was a personal matter --"

"What if it is, sir?" broke in Leslie passionately. "You'll have to admit that if I'm serving myself, I'll be serving the Federation as well."

"H'm," said the Admiral; "there's some truth in that, at all events. See here, Captain, it's no business of mine if you choose to get yourself shot or cut up to satisfy an old grudge, but I'm not going to sacrifice even twenty good men to further your interests, unless I can be reasonably sure of having something to show for it. Now if you can convince me that there's any chance of making the capture and bringing your prisoners back again and at least part of your detachment with them, I'll give you the men you want and my best wishes for your success as well."

"This is my plan, then. By starting now, I'll reach Nankow after dark. They won't expect to be pursued at all -- at least, not by anything less than a regiment, and even if they have

guards or posts along the route, I'm counting on being able to surprise and overpower any such details before they have a chance to give the alarm. With the small force I'll have with me, I ought to be able to move very quickly and without making very much noise about it. Once I have them, it'll be easy work to get back. Suppose the Chinese can rally a considerable army in Peking within three or four days, which I greatly doubt. I know the country well, and can pass the city far enough to the north or south so that the enemy won't even get a glimpse of us. As for any wandering soldiers we may meet, they'll either be alone or in such small bands that they won't attempt to attack a determined, well-disciplined force. If I'm successful -- and I confidently expect to be -- you'll get the credit for a stroke that may break the back of the Chinese resistance."

Although he did not know it, his last words turned the beam in Leslie's favour. Scott was very human and the thought that, with small risk, he might have the honour of making one of the most important coups of the war, outweighed all the other arguments -- which were sound enough as far as they went -- that the Captain had advanced. He considered for a few moments longer, while Leslie bit his lips with impatience, and finally gave assent, though still with some show of reluctance.

"All right, Captain, I'll let you go -- but only on the understanding that it won't be any further than Nankow." He scribbled a few words on a rather dirty scrap of paper. "Here's an order for Colonel Harrison, directing him to let you have twenty men for special detachment duty. Have the prisoners you've made already sent to me."

Leslie took the precious order, saluted, and after giving a few low-voiced directions to an orderly, cantered off in the direction of the eastern gate, where the mounted troops were drawn up, waiting for the command that would send them in to help their comrades, who were still volleying briskly as they cleared the streets in the vicinity of the archway.

The long-moustached cavalry officer read the order Leslie presented to him, swore comprehensively, not through any feeling against his superior who had given it, or hostility towards the Captain who had brought it, but simply because it was his customary manner of expressing surprise at any unexpected event, and profanely told Gardiner to go ahead and select what minutely-adjectived troopers he wanted for his triple-blanked detachment. With this sulphurous permission, the Captain, riding down the column of horsemen, swiftly chose sixteen of the rank-and-file, added a veteran sergeant and a wiry-looking lieutenant, commandeered a big, black troop horse to take the place of his mangy pony, and wheeled his mount westward, his little party clattering behind him. It must be confessed that there was considerable grumbling among the soldiers over the fact that they would lose their opportunity of helping to loot the much-magnified riches of the once Imperial City. They were well acquainted with the story of 1860 and 1900.

History repeats itself, runs the saying, and there is nothing new under the sun. Even before the Captain and his troopers had lost sight of the Tartar wall, lifting its fifty feet of height futilely above the surrounding plain, the soldiers and sailors of the Federation were smashing in the doors of shops and palaces and staggering forth, laden with silks, rare ornaments curiously wrought, precious stones, silver and gold, while their officers turned away or looked on with unseeing eyes. For the third time in little more than a hundred years, the treasures of the Chinese were the sacrifice to Chinese sloth and inefficiency.

Chapter XVII - Leslie Settles One Account

THE Captain believed correctly that the fleeing officials had cut the railway between themselves and the source of possible pursuit. Besides, if they hadn't, the railway would be the one thing they would watch most carefully. So without even attempting to ascertain whether or not rail communication was still possible between Peking and Nankow, he trotted out purposefully along the old caravan road, with his men behind him.

It was very hot. The dust rose in choking clouds and hung about the little troop, and the cavalymen gasped and swore. Clusters of thatched and mud-walled houses dotted the plain and blue-clad farmers worked in the fields, seemingly oblivious to the fact that their country was engaged in its death struggle with the whole civilised world. The spirit of China was typified there. The few great hearts which had been stirred by the new feeling of nationalism that had roused the more intelligent and better-educated classes to stake the latent forces of their empire against the powers of the West, might strive and sacrifice and perish, but the great mass of the people, as long as they were left alone, cared not at all. Following precedent blindly, blocking by their inertia the efforts of their leaders to wipe out the many years of futility and shame, they neither saw nor wished to see that the limits of their vision bounded the destiny of their empire.

At Sha-ho, the detachment halted to rest the weary horses and the heat-tired men and then, somewhat refreshed, pushed on more vigorously. As they neared the mountains, the plain became rougher and more uneven. Gradually the sunlight faded and the hills turned purple and violet. At last, when the road had become little more than a stony track, darkness closed in and with two troopers for an advance guard, the little party proceeded at a foot pace and very warily. Presently the Captain pulled up and gave his final orders.

"Lieutenant, take two squads and go ahead. You'll open a way for the rest of us if there's a guard at the gate. Then stay behind and keep them busy while we cage the birds. Don't let yourself be cut off from my detachment. If they're too strong for you, fall back through the town and join me. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right-- hell!"

A confusion of shots echoed between the hills and the ring of hoofs sounded on the hard rock.

"Those damned fools'll wake up the whole town! Hurry, Lieutenant -- I'll be right behind you!"

Careless of pitfalls and the unevennesses of the way, the troopers dashed forward. The two soldiers in advance had halted and as the party came up with them, excitedly explained that they had stumbled on a post of three cavalymen. One of the enemy lay dead across a boulder and the hoof-beats of the other two could still be heard as they raced ahead to give the alarm. Without giving the scouts time to finish, Leslie cursed his men on.

A volley greeted them as they reached the city gate and a riderless troop horse reared and plunged. Then came the shock of meeting, groans and yells and the whistle of swinging sabres. Pistol flames lit lightning-like the faces of the combatants. The struggling men struck blindly. Horses screamed and drove shattering hoofs backwards. A path opened narrowly in the press and, with eight men following him, Leslie flashed through it and tore up the broad street of the city. He did not know which one of the many inns sheltered his prey, but a group of horsemen clustered confusedly about a wide, arched doorway gave him the key, and in an instant he was among them, his pistol spitting fire. The Chinese were all in disorder and gave way at once. They were only a handful at best and those who could work free, galloped wildly for the western gate and the entrance to the pass, while the others piled pell-mell back into

the inn yard. The Americans followed, cutting and stabbing, mad with the lust of killing and the two non-commissioned officers could scarcely restrain them.

And then Leslie saw Prince Wu. He stood impassive in the turmoil, dressed in the uniform of a Chinese general officer, and clustered composedly around him were the seven other officials. They had evidently been about to mount and ride for the railway station a mile away, trusting to the guard at the gate to hold back the pursuers until they made good their escape. But though they saw their plans rudely shattered and their hopes fade into nothingness, they remained calm and dignified to the end, regarding the frenzied troopers with something of disdain. It was again the eternal, mystifying spirit of the East, which in spite of the wreck of material fortunes, in spite of inherent weakness oft revealed, retained unshaken belief in the superiority of its race and civilisation.

For an instant the demon desire to slay possessed the Captain and, with a red mist in his eyes, he levelled his pistol at his enemy. But the unflinching gaze of the Oriental checked him, and shoving the weapon back into its holster, he bade his men bind the prisoners as quickly as possible and be off, for the town seethed about them and if the Chinese were given time to recover from their first surprise and rally, the lives of the party would not be worth a moment's purchase. Hardly was the work completed when a sweating cavalryman rode up with a message from the anxious lieutenant.

"Wants to know if you'll be much longer, sir. Expects fifty men down on him 'most any minute."

"Tell him we'll be there in three minutes and to hang on if he has to lose every man he's got. Mount!"

The little handful closed about the captives and hurried down the wide street to the gate, where the thankful subaltern wheeled his troopers in behind Leslie's detachment, the rearmost horsemen turning to empty their magazines at the wavering shadows flocking together for a rush, as they saw how few were opposed to them.

Time and again as the horses tripped and stumbled along the rock-strewn track, the stones rolling away in showers of sparks under their blundering hoofs, the rear guard halted and, crouched among the boulders, sent quick streaks of flame up the path over which they had come. Time and again the Chinese bullets strayed moaning through the darkness, blindly seeking a resting-place in living flesh. It was not until they reached the open plain that the enemy, fearful of possible ambush, drew back into the hills, and the men of the Federation could halt and reckon up their losses. Four privates and a corporal lay dead back there in the city or along the stony way, and of the others, hardly one had not a bullet wound or sword cut to show. Leslie himself was bleeding freely from a jagged rent in his thigh, and before they had ridden many paces further, the lieutenant groaned and reeled in his saddle and then it was discovered for the first time that he had been shot through the left shoulder and that his uniform all down the left side was wet and sticky.

At daybreak the detachment halted at a small village for much-needed recuperation and in order that the hurts of the injured men might be dressed. It was not safe to stop, but the horses were utterly played out and the troopers, many of them weakened by severe wounds, were in not much better case. Under the circumstances, to have pushed on would have been even greater folly. Leslie posted videttes in both directions along the road, herded his prisoners in a mud-walled house under strong guard and levied on the terrified natives for food and forage. Then, having attended to the wants of his men and horses as a good cavalry officer should, he bethought him of his own affairs and had Prince Wu brought before him.

The Oriental entered, calm and dignified as ever, though his hands were bound behind his back and his uniform torn and disordered from the rough handling he had received, and there was blood on his cheek where the stray bullet of one of his fellow-countrymen had grazed the

flesh. Leslie dismissed the guard and leaning against the mud wall of the hovel in which he had established his temporary headquarters, regarded his captive for some time in silence.

"Does your Highness recognise me?" he asked at length, with something of a sneer at the respectful title. The other glanced at him keenly, but finally shook his head.

"I see that I shall have to aid your memory," went on the Captain, making an effort to speak calmly. "Perhaps you will recall that about nine months ago -- before war was declared -- two army officers visited you on behalf of the Federation, regarding some important secrets of the Eastern allies which you had agreed to sell to them. For a certain consideration -- and I might add that it was a rather large one -- you promised to betray your country and deliver its vital secrets into our hands. That promise was not kept."

The Chinaman did not reply, but a quick flash of intelligence lit up his face, which as quickly resumed its former mask of indifference. The Captain saw and continued.

"I do not reproach you for your treachery to us -- that was to be expected from one of your race. We had no faith in your word, but we did trust to your self-interest to protect us. However, that is aside from the question. I do not concern myself with what motives or interests led you to act as you did. I only know that you condemned to death a brave and loyal officer, who was my comrade and friend, and me to torture and disgrace and a life that has been worse than any death you could have imagined for me. Whatever you may have to offer in defense of your action -- and I don't doubt that there is something -- the fact remains that because of you Major Wilkie met his death and I my shame. You have placed a heavy obligation upon me, your Highness, but you need not fear that it is greater than I am prepared to repay."

"You intend to murder me, then?" asked the Prince with bitter contempt. "You might as well have spared yourself this long introduction. I suspected it from the moment I knew that you were Captain Gardiner."

"Call it murder if you please -- words mean nothing to me. You gave me over to torture and the death of a common criminal. Luckily for you, I shall have to be more merciful."

"I'm a prisoner of war. You'll have to answer for me to your commander. Have you thought of that?"

"I'll answer for you" -- Leslie laughed harshly as he strode to the rude door and made it fast -- "You needn't trouble yourself on my account. It's simple enough -- you managed to free yourself from your bonds and tried to overpower me and escape. Do you think my men will question the details of the story when they break the door in and find you lying dead with your hands untied? Do you think, after eating my soul out all these months with longing for revenge, I'd let a little thing like the fear of what my superiors may say stop me? I swear by all the devils in hell, I'd kill you if I knew I'd be shot within an hour after I got back to headquarters!"

"Revenge!" repeated the other coldly. "Revenge for what? Because I had more patriotism and loyalty than you gave me credit for? Because I tricked you into thinking you had bought me body and soul, and would have saved my country if luck had not been against me? No -- you want to kill me because you played the coward -- because you betrayed your Federation to buy your life -- because your weakness and want of courage has branded you with a shame that gives you no peace. Do you think my blood can take from your memory your own crime? Do you believe that the murder of a helpless prisoner will wipe the stain out of your soul? Shoot me and see!"

Slowly the Captain's pistol muzzle sank downward.

"That's true," he said in a hoarse whisper and, with a sudden movement, shoved the weapon into its holster. For a space he stood staring at his enemy with cloudy eyes. Then he moved to the door and undid the fastenings.

"It appears that you have been in error, Captain Gardiner," said the Prince bitingly as he watched his captor. "You believed that you had an account to settle with me, while in reality it was with yourself."

"With myself -- Yes," repeated the Captain dully. He seemed to be meditating a fitting reply and at length raised his head as if about to speak, but instead he turned quickly to the door and jerked it open. "Corporal!" The soldier entered and stood at attention, awaiting his officer's instructions. "Take this man back to the others. Tell Sergeant Murphy we'll start in an hour."

He waited until the door had closed behind the prisoner and the guard and then sank down upon the hard-packed earth of the floor, covering his face with his shaking hands.

"He was right -- God knows he was right! He acted as a loyal man should and I -- oh, I deserved to have him throw my cowardice in my face! I've played the coward's part from beginning to end -- mad -- madness to think that by killing him I could quiet my conscience. God! -- can I never find rest?" He groaned aloud and writhed on the floor in his agony. Then a sudden thought came to him and he sat up with a terrible look, his hand slipping to his holster. But he brought it away again. "You fool -- you weak, miserable fool! Is that the only way left? What that all that was needed to show you what you really are?" Breathing heavily, he scrambled to his feet, dimly delighting in the sharp pain of his stiffened wound, and walked slowly to the door. "Oh, it's a cruel price to pay -- a cruel price for a moment's weakness." He hesitated, choking back the sob that rose in his throat, and drawing a deep breath, squared his shoulders resolutely, and stepped forth into the sunlit village street.

The few cavalrymen not on guard or outpost duty were squatting in what shade they could find and discussing affairs with gratifying energy. In reply to Leslie's curt questions, they assured him with cheerful profaneness that they were in good condition and quite ready to follow him into hell and out again on the other side whenever it suited his convenience to lead the way.

"You'll get all the hell you want before you see the lines again," said the Captain shortly, and more than one grim chuckle showed that they appreciated the truth of his observation.

In fact Leslie's prophecy was amply fulfilled, and when the exhausted little troop rode into Tientsin two days later, more than one observer was moved to remark that they looked as though they had marched clean across the continent and fought the whole Chinese army on the way, so pitifully worn and draggled were they, and plastered with dust and sweat and the dried blood from their wounds.

"Don't talk to me about the glory of war," said a spruce naval cadet, watching the procession with an expression of disgust on his smooth-shaven features. "Thank God, in the navy we can at least die clean when the time comes."

But there was no disgust on Admiral Barrows' countenance when Leslie made his report, all unkempt and filthy as he was.

"Congratulations, Captain," exclaimed the delighted sailor, shaking Leslie's hand as though he could not make up his mind to stop; "you've added to your laurels this time and no mistake. By George, when Scott told me what you'd started out to do, I swore I'd never see you again alive or dead. Well, you won't be the loser for it. Now where the devil did I put that paper?" He stirred the mass on his table with a revolving motion and at length produced an official-looking document, which he handed to Leslie with a flourish. "That's yours if you want it -- commission as major in the regular army. Of course you owe most of it to St. John. He's been moving heaven and earth to get those prize procrastinators in London to do something for you, ever since you pulled him out of that hole last spring. I contented myself with trying to have you recommended for a Distinguished Service Medal, and I think on the basis of this piece of work, it ought to go through."

"Admiral Barrows -- I --"

"There, there -- it's the Federation that's showing its appreciation -- not us." He paused and stared thoughtfully out of the window at the tiled roofs, blazing in the summer sun. "My boy," he said abruptly, "I don't know all the details of your past -- don't want to know them. But I do want you to feel that we -- your superiors -- trust you absolutely, and that whatever folly you may have committed before you came to us, you've fully atoned for. And what we've done for you in the way of promotion and reward is just our expression of that feeling and to show that we know a good man and a good soldier when we see him."

Leslie could not reply. A flood of gratitude and happiness welled up within him, washing out with its cleansing waves the bitterness from his overburdened heart and choking back his speech. In that moment he felt that the black cloud had lifted from his tortured soul and that there had come to him the peace he had so long craved. He could never be as he was before he had set out on his mission less than a year ago. The remembrance that he had betrayed his trust would remain with him as long as he lived, like the scar of an old wound, long since healed. But he had paid the price and the debt was cancelled. Once more he could go among his fellows a free man, and though he did not know it then, a stronger and a better one for the flames that had tempered and hardened the plastic iron of his nature to steel. He turned hastily away, dashing his hand across his eyes and without a word, hurried from the room.

The whole universe seemed to smile upon him. A little cluster of staff officers who had heard of his success and guessed his good fortune, came forward to offer their congratulations, and he noticed all at once what pleasant, warm-hearted fellows they were and how sincerely they rejoiced with him in the distinction he had won. And they, on their part, were surprised to discover that the Captain appeared to be an extremely jolly, hail-fellow-well-met kind of a chap after all, and more than suspected that he had been misjudged and that his reputation for coldness and aloofness was undeserved. Even the hot sunshine smote him between the shoulders, as he emerged from the headquarters building, like the rough but kindly hand of an old friend, unenviously glad of the honour he had achieved, and wishing him all joy.

Smiling broadly on the world like a happy schoolboy, he made his way to the glaring brick-and-tile hospital and enquired of the busy surgeon-major in charge for news of Lieutenant Hooker, not without a momentary misgiving as to the answer he might receive.

"Oh, he'll pull through all right," said the doctor brusquely. "Got the constitution of an ox. Want to see him?"

"If it won't be--"

"Can't let you stay more'n a minute or so. We've had every officer in the fleet, from the Admiral down, in to visit him ever since he became conscious. Orderly!"

The white-coated hospital assistant guided Leslie between the long rows of cots to the further end of the big, bright, oppressively-clean ward and stopped beside the white-painted, white-sheeted bed on which the Lieutenant lay. Used as he was to the sight of wounded and sick, the inevitable wastage of war, the Captain was startled. The very wreck of his former self the naval officer seemed, and it was hard to believe that in so few days the splendour of a strong, vigorous manhood could be reduced to this. As Leslie paused at the bedside, Hooker painfully turned his bandaged head and recognising his visitor, grinned feebly.

"Hello, Gardiner! Conquering hero -- 'Our Gallant Volunteer' by the brass band -- and all that, eh?"

Leslie nodded shamefacedly and the Lieutenant's eyes brightened with interest.

"Tell us about it, old man," he urged. In a few brief words, the Captain recounted the principal episodes of his venture, while the invalid solemnly made gestures indicative of his complete and unqualified approval.

"-- And I think," Leslie concluded, "that we've pretty well knocked the bottom out of the Chinese offensive. The men we captured were the ones who started the trouble in the first place, and have since held the country together and pushed the army ahead. Of course there's still a good deal to do. The Chinese army's far from being beaten and those fellows fight like the devil on the defensive. But the end is simply a question of time. And now, how about you? You'll get your step for that bit of work you did, of course?"

"I'll get two grades. Barrows has recommended me for a captaincy and the D.S.M. That's worth almost being killed." He paused and looked at his friend quizzically. "I suppose you've been made a major-general?"

Leslie laughed and in rather embarrassed fashion, told of his promotion, winding up with what the Admiral had said to him. When he had finished, Hooker, forgetting his weakness, essayed to whistle, but finding his energies unequal to the task, grinned again.

"After all this, you'll be thinking about starting back home again pretty soon, I imagine," he hinted. "Wish I could go with you, but the doc says it'll be a month before I can be moved."

The Captain's jaw set grimly and the old, hard, bitter expression clouded his eyes.

"I'm going up to the northern front as soon as I have the opportunity, and ask St. John for a battalion in one of his American regiments. The war isn't over, Tommy, and even if it was -- I don't know -- I don't think -- Tommy, I can't go home yet!"

The Lieutenant opened his eyes wide and gazed at his friend.

"Why, you damned fool!" he said.

Chapter XVIII - Table Talk

"Oh, whistle an' I'll come to ye, my lad!

Oh, whistle an' I'll come to ye, my lad --"

"Mabel! Mabs!"

"Tho' father an' mother an' a' should gae mad -- Did you call, Eve?"

"Call! I've been doing nothing else for the last fifteen minutes. For goodness' sake, stop singing and get dressed, or you'll be late for dinner."

Mabel replied with a distant giggle and appeared in the doorway, looking more elf-like than ever in her scarlet dressing-gown, over the shoulders of which her dark hair flowed in rich, rebellious ripples.

"I can do wonders when I get started," she reminded her sister, hunting for the vagrant tassel of her gown which was trailing along on the floor behind her. "I hold the record for the family."

"I know you can, dear, only you never will get started -- now don't stop to argue the question -- you haven't time."

"I s'pose I'll have to reform when I'm married," said Mabel with a sigh. "Goodness, what a bore it will be! It almost makes me want to change my mind and live and die an old maid."

"Mabs, dear," exclaimed Evelyn, scandalised; "I declare, you're positively shameless. He hasn't even proposed to you yet and one would think, to hear you talk, that the wedding day was fixed and the people all invited. And that awful song you were singing --"

"He will, though," giggled Mabel, searching wildly for stockings. "Only he's so afraid of me, he hasn't dared to so far. Think of it, Eve! -- a big, strong man who wouldn't hesitate to face his Satanic Majesty in person -- forgive me, honey, I didn't mean to shock you -- afraid of a little mite of a thing like me! It makes me positively vain!"

"I should think he would be, if you carry on in this manner when you're with him -- those are mine, dear, but you can have 'em."

"Thanks -- I believe they suit me better than my own -- Oh, I'm propriety itself. I just sit there like a demure little mousie and make my eyes big and interested and gasp, 'Oh, Captain Hookah, did you really? How perfectly thrilling!'"

"Yes, dear. I don't doubt you do. If I remember rightly, your last conversation with him was, 'I'll bet I can shoot just as straight as you, Tommy. Bring your pistol next time you come and we'll go out back of the garage and try.'"

"You shouldn't attempt sarcasm, honey -- you mean well, but it isn't in you. Poor Tommy! I know I shock him twenty times a day, and yet he thinks everything I do or say is just about right. Tell me, sis, would you wear this or this if you were me?"

"I think the blue, Mabs -- really, dear, I believe I ought to warn him against you. Just think of how fearfully disillusioned he's going to be."

"All the better -- if I keep him constantly astonished, he won't get tired of me so soon."

"Mabs!"

"Well, it's true, isn't it? No matter how crazy you may be about a man or how crazy he may be about you, when you have to live together three hundred and sixty-five days a year for goodness knows how many years, you're bound to bore one another after a while. After I'm married, I'm going to make Tommy take at least two weeks' vacation from me every year and go off with some of his men friends. Then I'll visit my old classmates, and when we get home again we'll have a lot of new ideas and experiences to talk about. The trouble is, so many girls think that getting married makes some miraculous, mysterious change in human nature and that they can keep on living with a man eternally without ever wanting to get away from him -- or he from them -- just because they're in love with him. Then, when the inevitable happens

and he feels that he'd like a change for a while, the poor things believe their romance is shattered and they'll never be happy again. It's so silly! Why can't they understand that he just wants to be with men again, and put his feet on tables and chairs, and go without shaving, and tell the kind of stories women aren't supposed to hear, and enjoy life the way he used to before he was tied down to a wife and family? If they'd only let him go when they see he's getting restless, he'd come back soon enough, ten times more devoted and stay-at-homey than before."

"You do have the most -- the most unusual ideas, Mabs! It always seemed to me that when marriage brought the refining influence of a woman into a man's life, he'd want to forget his rough, bachelor ways and find all the companionship he needed in his wife."

"Eve, precious, you're just as bad as the rest of 'em. You can't make a man an absolutely different being by marrying him. You'll probably be able to rub off some of the worst corners, so that he'll remember to wipe his feet when he comes into the house and won't swear when he loses his collar button, but that's about all. The two big mistakes girls often make, when they marry, is either to believe the man they love already stands on a little pedestal of his own, head and shoulders above the ordinary run of mortals, or else that they can pull him out of the depths, after they've married him, and set him up on one and keep him there. You don't happen to remember what I did with that opal brooch of mine, do you? -- and, oh Eve, please hook me while you think."

"Didn't you lend it to Connie the last time she was out here, Mabs? She's such an absent-minded soul, she probably forgot to give it back to you. Now I think of it, I'm almost sure I remember seeing her with it on -- don't squirm so, sis -- but you can wear my turquoise one if you'd like -- I won't want it myself."

"Eve, darling, you're just a heavenly being!" exclaimed the younger girl, twisting her narrow shoulders to get as complete a view of herself as possible in the tall mirror. "It'd be the very thing, and I appreciate you most to pieces. If he can resist my charms tonight!--"

"Well, he's held out manfully so far," returned Evelyn, sliding an arm about her sister's waist as they left the room together. "I'm almost afraid, dear, that Tom is so impressed with his own unworthiness that he won't ask you at all. He said something to me the last time he called--"

"Oh, I don't suppose he is worthy of me, as far as that goes -- I wouldn't have him if he was -- he'd be absolutely insufferable. But he'll propose all right -- don't you worry. If he doesn't, I'll do it myself."

"Mabel!"

"Why not? D'you think I'd let any idiotic convention stand between me and the man I want? Not much, my Evelina!"

"Mabs, you're absolutely hopeless, but I love you heaps all the same" -- she drew the girl to her with an affectionate little hug -- "Hello, Jimmy! So you decided you could come after all? I'm awfully glad you could!"

"Tommy telegraphed that he'd come out to Ann Arbor and bring me back by force, if I wouldn't come peaceably," said Merriam, looking up at her with a light in his eyes as she descended the last few steps. "So I thought I'd better come peaceably -- besides, I doubt if I could have stayed away, anyhow."

"You can go right up to your old room. You won't mind if we don't wait dinner for you, will you? I expect the rest are about starved, and mother always insists that everything will be spoiled if we're five minutes beyond the appointed time."

"I won't be long -- Mabs, you look like Tennyson's 'queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls.' If I wasn't long past such frivolities, I'd fall in love with you on the spot."

"Don't count too much on your immunity," she laughed, giving him her hand; "I'm after all the scalps I can get."

"Including that of a certain -- there, there, you mustn't be provoked at your big brother. I was wrong to tease you about such a thing."

"I expect it's pretty much common property," said Mabel, trying to look angry and failing signally in the attempt; "as far as the family is concerned, at any rate. See you later."

"Does my little sister get all the compliments?" asked Evelyn, smiling, as Merriam still hesitated.

"You're wonderful," he returned in a low voice; "as you always are. Can one say more?"

She coloured faintly and moved a step towards the sitting-room.

"I want to have a talk with you after dinner," he went on quickly. "May I?"

She gazed past him thoughtfully for a moment without answering.

"May I?" he persisted.

"Why, yes -- of course," she said, raising her grave, grey eyes to his and with a nod of her beautiful head, she passed on to join the others.

Hooker was talking animatedly with Mr. Thornton in front of the broad fireplace, but he broke off abruptly as she entered and came forward to greet her.

"Well, you're certainly stunning to-night," he exclaimed, surveying her with frank admiration. "'Tisn't fair for one family to have such a monopoly of beauty."

His thinness and pallor bore eloquent testimony to his close race with death, but he moved with the same vigour and alertness as of old and his voice had lost none of its accustomed ring. He wore the dark-blue full dress of his Service, resplendent with its fringed gold epaulets and lace, and on his breast was the small bronze medal which spoke of unwavering courage and duty well performed. The brilliant uniform brought a sudden furrow of pain to Evelyn's smooth forehead. She thought of another who might have stood there; of another who might have worn the dress of the Service and borne a medal on his breast. But that hope was long dead.

"Tommy's in a complimentary mood this evening," said Mabel with an air of proprietorship. "He told me that I walked in beauty like the night. He must have read poetry prodigiously in the hospital."

"I'm not altogether a Philistine, Mabs," retorted the naval officer, reddening slightly. "I'd like to bet right now that I know as much about literature as you do."

"Oh, I don't doubt it for a minute. I specialised in history and athletics. But let's go out -- I know you're always hungry."

They moved on into the brightly-lighted dining-room and Hooker happily seated himself by the younger girl, while the empty chair beside Evelyn waited for the tarrying Professor. He arrived before the party had well settled itself to the meal, and with a word of greeting to his host and hostess and a friendly nod to the sailor, confined himself for an interval to soup and silence.

"Must have had a hard trip," remarked Hooker, observing the ravages Merriam was creating.

"I only had time for a sandwich between trains at noon," said Jim, looking up; "I confess I'm rather famished."

"How is your work going, James?" asked Mr. Thornton paternally. "Is your book nearly finished?"

"Very nearly, sir. I flatter myself that when it comes out, there'll be something of a stir in chemical circles. If they don't turn me off for my heresies, I ought to achieve the beginnings of a reputation."

"I'm sure you will," said Evelyn warmly; "and you certainly deserve it. You've been working like a slave."

"If you're thinking of running for president on the strength of it," offered Mabel across the

table, "I'll vote for you. Only you must promise to be elected. I'm not going to waste my divine right of suffrage."

"Will you have a vote at the next presidential election, Mabs?"

"Yes, I'll just about be old enough. My birthday's the tenth and the election comes on the thirtieth."

"Not this time -- the thirtieth's Sunday. How about your residence?"

"I'll vote in Poughkeepsie. The girls have organised a Hamilton club already and I'm on the campaign committee."

"I congratulate you -- both on the election and your party predilection. Are you a Republican too, Eve?"

"I'm anything that has for its platform giving the women of the United States a vote in Federation affairs. It's a shame we haven't it already. France and Great Britain and Prussia have granted it, and now they have to wait until the other countries come in."

"Why, you have what amounts to almost the same thing, daughter," said Mr. Thornton. "You elect the men who govern this country and they have something to say about what the policy of the United States will be towards the other countries and the Federation."

"I know, father, but they ought to let us vote for the Commissioner and in the Federation referendums. If the principle holds good for one country, it should for the whole world."

"The remedy lies in your own hands," suggested Hooker. "Send men to Congress who will give you a vote in international affairs and the thing's done."

"The trouble is," observed Merriam, "that the women of the country haven't yet learned to get together on a question. They're too easily drawn off by promises of minor reforms, like the National Labour Bureau plank the Democrats put in their platform last year, and I must say, I think they're swayed too much by sentiment."

"That's rank heresy, James," said Mrs. Thornton. "Harris, fill Professor Merriam's glass -- Mr. Thornton begged and prayed me to vote for McCulloch for governor at the last election, but I was adamant."

"Just proves what I said," retorted Merriam, emphasising with his fork on the table. "Van Zandt promised to support that factory girl measure, which, by the way, wasn't a state issue at all, and would have been taken up pretty soon by the Federal Industrial Commission, and you women all flocked to him, although McCulloch had the better record and was a stronger man in every way. Why, he practically put through by himself the state constabulary bill when he was in the legislature, and cleaned up that railroad scandal and --"

"Sentiment isn't a bad thing sometimes," interrupted Evelyn. "It--"

"I suppose if the women had had a vote in Federation matters," Jim snorted without heeding her, "the International Police would have been abolished five years ago; and a nice mess we'd have been in then!"

"Not if I'd had anything to say about it," said Mabel. "I'd have been in favour of increasing it, if anything."

"Well, you're blessed with superior intelligence and discernment, Mabs," said Hooker admiringly.

"Meaning that I'm not?" observed Evelyn, laughing at his confusion. "Why, Tommy!"

"Not at all," stammered the embarrassed officer; "I only meant -- of course you're just as clever -- only--"

"Better give it up, Tom," said Merriam with a grin. "Scylla and Charybdis won't be in it with the dilemma you'll find yourself in if you keep on."

"James is right, though," said Mr. Thornton soberly. "The women all over the world were over-poweringly in favour of reducing the Police. McPherson told me when he got back from the continent that they were banding together to urge the men to vote for the reduction of the

force. Purely a matter of sentiment, of course. It was the idea of an armament of any kind, coupled with the extravagant ideals of the missionaries and optimists in the Far East. We're none of us in favour of militarism, but that and leaving the Federation unprotected are two entirely different things. My father told me -- I was too little then to remember anything about it -- that there was the same sentiment in the United States while the War of the Nations was going on in Europe, and it was only pure luck that saved the country from an invasion which it would have been powerless to resist."

"Well, the question has been settled now," observed Hooker. "And we've been saved -- largely through luck, of course, and the wisdom of the head of the Federation. There's a man for you -- and a leader of men."

"The world won't see another like him in a hurry," agreed Jim. "It's very, very fortunate that we had him to guide us in our hour of trial."

"Did you hear that Jack Coleman had been wounded?" said Mabel in an aside to the naval officer. "He volunteered, you know, last summer and was only in action three days. I got the most heart-broken note from Connie yesterday. She says he'll be a cripple all the rest of his life. Isn't it awful?"

"That's the worst of war -- the terrible waste. If it would only use up the offscourings of society -- the people who are nothing but a drain on the resources of civilisation -- it wouldn't be so bad. But it always takes the best, and those it doesn't kill it often makes useless, as far as any future service they can render to the world is concerned."

"Poor Connie! She and Jack were absolutely wrapped up in one another -- never knew a brother and sister so devoted. Well, he did his duty. That's some consolation."

"I'd like to know to whom," commented Evelyn, breaking into their conversation. "Is it going to console his family any to know that because he was one of the few who had the courage to go, he's condemned to be a hopeless invalid until he dies? No, they're going to think of what those same traits of character that urged him to volunteer might have made of him if he'd stayed at home. There wasn't much of the glory of war in it for him. It was nothing but drill and drudgery for the first six months, then three days in the trenches and that was all. It was just another common soldier wounded."

"But, Eve," objected Mabel, perplexed, "suppose every one felt as you do -- what would have become of us then?"

"Oh, I don't know -- I suppose this war was necessary -- at least every one says so -- but it does seem to me sometimes as though, after all these years that the world's been going on, some other way might have been found. It's nearly 2000 years now since the teachings of Christianity were first brought to mankind and yet, when you read the history of those 2000 years, what is it but war -- war -- war? One so-called Christian nation turning against another so-called Christian nation, usually impelled by motives entirely un-Christian. Pah! It's enough to sicken one!"

"It's over sixty years since one Christian nation has hammered another," remarked Hooker. "They had one final orgy of killing then and I guess that was enough to last then through the rest of time. What we're doing now is merely self-defence. No civilised country wanted this war and in fact they were all so desperately anxious to keep out of it, that between them they nearly accomplished the finish of Western civilisation."

"I know," replied Evelyn; "but just suppose, instead of wasting all the wealth and energy as they did in fighting, the Western nations had spent the nineteen hundred and odd years of the Christian era in trying to spread Christianity and the brotherhood of man throughout the world--"

"You mean that in that case we wouldn't have had this job on our hands? Probably you're right. But it wasn't done and now we're paying as cheerfully as we can for the sins and

omissions of our forefathers -- a thing, by the way, mankind has had to do pretty much ever since the world started."

"And I think," said Mabel, "that we've had enough war and other unpleasant subjects this evening. Here's Eve growing more serious momentarily and Jimmy surrounding himself with his full pedagogical atmosphere and even you, Tom, look about as cheerful as though you'd just lost the Ariadne all over again. For goodness' sake, cheer up, people. 'Life is real, life is earnest,' I know, but it's equally true that 'a little nonsense now and then is relished by the best of men,' to say nothing of little girls like myself."

"Well, who began it, I'd like to know?" retorted Tom, selecting his cigar from the box which Harris respectfully presented.

"Guilty, me lord," she replied with such a bewilderingly fascinating glance that the enraptured officer temporarily forgot the lighted match he held and nearly burned his fingers in consequence. "But you won't tell on me, will you? Jim, if you'll toss the case over to me when Eve's through with it, I'll be obliged."

She cleverly caught the thin box of polished gold which Merriam aimed at her, and taking from it one of the cigarettes it contained, returned the box to him as accurately as it had come.

"Aren't you starting in rather early?" hinted Hooker, holding a match for her; "or is it part of the curriculum?"

"If all the other girls of my age whom I know smoked as little as I do, Tommy, there wouldn't be the wail you hear going up all over about the degeneracy of the times. I practically don't smoke at all at college, while even Connie, who is propriety personified, has her evening cigarette regularly before she begins to study. But then, of course, I'm in training as long as the hockey season lasts."

"When I was a girl," began Mrs. Thornton with considerable dignity, "we --"

"When you were a girl, mamma," said Mabel sweetly, "they danced those awful dances that were ten times more harmful than an occasional cigarette could ever be -- I've seen pictures of them in the old magazines. Talk about degeneracy!"

"Tempora mutantur," quoted Merriam. "But the surprising fact remains that each succeeding age is the only really degenerate one. I'll bet that the Puritans of Cromwell's time were convinced that the world had never seen such wicked days as those in which they lived."

"After all," began Evelyn, resting her round white arm on the table and watching the blue smoke tendrils twine upwards between her fingers, "it's a good deal a question of definition. When you say 'degenerate' --"

"Now those two will argue away for the rest of the evening," confided Mabel to the naval officer. "Come into the sitting-room, and I'll play you that new sonata I was telling you about -- by that young Hebrew composer, you know, who, the critics say, is going to be a second Beethoven. I'm sure you'll like it."

He drew back her chair as she rose from her place and they passed from the room, scarcely noticed by the others. Mrs. Thornton, with a vague excuse, had departed kitchenwards, doubtless to call to the attention of the cook some minor shortcomings in the meal just finished; Mr. Thornton was already dozing as a preliminary to his after-dinner nap in the study; and Evelyn and Jim, deeply engrossed in their discussion, were oblivious to all external things.

Chapter XIX - The Tangled Web Of Circumstance

MABEL guided Captain Hooker to the corner of the sitting-room filled by the grand piano and, seating herself at the instrument, let the fingers of her right hand wander idly over the keys while with her left she turned the pages of the music-book. The room was dark save for the flickering firelight and a single shaded electric bulb which brought out the girl's delicate profile like a rich cameo on a luminous background.

"It's supposed to represent the sea," she said, half to herself, as her fingers struck the first notes. "The adagio's the most beautiful part. It makes me think somehow of a low surf washing up on a moonlit beach, as I've often heard it on a summer's night."

The music surged and swelled under her sensitive touch, and broke with the rustle of a curling wave and died away, only to return again in a tide of wonderful harmony. It seemed to the listener that he could hear the kiss of the water as it crept up the dry sand and the noise of the little ripples, chasing each other across the surface of the spent wave before it was sucked back into the open sea again. Anon came the faint, dull rumble of large stones and pebbles, ground together by the undertow.

"This is the aria," she murmured, nodding in time to the music like a summer rose at the touch of a morning breath. "It's a sort of mermaid song, you know -- something quite new in a work of this kind."

An exquisite melody trembled above the flowing accompaniment and soared joyously aloft, vibrant and free with the freedom of the limitless ocean. It told of the bright sunlight and the wide sky and the swelling winds marching masterless over the vast blue floor beneath. Then it sank again and changed to a dreamy chant like a far-away chorus, borne by the lazy night wind over the gently-heaving sea. Hooker sat entranced, his soul stirred by emotions that he himself scarcely comprehended.

"It's marvellous," he whispered, when she had finished. "What a heart and mind -- to be able to write a thing like that!"

For a long while they remained silent under the spell of the music and when the sound of voices broke in upon them rudely, Mabel glanced up angrily with an exclamation of irritation upon her lips. A glass-walled porch opened off the sitting-room, one of its two doors being close to where they were seated, which in winter was transformed into a delightful sun-parlour, scented with the odour of many flowers. Neither Mabel nor Captain Hooker had noticed Evelyn and Jim Merriam pass through the sitting-room, but it was the Professor's voice which had first disturbed them, and as he caught the words, the officer sat up eagerly in his chair.

"You may have guessed it, Eve -- that I've loved you ever since we were boy and girl together. Perhaps you haven't, but it's true. It always has been true and I know that it always will be."

Mabel made a hasty movement as if to rise from the piano-stool and laid her hand on Hooker's arm.

"We mustn't listen," she whispered. But the Captain's rough hand closed over hers, forcing her down again.

"I must hear this," he said tensely. "Don't move -- it's important. You don't understand."

"I've thought perhaps it might be so," they heard Evelyn reply. "A woman can feel such things without being told. And I've honoured you very greatly for keeping silent, knowing how it was with me, and letting our friendship remain untroubled as I wanted you to. Why do you speak to me of it now?"

"Because I feel that now I have the right to speak. Because you need the love that I can give you -- never more than at this time. You were made to be loved, Evelyn, and to love -- to

love a man who cares for you as I do, who understands your every thought and desire as I do -- to have a home of your own and children of your own to pour out the rich wealth of your heart upon. You will starve without these things, dear girl -- I know it -- I have seen it all along."

"My first and greatest love I gave to Leslie," she answered quietly. "You know how much I loved him as well as I. Since he has been taken from me, I have felt that I could never love again."

"It will come again as the years pass -- if I did not believe that it would, I would not have spoken. New joys and interests will wipe out the old sorrows and you will find a fuller measure of happiness than you now believe possible in living the life that you were meant to live."

"Oh, I can't -- I can't! It would be a constant reproach to me if I could so easily forget in my own happiness --"

"It is what he himself would wish above all else -- that you should be happy. You are wrong, dear heart, in believing that the truest way to honour his memory is to shut yourself away from the world with your own grief and make a selfish virtue of useless renunciation. You are wrong to cut yourself off from the full and useful life you might give to the world to nurse a sorrow which will be of service to no one -- least of all to yourself and to him. Oh, I know it is selfish of me, dear, but I have for many years loved you with a love such as few men have had it in their power to give and few women to receive. Is that deserving of no reward?"

She was silent for a time, and in the adjoining room the two listeners could hear the hammering of their own hearts in the dead stillness. Presently the Professor spoke again.

"I don't want to urge you, dear, if your truest feelings prompt you to refuse. I do not want to argue that you owe me any return for the love I have given you. It has meant very much to me -- more than you can ever know -- to have loved you as I have, and if it has sometimes brought me moments of unhappiness, it has also brought a joy that has been more than worth any suffering it may have cost. Perhaps I was wrong to speak to you while your hurt is still unhealed. But if the time ever comes when you are willing to accept my love, I want you to know that it will always be waiting for you undiminished, no matter how many years may have passed away."

"Jim," said Evelyn suddenly, "you have been, after Leslie, the man I cared the most for -- whose presence in my life meant the most to me. I believe in the old days -- before Leslie came -- I would have married you if you had asked me, and been confident that I was giving you all the love I was capable of. But when I met him -- oh, I knew then that what I had felt for you was only a shadow -- a faint resemblance of the passion he inspired in me. And I believe that will be so until I die. For some people there can be only one great love in a lifetime, and I believe that I am one of these." She paused, and unconsciously Tom Hooker tightened his clasp of Mabel's hand, crushing her slender fingers into her soft palm; but she did not notice. "What I have left to give are only the poor remains of love -- an affection, perhaps, but nothing more. Would you be satisfied with this?"

"I would be satisfied with anything, Evelyn -- with only your friendship and regard if that was all you could give. But I am confident that after a while love would come to you once more -- not perhaps as the same consuming passion you felt before, but a love that would be as deep and true and strong as that you would have given him had he lived. It is not only my own life I am pleading for, dear; it is yours as well -- for the happiness and love God meant you to have and Leslie would have wished for you. I kept my secret to myself in the old days because I saw that then you did not know the meaning of love and felt no need of it. But it is different now. Love has come into your life and stirred it to its greatest depths, and you can never be the same again."

They heard the subdued rustle of her garments as she stirred, and with her free hand

Mabel fumbled for her handkerchief and wiped her eyes.

"I don't want to spoil your life, Jim. The future means so little to me, and if I could give you the help and happiness you deserve, that at least would be something to live for, and by aiding you I might be of some service to the world. Perhaps you are right. Perhaps love may come in time -- for your sake I hope it will. At least I could give you friendship and encouragement and perhaps make your life richer and fuller than it is now, and that would be worth something to me. It would not be a sacrifice."

"If you'd rather wait a year, Eve -- two years -- any number, until --"

"No," she answered wearily, "I'd rather have it settled now -- you've waited long enough. I'll give you my answer to-morrow -- and I think you may be confident that it will be yes."

They heard the scrape of her chair on the boards as she rose to her feet, and suddenly remembering himself, Hooker released the hand he held tightly in his own and fairly pushed Mabel from the piano-stool.

"Upstairs with you as quick as you can -- don't make any more noise than you can help getting out of the room -- be undressing when she comes. Good-night!"

She nodded and fled and the officer silently withdrew into a window-nook as Evelyn slowly entered and crossed the dimly-lighted room with lifeless step. He followed her cat-like when she had passed and standing in the hallway, listened intently until he heard the closing of a door in the regions above. Then, drawing a long breath, he shook his head soberly and filling his pipe, stepped into the library and proceeded to install himself comfortably in the largest arm-chair he could find, from the depths of which he gazed in meditative fashion at the lead-colored smoke rings drifting lazily upward from his lips. Presently a step sounded in the hallway, hesitated at the foot of the staircase, and as the Captain broke not unmusically into a whistled tune, finally came towards the door of the library.

"Hello," said the naval officer as Merriam entered; "what have you and Eve been doing all evening?"

"Oh, discussing affairs as usual," returned Jim absently. "You don't happen to have another pipeful about you anywhere, do you?"

"I have," said Tommy, producing his pouch; "if you can stand navy weed. Here!"

"Thanks -- where were you and Mabs?"

"Improving our minds with melody part of the time -- watching the moonlight the other part," replied Hooker with as little embarrassment as though he was confining himself unalterably to the truth. "We thought perhaps you people might be out too. It's a wonder of a night."

"Tom," said Merriam, lighting his pipe with quick, nervous puffs, "d'you realise what a lucky fellow you are?"

"As-- how?"

"Oh, to have made a splendid record in your profession and come home again loaded with honours, and then to have a fine, beautiful girl all ready to practically throw herself into your arms."

Under other circumstances, the Captain would probably have objected strenuously to having Mabel dragged into the conversation in this somewhat brutal manner, but in the light of what had occurred only a short while before, he overlooked the lapse and merely said, "Well, you have the reputation started and before you get through, will make my modest exploits look like two bits. As for the other, it cometh not by fasting and prayer, as some old patriarch or other observed, and if I get her, I'll admit it's a damned sight more than most men get and I deserve. However, I haven't got her yet."

"Oh, you'll get her," returned Merriam moodily. "It's only a question of asking -- as every one but yourself has seen for the past month."

In his heart of hearts, Hooker did not feel anything like so confident of success, a fact which

did credit as much to his masculine lack of intuition in such matters as to his want of vanity. But he forbore to argue the point.

"Lord knows it's been long enough coming," he remarked. "I've spent a good many lonesome days while it was on the way. But I'm paid now -- overpaid."

"You bet you are," replied Jim rather enviously. "Tommy, I wish to God my course in life was as plainly mapped out as yours!"

"What do you mean?" asked the officer quietly, after a short silence.

"Mean? -- oh, nothing! -- or I should say, everything." He roused himself with an effort.

"Don't know what's got into me to-night -- working too hard, I guess. When do you go back to the front again?"

"Probably never. That is to say, I expect the war'll be over before I'm fit for any real work again. I was pretty badly messed up, Jim, and it'll be months before I'm in anything like normal condition."

"I'm sorry."

"You needn't be. I'm just as glad not to see any more of it. I like a good fight as well as anybody, but at best war's a nasty performance and at worst it's just plain hell. That's not original, but it's true as gospel."

"Any plans?"

"Staff job if I can get it. If I marry, I'll want a settled abiding-place. Otherwise, I suppose I'll get a squadron command when things clear up a little. This business has made some pretty big holes in the officers' list."

"Yes, I suppose a good many have dropped out."

"Heaps of them -- killed, wounded, or missing."

"Missing?"

"Just so -- like Leslie Gardiner, for example."

"Oh -- yes." Merriam shaded his eyes with his hand. "It's pretty generally accepted now that he died, though, isn't it?"

"It is by most people."

"Then it's-- then you still believe--"

"I believe the evidence of my own eyes, at least."

For some moments Merriam regarded him with a dawning horror in his eyes.

"Great God, Tom!" he burst out; "you don't mean -- you can't mean --"

"That I've seen him? -- yes, I have -- at the front, shortly before I was wounded. He was alive and as well as could be expected after what he'd been through."

Merriam buried his haggard face in his hands and for a long interval there was silence, while Hooker desperately wondered how best to deal with the situation he had designedly given birth to. At length Jim spoke again, without raising his head.

"Have you told -- does Evelyn know this?"

"No one knows it but myself and you, now that I've told you."

"But why -- he should have told her -- he should have written -- it was cruel to make her suffer as she has if he was still alive!"

"He had his reasons -- and I won't say they weren't good ones. Personally, I think he was too hard on himself, but he was doing what he thought was right and mighty few men would have held to an ideal of conduct as he did, even if they could have conceived it in the first place."

Merriam lifted his face, an expression of bewilderment struggling with his anguish. "I don't understand," he said dully.

Then in simple, clear-cut sentences, Hooker told the story of Leslie's momentary cowardice and how, believing himself disgraced and unworthy of the great love that had been given him,

he had resolved with brave and steadfast soul to renounce that love and all it meant to him and consecrate the remainder of his life to the wiping out of the stain he had placed upon his honour. And of how that resolution would have been kept and the world never have known that Leslie Gardiner still lived, had not chance thrown him into Hooker's path and his secret been wrested from him. And of how even now, after he had more than once offered his life for the cause he had betrayed and redeemed himself in overflowing measure and won the respect and admiration of his superiors, his high-strung conscience would not be satisfied nor permit him to take up once more the rich life he had put aside. But Merriam stared straight before him with burning eyes and seemed scarcely to comprehend.

"After all, he made her suffer," he said bitterly. "He had his chance -- he had what would have inspired most men to dare anything -- to endure anything -- he threw it away."

"I thought you were his friend," said the officer quietly.

"Oh, yes-- of course-- I'll help to kill the fatted calf when the prodigal returns to receive his reward. What is it the Bible says about there being more joy over one sinner that repenteth than over ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance? It's quite typical of that inconsistent philosophy which men have been foolish enough to believe will one day redeem the world. What about the others -- the ninety and nine just persons, who have fought the demons that tempted them all their lives long and followed the course that seemed right to them in silence, though they shed their heart's blood drop by drop on the way? What do they get out of it? The reward of virtue, I suppose! Bah!"

"This particular prodigal isn't coming home," replied Hooker steadily. "At least not until some one catches him and ties him up and brings him. He hasn't had a particularly easy time of it, you can take my word for it -- I've seen him. Curse the scheme of things that makes the innocent and guilty suffer alike and in the same proportion and I'll come right in with you, but at least give a really brave man his due."

Merriam was quiet for a time and the Captain drew a deep breath and filled a fresh pipe. At last the Professor arose and began to pace the room with short, nervous strides. Suddenly he stopped and looked the officer squarely in the face.

"What made you tell me all this?" he asked. "Didn't I hear you say that you promised Leslie not to repeat to any one else what he had told you?"

"I did, but circumstances alter cases. Occasionally as much harm's done by saying too little as by saying too much -- though not often."

Again the Professor seemed perplexed and strove in vain to penetrate the admirable mask of indifference the other had assumed.

"What do you mean?" he asked at length, a little hoarsely.

"Nothing at all, Jim. I thought perhaps you'd better know about it -- that's all."

For a while Merriam pondered the officer's words; but his confused brain could make nothing of them, and at last he sighed and mechanically knocked the ashes from his long cold pipe.

"I'm pretty tired," he said. "Guess I'll go to bed. Good-night -- oh, I ought to thank you for telling me. You understand that, of course."

"I understand, old man," answered Hooker soberly. He listened to the slow footfalls ascending the stairs, shook his head, and settled himself to finish the half-consumed tobacco in his pipe. "What a hell of a tangle," he muttered to himself, -- "and, my God, how unjust!"

Chapter XX - Merriam Considers The Role Of Villain

THERE were three unquiet hearts beneath the Thornton roof that night. Mabel slept peacefully, her head pillowed upon her rounded forearm, her heavy braided hair lying across her breast, and a smile on her lips like that of a happy little child. Mr. Thornton and his wife slumbered heavily, conscious of the weight of many years but untroubled by it, for those years had been well spent according to their lights, and held nothing with which they could reproach themselves. But to the others sleep did not come. Not to Tom Hooker, keeping lonely vigil in the library while his keen mind sought in vain to untangle the hideously confused web in which those he loved were caught. Not to Evelyn, lying rigidly beside her sister, staring into the blackness with wide, aching eyes and desperately trying to choose wisely between the two paths that diverged before her. Not to Jim Merriam, tossing hour after hour on his disordered bed, and fighting once again his weary battle, with all the Powers of Darkness clustering about him and whispering in his ear, "Take it -- it's your last chance -- you've waited long enough -- take it -- take it."

He heard the big clock in the hall below solemnly strike the hour of twelve. It seemed centuries -- eternities -- since it had sounded before. And still the demons whispered busily in his ear, urging him to yield. Why not, when all his life he had followed the narrow path of duty and right, never once hesitating or turning aside? He knew that he had lived as a strong man should live, scourging on his rebellious soul when it faltered, bravely meeting temptation when it came and overcoming it, grimly crushing down the hunger in his heart when it rose to overwhelm him, and facing the world with smiling lips. For all this did he not deserve reward? There were men whom he had known-- men whom he knew now -- who had stooped to things he had put from him resolutely; who had followed the easy way and taken life as it had come to them, largely and with both hands and, in the end, easily achieved the happiness he had never known. There were men who had called him a fool for that he had striven to keep his soul clean and his honour untarnished and they, as they pursued their careless course, had prospered. Did not life owe him at least as much as it had given to them?

He heard the big clock in the hall below chime the hour of one with a lingering echo of its silver bell. It seemed centuries -- ages -- since it had struck before and still the demons whispered busily in his ear that duty had ceased to be a virtue and faith had become the folly of a supersensitive mind. There were men he had known who, like himself, had for years bound themselves to an unwavering rectitude and steadfastly held to the hard road their consciences directed, whose courage, wasted by many conflicts, had failed in the hour of supreme trial; and who, in their weakness and failure, had found help and encouragement the blind world had denied them while they still stood firmly on their feet. There was Leslie Gardiner, to whom the treasures of life had come with hardly an effort on his part, when he was ready for them. What though, unmindful of their worth, he had cast them aside? For at least a little while he had known the glory of a woman's love; and in spite of the stain upon him, in spite of the suffering he had caused her whom he had won, that love was his again whenever he should return to claim it. He had found help in his trial, the help of warm-hearted friends, who were striving to recover for him what his own cowardice had lost. But the man who had not faltered, who had fought without the inspiration the handsome Captain had had to uphold him, -- what helping hand had been stretched out to aid him? It was fair enough. Leslie, with everything to spur him on, had had his chance and thrown it away. He, with nothing in his favour, -- why should he not grasp the opportunity when it was offered to him?

The silver bell of the big clock in the hall below rang the hour of two. It seemed centuries -- aeons -- since he heard it before. Would the night never end? And still the demons clustered ever thicker about him and whispered busily in his ear. After all, the Captain might never come

back. If he had determined to adhere to his fantastic plan of renunciation, he could not expect the girl to waste away her life waiting upon his pleasure; he could not expect other men to stand aside, nor seek to satisfy their desire for that which he refused. It would be absurd -- no one would expect it, Leslie himself least of all. Then there were always the chances of the war.

And suppose he did come back -- eventually? Suppose he did return after a year -- two years -- to find that his friend had married the woman he loved? Well, other men had broken faith and friendship and forgotten loyalty before and for far less reason. And the fault would be partly Leslie's, who by his silence had set the trap, so cleverly hidden that it remained unseen until stumbled upon; who by his silence had brought anguish and suffering not only to the girl who loved him and believed him dead, but to the friend who believed him dead and secure in that belief, had sought a little of the happiness that was his due. It would have been a little thing for the Captain to have written; a little thing for him to have confided in the friend who had been closer than a brother to him and to have saved this ghastly blunder. Leslie himself had been the first to break faith, the first to sever the ties of loyalty and friendship by refusing to trust the friend who had sacrificed so much for him. Was he deserving of consideration after that? Did the friendship of years, so thoughtlessly spurned and made light of, count for more than a lifetime of love? Men said that love was greater than friendship, greater than loyalty, -- a power that overrode all bounds and limits of the complex relation of man to man. And the world believed and applauded and looked with pity and scorn on the one who put duty and generosity before all else and was willing to sacrifice his own good for the good of his fellow-man.

He heard the big clock in the hall below strike the hour of three. It seemed an incalculable time since it had struck before. And still the demons thronged at his ear and whispered to him to yield. And Evelyn? Might she not despise him and cast him off when she knew? But how could she know? He had acted sincerely and in good faith when he had spoken of his love to her that evening. He had not suspected that a snare lay across the clear way before him. It was merest chance that he had learned; the merest chance that he had stopped to speak to Hooker before going to bed; the merest chance that Hooker had told him -- Or was it chance? He remembered that the officer's words had puzzled him, seeming to convey a hidden meaning that had better not be spoken openly. It was inconceivable, but did Tom know? But how could Tom know? It was manifestly impossible. It must have been a guess -- a chance intuition -- certainly not sure knowledge. After all, it was of no consequence. Evelyn would believe that he had not known that Leslie was still alive. She would believe that he married her in ignorance, she herself being unaware that her lover might one day return. And Hooker would not tell her. It would only make a bad matter worse and do good to no one. Yes, he could count on Hooker's silence. And perhaps Evelyn might learn to love him before Leslie returned. It often happened that when first love was thwarted, the hungry heart eagerly sought for another to fill the desire it had been taught. And Evelyn, above all else, was made to love. He must marry her as soon as possible. That was the first and most important thing. With a new home to care for, with new friends and interests surrounding her, she would forget more readily. And every day that she would be under the influence of her new life, every day that she would call him her husband, was precious, since at any time Leslie might come back. To marry her quickly, that was the thing; to bind her to him before her eyes were opened to the truth. It would be so easy. He would be a fool not to grasp the occasion when it offered -- after waiting all these years.

The big clock in the hall below sounded the hour of four and the demons fled away, chuckling with diabolical glee. Their mission was accomplished. In the library Tom Hooker, surprised by weariness, slept profoundly, buried in the depths of his arm-chair. In the blue-

and-gold bedroom where Mabel lay in happy oblivion, while dreams with rose-blushed wings caressed her smooth forehead and murmured low in her dainty ear of delightful days to come, Evelyn, her decision made, forgot her many cares and her mind, released from the problems of her life, fled back to her sunny childhood and the happiness of her college years. And on his tumbled and disordered bed, Jim Merriam rested quietly at last. For good or ill, he had chosen.

"Good gracious," said Mabel, when some hours later they had all assembled at the breakfast table; "I never in my life saw such a fagged-out set of people. You look as though you'd been up all night."

"Went to sleep in the library by mistake," confessed Tom. "And spilled tobacco ashes all over the red chair"-- this with a cautious glance at his hostess -- "Harris woke me up at seven -- had a bath and went for a walk."

"You must be more careful, Tommy," said Mabel anxiously; "you're not strong enough yet to take liberties with yourself. How about you, Jim? Did you fall asleep standing up in the corner of the hall?"

"I didn't fall asleep -- that was the trouble with me. I got to thinking of things and stayed awake until nearly four this morning."

Evelyn shot a rapid glance at him, but said nothing. There were dark circles under her eyes, but woman-like she had concealed the ravages made by her troubled night more successfully than either of the men.

"I knew you were working too hard, James," said Mrs. Thornton compassionately; "you ought to give yourself a rest."

"Well, I hope to before long," replied Jim, as Evelyn coloured slightly. "There isn't so very much going on between now and the Christmas holidays. I think I can afford a month off if I want it."

"Then I think you'd better want it," said Mr. Thornton with a judicial air. "We would be very sorry to have you endanger your career by trying to do too much at the start."

"What are your plans for the morning?" asked the younger girl of the table generally. "If you haven't anything to propose that sounds more attractive, I'll take Tommy out in the roadster and get him in condition for a good nap after dinner."

"Would you care for a tramp?" suggested Jim, speaking to Evelyn, but avoiding her eyes. "I think it would freshen us up a little."

"Yes," she replied lifelessly; "I'd like it. What time are you planning to have dinner, mamma?"

"At half after twelve, dear, and" -- with a pointed glance at Mabel and the naval officer -- "don't any of you dare to be so much as a single minute late."

"Do you feel horribly guilty, Tommy?" asked Mabel with well-simulated remorse. "When mother begins to remember my shortcomings, I usually find it advisable to vanish. Coming, Eve?"

Evelyn nodded and rising from her place, followed her sister through the doorway, while the men retired to the sitting-room. Hooker endeavoured to draw the Professor aside for a little private conversation, but Jim persistently adhered to their host; and before the officer could accomplish his object, the girls had come down again.

"Where shall we go?" asked Jim as they hesitated on the steps. "I'm in favour of losing the haunts of civilisation as rapidly as possible."

"Then let's take the path over the hill and follow the river road," said Evelyn. "We can make the circuit in about two hours and a half, and that'll give me plenty of time to dress for dinner."

"Good idea," assented Merriam; "we never meet any one on the river road this time of year and it's good walking."

"I remember that when I was a little girl," said Evelyn, as they struck across the meadow to the foot of the ascent, "it used to be the height of my ambition to climb the hill path. I don't know just what I expected to find on the other side, but the very vagueness of my expectations lent an irresistible charm to the adventure. It was a terra incognita that might contain anything in the shape of knights and fairies and enchanted castles, with the addition of the entire setting of 'Alice in Wonderland' and the 'Water Babies.'"

"I remember very distinctly the first time you made the attempt and how you frightened your mother nearly to death, to say nothing of the rest of us."

"And I remember how scared I was by the time you found me," she answered, laughing. "What ever inspired you to look for me over the hill, Jim?"

"It was the first thing I thought of when they told me that you were lost. I knew how you insisted, every time I told you a story, that the knight errant hero always commenced his journey on the river road and that the princess he was seeking was immured at about the place where the old cider mill used to stand. Your conception of distances was conservative in those days."

"You found me under the twin cedars in the hollow and carried me home. And I cried all the way -- the first part because I was frightened and the second part because I was sure I'd be horribly scolded for running away."

"You didn't look very scoldable. I never in my life saw such a pathetic little object as you were when I found you. Your little dress was positively in rags and your face was covered with dirt, except where the tears had washed it off or turned it into mud, and your hair was full of sticks and leaves and all kinds of miscellaneous stuff. And the kitten you'd taken along for company had scratched your hands in three places."

"You went back and got it after you'd taken me home, didn't you?"

"I knew how you adored the little beast. Your mother told me that you howled for it as soon as you had gotten over being scared and were sure you wouldn't be spanked."

They breasted the rise and after climbing steadily for fifteen minutes, came out on the crest and, with the instinct of long habit, turned and looked out over the valley spread below them.

"See!" said Merriam; "there's Mabs and Tommy."

A yellow motor-car ran swiftly along the road that wound ribbon-like under the leafless trees and, as they watched it, turned the spur of the hill and disappeared. The air was very still and the smoke from the houses rose straight upwards into the hard, blue sky. A flock of birds, flying southward, swept high above the valley, dwindled to a point, and vanished.

"You were awfully good to me in the old days, Jim. I've often thought since of how good you were to me."

"And now?"

"You've always been the same -- always the same true friend I could depend on, no matter what came. I -- I owe you more than I can ever pay."

"I never wanted payment, dear. Your happiness was reward enough for me."

"I've been very selfish. I accepted all you did for me without thinking that it was more than mere friendship would have given. You had accustomed me to it for so long that I took it for granted. If I had stopped to think, I might have made life easier for you."

"Eve, darling, please don't talk that way. The last thing in the whole wide world I'd want you to feel is that you were under any obligation to me. And I didn't want you to know before."

She was silent for a while and he waited, moistening his dry lips.

"Jim, I can't give you the love you ought to expect and that you deserve. I've tried hard -- oh, so hard -- since you spoke to me last evening to believe that I cared for you as you wanted me to -- but it isn't there. But what I can give you, I will, if you'll take me without what I can't; and I'll do my best to be a good wife to you and help you and make up to you as much

as I can for all you've suffered through me. Perhaps when we're married, the other will come -- at least I can admire and respect you and be a friend to you and maybe that will take the place of love."

"That's all I could ask. I'll take you on those terms, dear -- and may God forgive me!"

She did not resist when he drew her to him, but after he had kissed her cold lips, she released herself with a certain quiet dignity and he did not offer to touch her again.

She spoke freely of the wedding as they walked on. She would be ready, she said, whenever he was -- she had few preparations to make -- but she hoped that it might be soon and as simple as possible.

"Then let's say the week before Christmas," he answered. "That will give you nearly a month to get what you need, and I'll have time to find a house for us in Ann Arbor -- unless you'd rather wait until you get out there and go around with me."

"No," she said, "I'll trust your judgment. You know my tastes as well as I do."

"I think you'll like it out there," he went on. "The university atmosphere will appeal to you and you'll find the society very agreeable. I have some warm friends among the faculty and you'll feel at home right from the start."

"I'm sure I will," she replied readily. "Ever since I graduated, I've missed the intellectual life of my college days and I'll be very glad to take it up again."

"After the wedding," he pursued, "I'll take three or four weeks off and we'll go south -- Bermuda, if you say so, or one of the Florida coast resorts. Have you any preference?"

"That'll be very nice," she agreed. "No, I don't care which it is. I'll let you choose."

"I'd much rather you would," he said a little wistfully; "it's your trip."

"Then let's settle on Bermuda," she returned quickly. "I've never been there and always thought I'd like to go."

"Bermuda it is," he assented, made happy by her simulated interest. "I'll engage the passage before I go west again. You're sure you can get all the clothes and things you need by the week before Christmas, Eve?"

"Oh, yes -- easily. There's very little I'll have to have new."

"How about the housekeeping paraphernalia?" he hinted. "I've always understood it was more or less of a job to collect all that."

"I declare, I forgot all about it," she replied with a short laugh; "but even with that there'll be time enough. Mother'll be only too glad to help out. In fact, I expect she'll be willing to attend to it all while we're away on our -- our trip."

"It sounds almost too good to be true," he said with the enthusiasm of a boy. "I've dreamed so often of planning a home for us two -- and now it's actually happening! I can hardly believe it!"

"Yes," answered Evelyn; "it's very nice. Will you give me your hand, please, Jim? I'm not as good at jumping gutters as I used to be."

When they reached the house again, Mabel and Tom Hooker had already returned, and Evelyn found her sister in the process of dressing. The younger girl looked searchingly at the flushed face of the elder and, with a sudden impulse, drew down her head and kissed her.

"Have you anything to tell me, dear?" she asked very tenderly, but Evelyn freed herself and answered pettishly, "I'm to marry Jim Merriam, if that's what you're after. I wish you wouldn't muss me so, Mabs. Now I'll have to do my hair all over again."

Mabel opened her clear eyes wide, and drew back with a puzzled, hurt expression.

"I'm sorry," she said. She stood thoughtfully, watching her sister, unconsciously twining and untwining the silken stockings she held between her fingers, while Evelyn impatiently tugged at her heavy walking-shoes.

"Eve, precious," she said suddenly, "you're not happy -- I can see it. Can't you trust me,

dear? We've never had any secrets from each other before. If you're in any trouble-- oh, my dear -- my own dearest sister, I do so want to help you if I can."

She knelt beside Evelyn and taking one of her sister's hands in both of her own, pressed it against her bosom. But the other jerked her hand away roughly and pushed the younger girl from her.

"Don't be silly, Mabs," she replied sharply. "There's nothing the matter. I'm a little tired from my walk -- that's all."

Mabel made no further effort and finished dressing in silence, but when, half an hour later, she went down to the sitting-room, her eyes were very red and her sensitive mouth was scarcely yet under control.

The days that followed were anything but comfortable ones. Evelyn was her usual self when in Jim's company, but at other times she displayed a nervous irritability wholly foreign to her nature; Mabel, hurt and anxious at her sister's persistent refusal to confide in her, went about with sober face and questioning eyes and found no distraction even in the society of her lover; Tom Hooker, feeling that he had lost control of the situation, was chronically absent-minded; and Jim Merriam, who ought, by his own calculations, to have been the happiest of men, discovered that for some unaccountable reason he was acutely unhappy.

He had chosen to do wrong deliberately, but he was surprised to find that the mere choice was not sufficient. For close on to thirty-five years, his strong will had dominated his life, had shaped his habits, his thoughts, his attitude towards his fellow-men. For nearly thirty-five years he had disciplined his character to choose right because it was right, to deal openly and honourably with all men because it was the only way worthy of a strong man. And now that character, moulded and tempered through long years, dominated him. Try as he might, he realised with great bitterness of spirit that he could not do wrong. In so far as the power to choose remained to him and to act upon that choice once made, he had overcome his nature, but the victory was an empty one. He had sought through evil to win to happiness, but his unaccustomed soul revolted at the evil and refused to let him be happy. He had builded better than he knew and the edifice, reared stone by stone and year by year with so much labour and anguish of spirit, could not be so readily thrust down.

Perhaps if Evelyn had cared, it could have been done. He admitted to himself that if she had shown for him one-half the love he gave to her, he could have stopped his ears against the promptings of his well-trained conscience and enjoyed, if not true happiness, at least contentment and peace. If she had loved him as he had sometimes dreamed that she might do, he could have schooled his troublesome soul and commanded it to be still; but strong as he was, he could not do this alone. Bitterly he realised that he had made a false step and must retreat, not for the sake of the woman he loved or the friend he would have betrayed, not for the sake of his own honour and good name, but to preserve what he could of that peace and happiness he had thought to gain.

It was characteristic of both his better and worse nature that, once he had decided upon what must be done, he lost no time in useless regrets. When the Sunday dawned that was to witness the break-up of the party, his plans were completed and after dinner, he asked Mabel to come into the library with him. He had something to tell her, he said, which closely concerned the happiness of her sister. The girl seated herself expectantly in the same chair in which her lover had passed his memorable night of wakefulness, and Merriam closed the door and stood with his back against it.

"Mabs," he said quietly, "you know that I asked Eve to marry me and that she consented, don't you?"

"Yes, Jim," Mabel answered in some surprise; "I know."

"I had no right to ask her, and I knew it at the time. She had no right to accept me, but this

she didn't know."

"Why, Jim?"

"Because Leslie Gardiner is still alive."

She sat silent for an interval, striving to assimilate this new and unexpected idea, and he waited calmly while she pondered.

"How did you happen to learn this?" she asked presently.

"Tom told me. He met Leslie shortly before he himself was wounded. I won't go into the details of the story. You can get them from him. He suspected how things stood between Evelyn and me and told me -- through he had promised Leslie not to -- before I won her consent to our marriage."

He wondered a little that she took the startling news in such a matter-of-fact manner, but she was so overwhelmed by the possibilities the disclosure opened, that her ordinary emotions were dulled. Her woman's intuition told her that she was witnessing one of life's great tragedies and the aspect frightened her.

"Yet -- and still you went ahead and asked her?"

"And yet I asked her."

"Did you know -- was it before that evening -- the first evening you were here that he told you?"

"No. I honestly believed then that the way was clear for me to win her if I could. He told me just before I went to bed -- after I had spoken to Evelyn. But I went ahead just the same."

"I think I understand," she whispered.

"Well," he asked at length harshly; "why don't you tell me what you think of me? Why don't you call me what I am -- a cad and an ingrate, who planned in cold blood to betray the friend who trusted him and break the heart of the girl he loved? Why don't you take back the friendship you have given me and tell me that you never want to see my face again?"

"It's not so! It isn't! Oh, Jim, I'm so sorry for you -- so very, very sorry for you! My heart just aches to think of all you've suffered and this last cruel thing that's happened to you!"

She came swiftly to him and took both his hands in her own, her eyes starry with tears and her face filled with infinite pity and compassion.

"I've always believed you were a splendid man -- and now -- and now I think you're the noblest man I've ever known. You've borne more than any man was meant to bear -- life had no right to treat you so."

He crushed convulsively the hands he held in his, and fought desperately to master the emotion that threatened to overpower him.

"I don't deserve it -- I haven't any right to your sympathy -- I meant to do wrong all along -- I wanted to the worst way -- I found I couldn't! Oh, I was mad -- mad with waiting and longing for her -- I knew I'd never have the chance again."

He freed one hand from her clasp and wiped his wet forehead, and she cried quietly, her head pillowed on his shoulder.

"There's only one thing for me to do now," he went on more calmly: -- "find Leslie and bring him home. Tom will give me letters to the authorities at the front. I'll start to-night."

"Oh, Jim, you can't -- it's too much to expect of you. And your work --"

"My work will have to take care of itself for a while. This is a bigger thing than work, dear girl. It's my duty to go. I owe it to her."

"What are you going to tell her, Jim?"

"I don't know -- I'm not sure. That's why I wanted to speak to you."

"Then I wouldn't tell her anything, Jim. I can spare you that, at least. You can go without letting her know. I'll say you were called away suddenly and hadn't time to explain. Afterwards -- when I've talked it over with Tom -- perhaps it would be better to let her know the truth. You

can trust me to do my best for you. She'll forgive you -- I'm sure she will."

"It's like you, Mabs. You've always --"

"Please don't, Jim. I wish I could do more, but I can't -- no one can but yourself -- that's the cruel part of it. Oh, Jim, it's so terrible to think that your whole life has been spoiled --"

"It hasn't altogether, Mabs. First and last I've had a good deal -- more than some men -- your friendship, for one thing."

"I won't ask you to forget," she went on, taking his handkerchief to mop her eyes. "I know that's impossible. But try -- some other girl -- you're too fine a man not to find some one to love -- and who will love you."

"I'm afraid it's too late," he answered wearily; "but I'll try. I think I'd better say good-bye now. They may be looking for us. You'll want a little time to compose yourself."

"Good-bye, Jim -- and may God be good to you."

Outside the door he encountered the naval officer, who, anxious at their long absence, was coming to seek them.

"Tommy," said Jim abruptly, "I'm starting for the front this afternoon -- to find Leslie if I can, and bring him back if it's humanly possible. You'll give me letters and recommendations to the powers and all that, won't you?"

The other gave vent to a long whistle. "Of course -- gladly -- anything you want. Say, old man, what's happened?"

"Mabs'll tell you. I don't feel up to going over it again. I'll catch the Slavic for London tomorrow night. You'd better send the letters to me on board her. You know what I'll need better than I do."

"Of course. I'll start on them at once. Say, Jim, you're -- this is pretty white of you, you know. I've seen how things were going with you."

"It's no more than I ought to do. I don't need to tell you, Tommy --" He paused, frowning.

"I know. Every man may find the bottom of hell once in his life, but it takes a real man to scramble out again. I count it an honour to call you my friend." He held out his hand and Merriam grasped it gratefully. "Good-bye and good luck!"

That same evening, Mabel drove the navy Captain down to the station in the yellow roadster. He intended to obtain from headquarters at New York some letters for Merriam more potent than he himself could give, and a day was none too long for what he wished to do. The train was late and while they waited, the two paced the concrete platform in silent meditation.

"Tommy," said Mabel suddenly, when they had penetrated beyond the glare of the last electric light, "you'll marry me, won't you?"

"Great God!" exclaimed the astonished officer, and the pipe he was in the act of lighting fell from his hand and broke on the hard stone at his feet.

"Won't you?" she persisted.

"Mabs -- my darling -- it isn't true! It can't be -- a rough fellow like me --"

"It is, Tommy. I've loved you ever since that first day -- when you came with that message for Eve. I saw then what a splendid, true-hearted man you were, and the longer I've known you, the more I've seen in you to admire -- and love."

"I can't believe it!" he repeated. "You're worlds too good for me, Mabs -- and yet -- and yet, my God, how I want you!"

"And I want you, Tommy -- oh, I do -- I do! I'm not half worthy of you, Tommy, but if I was and a hundred times more, I could never love any man as I do you. Well," she added, after a short pause; "aren't you going to kiss me?"

"Good Lord!" said the officer hastily, and gathered her in his arms. As he felt the contact of her slim body, he crushed her to him and fiercely kissed the warm lips that sought his own,

and then, fearing that he might have hurt her by his roughness, he loosened his clasp with stammered words of apology. But she clung to him, half laughing, half crying.

"I'm glad," she murmured, nestling her hot cheek against his own, "that I didn't propose to you when you were as strong as you used to be." Then, as her arms tightened about his neck, "Oh, my dear, I'm so tired -- so very tired of deciding things and of all the trouble in the world. You must save me from it, dear -- and help me to forget!"

Chapter XXI - Leslie Hears His Own Name Again

"MAJOR SMITH?" said the staff officer sadly. "My dear sir, we have, on a conservative estimate, at least fifty Major Smiths with the English and American troops, besides captains and lieutenants innumerable and even a colonel or two. What's his first name -- John?"

"No," answered Merriam, laughing in spite of himself; "it's not as bad as that. I believe the full name is Benjamin Smith."

"Benjamin Smith?" repeated the officer, as though the sound of the name awakened memories. "I say, you don't mean the chap who blew up the tunnel, do you? For if you do --"

"That's just whom I mean," interrupted Jim. "Can you tell me --"

"He was promoted, you know, after Yentai. Lieutenant-Colonel now. Riley, bring me Colonel Benjamin Smith's record -- 12th corps."

The clerkly young Irish sergeant opened a long drawer in one of the lead-coloured steel filing-cases and, after a short search, drew forth a card which he placed before his superior.

"Benjamin Smith -- appointed captain of volunteers, June 3rd -- commissioned major for distinguished services, July 5th, and assigned to the 92nd infantry -- D.S.M., July 10th -- promoted to lieutenant-colonel for bravery in action, October 21st. Where's the 92nd infantry, Riley?"

"On the lines south of Liaoyang, sir," replied the sergeant, consulting his records. "The 23rd division holds the railway."

"You'd best go direct by rail. That you'll have to see the railway officer in charge of the south Manchuria section about. Riley, take this gentleman to Major Eberhard and help him arrange for his transportation -- oh, it's nothing, sir. Glad to oblige you."

Guided by the sergeant, Merriam sought the office of the railway chief and his business with that functionary satisfactorily concluded, made his way, escorted by a railway battalion lieutenant, to the huge depot. There was much orderly confusion at the station, for Harbin was the base of operations for two great armies, one fighting the Japanese in the east and the other, the Chinese in the south; but the Professor's guide pushed through the hurry and bustle with little ceremony and quickly installed his charge in a passenger coach, coupled onto the rear of a long line of trucks loaded with boxes of cartridges and shells for the big guns, where he left him with many courteous wishes for a comfortable and speedy journey.

The other occupants of the car were commissioned officers, returning to their commands upon the completion of their leave or detachment duty, and here and there faces were distinguished by the pallor which spoke of long days in the hospital. There were big, blond giants from the Scandinavian peninsula, bearded Russians, red-faced Englishmen, stolid, heavily-built Germans, and at Merriam's end of the coach, a little group of restless Americans. And the talk was all of the war and the chances of the war.

"The Japs can't hold out much longer," said a captain, who bore the letters A.S.C. on his shoulder-straps. "They've been tied up around Vladivostok for nearly a month now, and our navy's established a strict blockade off the coast. Their only way to get supplies and ammunition through is by airships and that is risky work."

"The last two attempts failed," said an officer, whose arm was adorned with the red cross band; "I had it from one of von Erlen's aides, who came into the hospital with pneumonia day before yesterday. They picked thick weather to make the run both times, but it wasn't any use. The fleet was on the lookout with fog reflectors on the searchlights and got the first one, and on the second try, the Jap commander missed his reckoning and landed ten miles down the coast."

"The sooner they give up the better," observed an infantry major. "Then Remy can shift our northern army to the, southern front and smash the Chinese in a hurry."

"Well, I won't quarrel if the end comes pretty soon," remarked a cavalryman. "I'm tired of winter campaigns. Been through two of 'em now. I'd like to get home again."

"You can thank us for most of your success," said the Army Service Corps officer. "There hasn't been a hitch in the transport and supply since the war began. The Germans showed us the value of organisation in '14, and our general staff was clever enough to follow their example. That's common sense. The best troops in the world are no good if they haven't enough ammunition, and men can't fight on empty bellies."

"Common sense is the thing," the surgeon assented. "It's common sense not to try operative work in field hospitals, even permanent ones. That's why our base hospitals can show such good records and why we can send so many men back to the front."

"You fellows make me tired," said an artilleryman, curled up next to the car window. "What wins battles, anyhow? 'Tisn't the medical staff, nor even the commissary department. It's the men on the firing-line -- the men who can shoot. Give me an army with good gunners as opposed to one without, and I'll pick the winner every time."

"Yes," retorted the infantry major, "and what happened to your good gunners on the Sungari? If it hadn't been for Hunter's brigade --"

The story was evidently well known, for the speaker was interrupted by a roar of laughter so contagious that Merriam himself was fain to join in, although he was totally ignorant of the cause.

"Never mind, Jack," the infantry officer consoled; "it takes genius to conduct a masterly retreat, even if you do have to abandon your guns. Only you mustn't forget that the Line's the thing -- always has been and always will be."

Seated near Merriam was a boyish first lieutenant, who wore on the collar of his overcoat the number 92 in bronze figures, and recollecting that that was the regiment to which his friend belonged, the Professor moved closer and produced a well-filled cigar case.

"Say," said the boy, gratefully accepting the proffered weed, "that's awfully good of you. Tobacco's something the quartermaster-general leaves out of his little list." He bit the end of the cigar eagerly and inhaled the first puffs with intense satisfaction. "Goin' to the front?"

"Yes," answered Merriam, and observing that his companion regarded his civilian garb with an air of doubt, he hastened to add, "I'm going to look up an old friend of mine, who, I think, belongs to your regiment -- Lieutenant-Colonel Smith."

"Oh, Colonel Smith!" replied the boy. "Yes, he commands us now. Colonel Hopkins came down with enteric couple of weeks ago. Smith's a good man -- a damn' good man. One of the best field officers in the division."

"You know him well, then?"

"I should say I do! He commanded my battalion at Yentai."

"Oh, yes -- he won his promotion in that battle, didn't he?"

"He certainly did, and a nery bit of work it was -- about as nery as I've ever seen." He spoke with the air of a veteran replete with the memories of twenty campaigns; but the Professor, remembering that this child had seen grown men savagely intent on killing each other; had probably killed men himself and, at all events, been for hours in imminent danger of being killed, forbore to smile; and instead humbly begged for the story his companion was plainly only too anxious to tell.

"Well," said the lieutenant, "of course, as far as the battle itself goes, my observations weren't very extensive. Line officer doesn't see much except what's right in front of him. But as I understand the situation, it was something like this. The Chinese were spread out in a big semicircle from Yentai to Pen-hsi-hu on the Taitz river and covered Liaoyang. St. John's plan was to come down from the north with six divisions and deliver a frontal attack, while six more turned the position at Pen-hsi-hu, crumpled up the Chinese right, and drove it down the Taitz

valley onto the centre and left. It was really the start of an enveloping movement, though with the force we had, we couldn't hope to do much more'n dislodge the Chinese from their position and drive 'em back on Liaoyang, where the decisive battle was to come off later on. My division was on the extreme right of the direct attack and the 92nd was in reserve.

"We didn't see much of the first day's fightin'. St. John was just feelin' along the Chinese line and it was mostly cavalry'n air scouts, with a little burst of firin' when the advanced lines of the two armies came into contact. Second day started out more lively. We could hear the guns goin' hot and heavy in front of us and once a shell dropped onto the 4th battalion next to us'n wiped out a couple of squads. What with one thing and another and the heavy work we'd had before, my battalion was down to about 800 men. We'd lost a lot of officers an' a couple of days before, I'd been made acting adjutant.

"Pretty soon rumours began to drift back from the firin'-line that things were goin' kind of bad. The Chinese were holdin' like a wall an' our boys were droppin' fast. I asked Smith what he thought about it, an' he said it looked to him as though the enemy were massin' on our right and gettin' ready to try'n outflank us. All the time the wounded were passin' through our lines in a steady stream, and what they had to say -- those who felt like sayin' anything -- was far from encouragin'. By and by, our regiment was sent in, my battalion still bein' in reserve, an' a little later -- along about two o'clock -- an aid rode up to my major, an' then the order came for us to advance. 'It's up to us,' says Smith; 'the whole front's breakin' an' we've got to hold 'em off till the reserves come up.' We started off at the double in column of squads an' as we got close to the firin'-line, we began to meet bits of broken companies that'd had all they could stand an' were headed for the rear. Some of 'em cheered when they saw us comin', and stopped an' joined us. Then our boys began to drop an' we deployed.

"The young officer paused to light his cigar, which had gone out during the recital, and Jim was conscious that his own breath was coming rapidly and that a curious excitement was making his nerves tingle.

"The Chinese had just delivered an attack an' though the lines had held, they were in bad shape an' there were some pretty big gaps. 'We're to hold the line an' give the broken battalions a chance to form again behind us,' says Smith to me, an' then he looked through his glasses across to where the enemy were gettin' ready for another assault. 'Hell,' he says, 'we'll never do it in God's world. There must be a brigade of 'em, an' they'll be round our flanks in two minutes.' Hopkins saw it, too, an' I saw one of his aids go off at a tearing gallop to General Wilson, the division commander. Then the Colonel came over to Smith. 'We can't hold 'em, Major,' he says. 'I know we can't,' says Smith. 'There's just one thing to do.' 'You'll be wiped out,' says Hopkins excitedly. 'I'll gain fifteen minutes,' says Smith coolly, 'an' the reserves'll be up by that time. It's got to be done, if I have to lose every man.' 'Mind,' says Hopkins, 'I don't order you to go -- 'specially without authority from General Wilson.' 'There isn't time for that,' says my Major, 'I'll take the responsibility.' 'God help you!' says Hopkins, an' then my Major ordered the battalion to advance."

The officers around them were all listening by this time, and a little outburst of approving nods ran about the circle.

"We started off at double time, the whole four companies in line, an' the Major an' myself an' the battalion sergeant-major in front of the centre. The Chinese were advancin' again, firm' as they came on, an' our men were goin' down by dozens. The ground was pretty uneven an' in their hurry to get at us, the Chinese formation had got a bit broken. Smith saw his chance like a flash an' signalled for a charge. I don't believe any human beings could stand up to a line of bayonets comin' as ours was. 'Tisn't in human nature -- even Oriental human nature. The Chinese broke an' ran for their lives an' we after 'em, stabbin' an' cuttin' for all we were worth. There was an old cart track in front of us that gave a little cover, an' Smith halted us

here an' commenced smashing in volleys as fast as the boys could pull trigger. But the Chinese batteries were hammerin' away at us an' the boys were droppin' -- droppin' right along. 'It'll be every man sure enough,' yells the Major in my ear. 'There isn't half the battalion left.' His cap was gone, an' the whole side of his face was bloody from a bullet graze on his cheek, an' his uniform was torn an' black with sweat. I'd had two fingers taken off my left hand,- but I didn't care 's'long's I could still shoot. The Chinese had gotten over their scare by this time, an' were massin' to come over an' clean us up. Then I looked to the rear an' there was our whole line sweepin' forward. Wilson hadn't forgotten, an' was comin' to relieve us. 'We've done enough,' says Smith. 'Let's get out of this.' So we got out -- what was left of us."

There was a short silence when the young lieutenant had ended, which was at length broken by the infantry major asking for the casualties.

"Sixty per cent, and over," returned the boy with proudly flashing eyes. "All killed or wounded -- not one missing!"

"Great God!" exclaimed Merriam; "what a sacrifice!"

They had left Harbin far behind and as the day slowly wore away, passed K'uan-ch'eng-tzu and rumbled steadily onward through the night towards T'iehling and Mukden. Occasionally they passed long trainloads of wounded, the overflow from the hospital in Liaoyang, and once they were held on a siding while a heavy troop train roared by, bound for the lines in the south. The young lieutenant nudged Merriam, who slept but little, and whispered that it was a Swedish battalion belonging to the 8th corps, and that it betokened the early capitulation of the Japanese army in Vladivostok, for the 8th corps had been on the eastern front since the opening of the campaign.

The second day dawned and still the train ran endlessly on through the level plain of Manchuria. Noon brought them to Mukden and four hours later, they reached Liaoyang, where a lengthy stop was made. The city bore ample witness to the desperate character of the recent struggle for its possession in its blackened and crumbling house-walls and riddled railway station. The place swarmed with soldiers, and here, for the first time, Merriam saw a group of Chinese prisoners, northward bound -- sullen-looking men in drab uniforms and putties the colour of yellowish sand, and fur caps against the cold weather.

After leaving Liaoyang, the train fairly crawled, and night was already coming on when it finally halted in the midst of an open plain. Merriam, cramped and stiff, roused himself with some difficulty, the young lieutenant generously giving him a hand with his baggage, and arriving rather ungracefully on the hard-packed earth of the road-bed, looked about him. His companion had mysteriously disappeared and searching vainly with his eyes among the throng for some trace of him, Jim was aware of a worried-looking officer, who surveyed his unmilitary garments suspiciously and demanded his credentials. The functionary thawed immediately, however, upon beholding the imposing signatures on the Professor's papers, and in reply to the latter's inquiries, told him that he was in luck, inasmuch as the 92nd was encamped scarcely a mile distant, it being the turn of that regiment to recuperate after the strain of five days on the fighting-line. At this point, and just as Jim was considering dubiously his probable chances of arriving at any fixed locality amid such novel surroundings and questioning in his mind the wisdom of asking the provost marshal's representative, who was still examining his pass, for a guide, the lieutenant suddenly reappeared and offered to conduct him to the quarters of Colonel Smith forthwith.

The distance proved to be more nearly two miles than one, but Merriam did not grumble, being so close to the end of his long journey, and his companion, delighted at the prospect of "seeing a little of the fun again," as he expressed it, radiated irresistible high spirits and good humour. At length, when they had tramped steadily forward for something like half an hour, the lieutenant uttered an exclamation of satisfaction and pointed to a line of shelters, half tent

and half rude hut, which, he said, marked the abiding-place of the 92nd regiment when not in the trenches. A small group of officers stood around a low fire at a little distance from them and, recognising some of his comrades in the assemblage, the Professor's companion approached and inquired as to the whereabouts of the commander.

"Colonel Smith?" said a lean Yankee, who wore the bars of a captain on his overcoat and whose voice was strangely suggestive of some peaceful New England village nestled among green-crested hills; "I left him over by the machine-gun section not five minutes ago."

"This way," said the lieutenant to Merriam. "Lord, but it's good to be back again!"

They skirted the row of hovels and presently a tall figure loomed before them through the gathering dusk. His face was turned away from them, but in spite of the disguising shroud of the big army overcoat, Jim felt instinctively that the search was ended. A flood of long-forgotten recollections rose in his mind and hysterical words trembled on his lips. His memory brushed aside the intervening months and he half believed that he would see his friend as he had formerly known him, radiant with life and hope and the splendour of vigorous manhood. But this man -- this bearded officer whose face and uniform were blackened and incrustated with dirt, whose features were worn and scarred and lined with the sadness of an overwhelming sorrow -- could this be Leslie Gardiner?

"Hello, Schuyler," said the Colonel. "Glad to see you again. You're just in time for the Haicheng party."

"I've brought a friend of yours, sir," replied the lieutenant, saluting, and he drew Merriam forward. For an instant Leslie stared as though he doubted the evidence of his eyes.

"Great heavens above!" he exclaimed suddenly; "it's Jim!"

"Les, old man," said Merriam huskily, and the Colonel straightened up sharply at the unfamiliar sound of his own name; "it's I, and -- and I've come to take you home."

Chapter XXII - Merriam Finds His Luck At Last

THEY were talking in the Colonel's quarters, a tiny apartment with low walls of mud and millet stalks roofed with canvas. The dim lantern-light threw vague shadows in the corners and was reflected dully from the brown paint on the scabbarded sword that hung, swaying slightly, from its peg near the door.

"I'm the last man to blame you, Jim," said Leslie after a long pause. "God knows, I'm the last man to blame you. You were tried beyond human endurance, and the only wonder to me is that you held out so long."

"I thought it was better to tell you the whole story," Merriam answered. "It's a relief to me to have you know, and perhaps it will help you to see your way more clearly."

"I'm glad you did," the Colonel replied; "very glad."

"You'll go back to her, Les?"

"I can't, Jim -- at least, not until this business is finished. I'm needed here, and it's a great comfort to me to know that I am." He hesitated and studied thoughtfully for a while the curling blue-grey smoke arising from the end of the cigar which his friend had given to him. "Jim," he went on at length, "suppose I hold to my resolution. Suppose I stay here in the East, as I've sworn to do. Suppose I stick to the vow I made months ago that I'd never see America again. Suppose I leave you a free field and ask you -- yes, urge you -- to go ahead. Do you think you could win her then?"

"It's not good enough, Les," answered Merriam sadly; "I think if you'd died as we all believed you had, I'd have married her on the chance that some time in the future she might have learned to care for me. I even think if I'd known you were still alive, and at the same time found that her heart held a little love for me, I'd have tried for her. After all, Les, I'm only a man --"

"I understand," said the Colonel quickly, as his friend broke off and looked at him appealingly; "it would have been only your right."

"I'd have let you know, of course," continued the Professor hurriedly, "so that the contest would have been a fair one. -- But it's not I, Les. She never thought of me as anything but an old friend and she never will. It was you from the first evening she met you. I knew it was you before you even asked her. I knew it was you that night you told me that you loved her and asked me what I thought your chances were. She wants you, Les, and needs you -- never more than now. She's been brave -- braver even than I, who knew her so well, believed that it was in her power to be -- but it's killing her. You brought love into her life, Les, and you've no right to withhold it now. Go back to her, Les, and pray God for the power to wipe out from her heart the memory of all she's suffered for your sake. Go back to her -- it's a higher duty than any that might keep you here -- you owe it to her -- you must."

In the silence that followed, their heavy breathing was plainly audible and the ring of the sentry's boots on the hard ground outside came to them like the sharp stroke of steel on steel.

"What'll you do, Jim?" asked Leslie finally. "Your life is worth something to the world. I can't let you throw it away."

"I have my work," returned the other. "That will fill my life and help me to forget. I won't let this ruin me, Les -- I promise you that. Every man's got to go forward, once he sets out, and it won't help him any -- to say nothing of the others -- if he tries to disobey the law and hold back. I don't understand why this should come to me -- what I've ever done to merit such punishment -- but I do know that I must fight it out to the finish and win, and by the living God, I will!"

He brought his clenched fist down on the little table with a force that made it bend and crack and leaning quickly forward, the Colonel gripped his friend's hand in both of his own.

"You're a real man, Jim," he said with a sudden catch in his voice. "I wish I could say as much for myself."

"I'm not the only one, Les," replied Merriam more gently. "You've known what it was to face a hard proposition -- one that took every ounce of the manhood you had in you -- too. I -- forgive me, old man, but I've hardly been myself lately -- I didn't give you credit for suffering as I can see you have. I was blind to any side of the case but hers -- and mine. Perhaps if I'd been more just to you, I wouldn't have given way so easily."

"And I -- how does the old saying run? 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' Jim, I'm beginning to think that my honour and reputation were hardly worth the price I've put upon them. Were they such tremendous matters that, because of them, I should make her suffer and you, too? I believed I was doing right, and yet -- and yet I'm afraid there was a good deal of vanity in that, after all. You're right, Jim, and Tommy was right -- I made a god of my own good name and worshipped it blindly, never heeding that you and Evelyn were part of the sacrifice I offered up for its greater glory. Heaven send us understanding! Jim, as soon as the war's over, I'm going home. And to-night I'm going to write to Evelyn and ask her forgiveness for the wrong I've done her." He stopped and knitted his brows as if pondering whether or not he should give utterance to the thought that was in his mind, but presently resumed, though with an effort. "Perhaps I shouldn't say this -- it's almost too big a thing for a man to do anything with but keep in his heart. But it's just this, Jim. You stood aside and left me free to gain her love if I could -- even gave me what help was in your power. And you did this although you wanted her yourself. Now you've come to me to take me back to her again, even though you knew my selfish obstinacy stood in the way -- even though you knew you were tearing out your heart by the roots and blotting out the last hope that remained to you. 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend.' And it's more than your life, Jim -- this that you've laid down for me."

Outside, the bitter night wind arose and roared about the corners of the hovel, and above its wailing note rang out clear and distinct the sharp challenge of the sentry at the door. "Who goes there?" "Relief!" "Halt, relief! Advance one --" And then the stamping of men and the clatter of arms and accoutrements as the guard moved on to the next post. But though the lonely sentries on the outskirts of the camp beat frozen hands together, and with stiffening lips hurled deep-throated curses at the biting cold; though the soldiers in their meagre shelters stirred uneasily and restlessly moved their fast-numbing limbs, within the Colonel's quarters the icy wind was hardly noticed, for the spirit of friendship burned clear and steady and warmed the hearts of the two men with its bright glow.

"I think I'd write to Mabs first, Les," said Merriam, breaking the long silence that followed Gardiner's last words. "She knows the whole story and can tell the news to Eve without startling her too much. I must be off again for America to-morrow morning. I left things hanging in the air at the university, and the sooner I get back, the better."

"I'd like like the devil to have you stay a while, Jim," said the Colonel. "But I guess the quicker you get out of here, the better off you'll be. This place is alive with bugs of various kinds -- impossible to keep 'em out. As you can see, we don't wash much -- even the Britishers quit trying to after the cold weather came on. Most of us haven't had our uniforms off-- though, Lord knows, there isn't much uniform about them in the ball-room sense of the word -- since along in October. We've just reverted wholesale to the animal state, Jim. In fact I've seen lots of pigs that were considerably cleaner than we are. Besides, I don't think it's the safest place in the world for a man who hasn't been hardened and inoculated for all the standard diseases in the category the way the troops have. First and last, there's a good deal of sickness knocking around among the non-combatants. And you're in excellent condition to pick up anything of the kind that might come your way. You don't look any too well right now."

"The journey tired me a good bit," replied Merriam indifferently. "It wasn't very easy travelling, after I got into the war zone. How much longer do you think it'll last, Les?"

"Hard to tell. If the rumour's true that the Japs are on the point of giving up, we'll be able to turn an additional army of over half a million men loose on the Chinese, and that ought to finish things in a hurry. I'm looking for the end of the war before spring."

"Then we'll expect you in March, or April at the latest. Well, I think I'll try for a little sleep in spite of the bugs."

"Can't offer you a bed, Jim," said the Colonel, rising. "Haven't got one for myself. Blankets are just about as scarce, and even if I could get you any, they wouldn't be fit for a human being to use."

"Oh, don't worry about me. I'll curl up on the floor just as I am."

"I can give you some millet straw and that'll at least keep you off the ground."

Merriam watched absently while his friend spread a thin layer of filthy straw in one corner of the hut and carelessly threw down another bundle in the opposite corner for himself.

"Not much glory about war nowadays, is there?"

"Glory!" exclaimed the Colonel, looking up from his task. "Hell!"

The Professor scarcely closed his eyes that night. To the discomfort of his mind and his wretched temporary abiding-place, was added a growing discomfort of body that even his extreme weariness and surroundings would hardly account for. He had been chilled to the marrow earlier in the evening, but now, in spite of the intense cold, his whole body felt hot and feverish and there was a stitch in his side that pained him severely. "Guess I'm in for a touch of grippe," he muttered to himself drowsily. "Well, it's not to be wondered at after what I've been through." As the night wore on, the fever increased and strange images presented themselves to his burning brain.

It seemed to him that Evelyn and he were on opposite sides of a broad river, black as night, which flowed swiftly between them, bearing along in its rapid course the bodies of men, some of them such as he had caught glimpses of on the fresher battlefields he had passed the day before. She was calling to him, he could see that, although the roar of the river drowned any sound that might have come to him. And while he hesitated on the bank, Leslie sprang past him, and plunging boldly in, with vigorous strokes reached the other side. Then he saw Tom Hooker's face, wearing its accustomed grin, and he heard dimly and far away the naval officer's voice saying: "Circumstances alter cases. Any man may find the bottom of hell, but it takes a real man to get out again. After all, there's no reason why you shouldn't, when you've waited so long." He felt an impelling desire to follow, but something told him that if he ever entered those dark waters, he would never emerge again. Suddenly some one came up behind him and thrust him in, and the icy waves numbed him and dragged him down-- down.

He thought that he and Leslie stood on the brink of a vast chasm, glowing white hot with leaping flames that licked upward and scorched them where they stood. And through the rifts in the flames he could see Evelyn's face, bright and glorious in the fearful glare. Then Leslie would have leaped across, but he held him back pleading with him that it was certain death to attempt that blazing barrier. But Leslie tore away from him and in an instant was safe beside her on the other side. Then he wished greatly to pass the barrier, too, but his feet seemed weighted with lead, and he fell short and was whirled down -- down into the roaring furnace.

Many times the visions changed and shifted, but the central figures always remained -- he and Leslie and Evelyn. He was conscious that his mind was wandering; conscious that the scenes were unreal, and his one desire was to gain control of his vagrant senses and conceal his illness before morning came and Leslie awoke again. At times he feared that he might have cried out in his delirium and aroused his friend, but when the confused noises in his ears subsided, he could always hear the Colonel's heavy and regular breathing as he slumbered

undisturbed.

When the grey of early morning began to show through the cracks and holes in the rough door, the cheerful notes of reveille rang through the camp and the Colonel, rolling from his couch onto the hard earth, sat up, broad awake on the instant. Merriam made haste to rub his hot eyes ostentatiously, and dragging himself to his feet by a superhuman effort, affected to yawn and enquired whether or not there was any possibility of a train leaving for the base within the next few hours.

"I'll send my orderly to find out," said Leslie; "or perhaps, on second thought, you'd better go along with him. There's no regular schedule, of course, and you might just miss a chance to get back to Harbin while he was bringing word. I'd go myself, but the regiment starts for the lines again at sunrise."

"Just the thing," replied Jim, vaguely astonished at his good luck; "get your slave and I'll be off."

"But I say, you'll stop for something in the way of breakfast, won't you? It's only army whack, of course, but it'll be some foundation to begin your trip on."

"Guess I won't wait, Les, if it's all the same to you. What you said about the trains has made me anxious to get to the rail head as soon as possible. I can pick up grub of some sort on the way, I expect, and that'll do well enough."

"Yes, I guess you can -- only be careful about the kind of native stuff you put inside of you. Wish you'd wait, but if you're in a hurry, you're doing the right thing to get off as quick as you can."

He stepped to the door and threw it open, letting in a blast of cold air that cut the Professor like a knife.

"Oh, Rogers!" An overcoated private crawled out from an adjoining hut and coming smartly to attention, saluted.

"Go with this gentleman to the railway and stay with him until he's safe on board a train for Harbin."

"Yes, sir."

Leslie turned back to Merriam. "Au revoir, old man. See you again next spring."

"Good-bye," returned Jim unsteadily. He pulled himself together and managed to stand upright without swaying, although his head was buzzing like a hornets' nest disturbed by the foot of a careless traveller, and returning the firm grip of the Colonel's hand, followed the soldier. When a turn in the path hid the low hovel and the tall figure standing by the door from sight, Merriam caught up with the orderly who was walking a few steps in advance.

"I'll take your arm, if you don't mind," he said to the man. "I haven't been very well lately, and I feel a bit dizzy."

He fought down the sickness through the long hours of the journey that followed, fought it down grimly until he could fight no more, and then lay in a semi-stupor while the train crawled slowly northward. At Harbin, the authorities found him raving in delirium, loaded him into an ambulance, and took him to the extemporized hospital used for medical cases. There, after his papers had been examined to make sure that he had the right to even the meagre consideration they could give him, he was made as comfortable as possible in a clean, white bed and one of the overworked doctors sent for.

"Pneumonia. Not much chance for him. Any friends?"

No, there were none who could be produced readily. They looked over his papers again and somewhat impressed by what they read, sent notification to Lieutenant-Colonel Smith of the 92nd infantry. But Colonel Smith and his regiment were already engaged in the six-day battle before Haicheng and so the message was held at Liaoyang, pending a lull in the hostilities. After all, the case was hopeless from the start and the over-burdened hospital staff

was too busy nursing soldiers back into renewed usefulness to waste time in a losing struggle with inevitable death. But they hastily did what they could, saw that he had an English-speaking nurse to give him what attention she could spare from the men of the fighting force, and left him to meet his end in peace.

Eight days later, a field officer fresh from the front, as was indicated by his grimy appearance and tattered uniform, strode into the trim office of the hospital chief and asked for news of James Merriam, civilian, reported dangerously ill with pneumonia. The officer interrogated, making out with considerable difficulty the two bronze diamonds on the shoulder-straps of his questioner, rose to salute respectfully and consulted a sheet which lay on the table in front of him.

"Died early this morning, sir."

The field officer's mouth tightened suddenly. "I see. Anyone with him when he -- when the end came?"

Probably the nurse on duty at the time. Would the Colonel like to speak to her?

"If you please."

The hospital chief despatched a waiting orderly for the nurse, and when he had departed on his mission, summoned another and after giving him a brief, low-toned order, sent him from the room likewise. Presently the nurse entered -- a slight, fair-haired, weary woman with a pale face illumined and glorified by service and sympathy with suffering.

Yes, she had been with him at the end, she said in answer to the Colonel's question.

"Did he say anything -- make any last request -- before he died?"

"He was conscious for a little while towards the last. I got my Bible and read to him for a few moments -- all I could spare. It happened to be the second epistle of Paul to Timothy, and when I came to the verse, 'I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith,' he made a sign to me to read it over again. Then he smiled and seemed happier and more at ease, but he lapsed into unconsciousness soon afterwards and died a little later, quietly and without pain."

The officer thanked her briefly, almost coldly it seemed, but she saw the bitter grief in his eyes and understood. While she was speaking, the second orderly returned and now the hospital chief handed a little packet to the Colonel.

"His papers, sir."

The Colonel ran through the thin bundle rapidly, came to a folded sheet on which his own name was inscribed, and looked up quickly.

"This isn't his writing, though."

"He asked me to write it for him shortly after he was brought in," said the nurse. "He was too ill to do it himself."

"I understand. Thank you -- once more." He opened the paper.

"Dear Les," he read, "they tell me here I've come to the end of my rope and have only a few days more to live. I'm selfish enough to hope that perhaps you and Evelyn and the others will be a little sorry because of my death; but it need be for your own loss only, for since death has come to me through no effort of my own, I welcome it gladly. My luck has turned at last, old man, and though the fight's been a long one, it's over now and I have my discharge. If you'll write to President Armstrong of the university, he'll take care of what little estate I leave. He knows where everything is and can handle it more easily than Mr. Thornton or Tommy. I've left everything to the college except a few little things of my mother's I'd like Eve to have. You won't mind, I know. It makes no difference to me where I'm buried. Right here will suit me as well as any other place, and I suspect it will have to be here in any case. I guess that's all except to say good-bye, old man, and God bless you."

The Colonel's face was very white and set when he had finished, but his hands were

steady as he folded up the paper again.

"I'll keep these, of course. Anything else?"

"Not unless --" The surgeon hesitated and looked at his visitor a trifle dubiously.

"Yes, I would -- if you don't mind my coming into the ward."

"That's all right, sir," said the chief soberly. "It's lucky you weren't two hours later. It would have been -- " He paused apologetically.

"I know. You can't stop for sentiment in war time."

The nurse went on ahead and the Colonel followed, holding his sword close to his side lest it should strike against something. At the entrance to the ward, she spoke to a white-coated orderly who hurried on before them, and when they arrived at the bedside, a low canvas screen shut them off from the rest of the room. The nurse silently drew back the sheet that covered the calm, still face, and then withdrew, leaving the Colonel and his friend alone. When she had gone, Leslie remained for a space, thoughtfully regarding the quiet figure before him. Then he stooped and gently touched the cold forehead with his bearded lips.

Half an hour later, he was on his way to the front again.

Chapter XXIII - The Shadow Of The Past

WITH the spring, peace came. The representatives of the allies at length agreed to the payment of the billion pounds which the nations of the West demanded as a war indemnity, and to the cession of Port Arthur, destined to be the principal eastern naval station of the Federation. There were many who voiced the opinion that the Oriental nations were getting off very easily -- perhaps too easily -- and hinted at punitive measures and the exaction of much territory. But the grey President of the Federation bought otherwise and, contrary to his usual custom, spoke his mind at length to the great delight and profit of the newspapers, which made haste to print his words on their front pages with scare-heads six inches high.

"I believe that the International Federation has decided the question of race supremacy once and for all, and now the more speedily we can forget that such a question ever existed, the better for the whole world. We have taught the nations of the Orient that in this present age, there is no place for the doctrine of race domination or race rule. Now we must begin to teach them that it is in the co-operation of the various races, not in their competition, that the progress of the world, the prosperity of the different nations, and the welfare of the individual exist. And we cannot do this, if we employ force to spread our teachings. What we win by the sword, we can hold only by the sword. If we endeavour to extend our borders by this war, we will acquire strife and endless discord for ourselves and no real benefit. I say that now it is better to lay the sword aside, and forego a fancied gain for the real one we shall obtain by inspiring those we have conquered with confidence in our justice and belief in our desire for the advancement of the human race."

Peace!

Like the clean, refreshing wind which follows the thunder-storm, the news swept through the cities and towns and villages of the Western world. It brought joy and thankfulness to the homes whose sons had gone forth and would return again. It brought thankfulness and rejoicing to the great industries which were shrivelling under the blight of war. And it brought quiet satisfaction to those few wise and far-seeing ones, now vindicated, who, in the face of hysterical idealism, in the face of confident ignorance and uninstructed sentimentalism, in the face of blindness and obstinacy and immovable prejudice, had taught the vital truth, so often revealed by history and so constantly forgotten, that no association of the human race, however inherently strong or potentially powerful, could trust in immunity from attack unless guarded by well-trained armaments and bulwarked by a ring of steel.

Flags everywhere, for already the soldiers were pouring in from the war. Worn and bronzed they were, by bitter cold and burning sun. Scarred they were, by bullet and bayonet and splinter of shell. Though their tattered rags had been replaced by bright, new uniforms, their faces still showed traces of the grime eaten in by months of trench and battlefield, and their eyes still held the haunting recollection of the frightful scenes they had looked upon. But through snow and ice, through flood and fire and terrible toil, they had cut the road to victory, and they marched with a firm and confident swing in their stride that told to the world how they had seen death and yet were not afraid to die.

They had paid the price of homage and honour in suffering and privation, in the risk freely and gladly taken of terrible death and wounds even more terrible, in unquestioning obedience to those who sent them forth to die when grim necessity demanded such a sacrifice. They deserved their reward.

But what of that sorrow-shrouded home in Boston, where Constance Coleman sits hour after hour by the bedside of her brother, who will never know the hope and joy of life again? What of the thousands of homes like it, scattered throughout the countries of the Western world? What of the many families left without support and thrown upon the charity of the state,

and the self-respecting workmen, taught by the withering of the industries for which they toiled, to accept their means of livelihood from others without giving their labour in return? These, too, have paid the price of peace and victory, but what is their reward?

On a certain morning in early May, a few days after the peace negotiations had been concluded, Lieutenant-Colonel Smith of the 92nd infantry, then quartered at Harbin awaiting its turn to board the long troop trains which were ceaselessly conveying the Army of Manchuria westward, stood in the presence of his commander, to whom he had been summoned some five minutes previously. Colonel Hopkins, ordinarily as good-natured an officer as ever cheered a mess table, wore on this occasion the air of a man possessed of a definite grievance against the world in general and ardently anxious to vent his ill-humour upon the first person or object conveniently presenting himself or itself for that purpose.

"I've just received an order from headquarters," he growled, as his subordinate came to attention and saluted, "permanently relieving you from further duty with the regiment and directing you to report to Colonel Villon in London as soon as possible. I wish to the devil they'd let me keep a good officer when once I've got him. I can't pick up a man like you anywhere in Manchuria."

For an instant the bare little room swam before Leslie's eyes, but he managed to maintain his outward composure, although he felt as though the firm earth on which he stood had suddenly crumbled away beneath him.

"I don't suppose -- there was no reason given for this order, was there, sir?"

"Oh, no -- of course not. That isn't the way they do things."

If Colonel Hopkins had been less intent upon his own wrongs, he must unquestionably have noticed the agitation of his second-in-command. But he was wholly taken up with his grievance, and Leslie's confusion passed undetected.

"I expect this transfer means additional honour and perhaps another promotion for you," continued the Colonel, though with a shade less gruffness in his voice than before, "so I oughtn't to object. But I hate like the devil to lose you, and that's a fact." He hesitated an instant, and then went on in a still more kindly tone, "I'd like to say for myself, while I have the chance -- and I'm confident that I can speak for the other officers of the 92nd -- that you've made us all like you more than a little, and we'll not only be sorry to lose a smart officer, but a good friend and comrade as well." He rose to his feet and held out his hand. "Don't forget the old regiment, Colonel. If we can ever help you any in your future career, remember that we'll be more than glad to do it."

In spite of the chaos in his mind, Leslie was touched by the words and manner of his grey-haired commander. He gratefully returned the honest pressure of the Colonel's hand and murmuring a stammered sentence of appreciation, turned away hastily and quitted the room.

Once outside of his superior's quarters, he strove to pull himself together and think connectedly. But try as he might, he could find but one solution to the riddle of this unexpected summons, and that solution filled him with the most sombre forebodings. In some manner, Colonel Villon had unearthed the true history of the Peking mission and Leslie had to acknowledge to himself that the most he could hope for was dismissal from the Service he had grown to love so well. At all events, he thought with a certain grim satisfaction, if he must stand court-martial for his long-past fault, he could at least prove to his accusers that although he had once been guilty of weakness and cowardice, he had since shown beyond all question that he did not lack courage and endurance. And in this reflection he found much comfort.

Armed with a copy of the order relieving him from duty, Leslie sought the chief of railways and prevailed upon that precise-minded functionary to arrange for his departure with a British battalion which was scheduled to leave during the early morning hours of the following day. This done, he returned to his own quarters and commenced to make ready his scanty kit. The

news of his supposed transfer spread rapidly through the regiment. When he rode out to his post on the right of the line of majors at afternoon parade, there was an outburst of cheering from the companies, still standing at ease, led by the men of his old battalion, and though the performance was one totally discountenanced by the regulations of the Service, it is worthy of note that quite an appreciable interval was permitted to elapse before the regimental adjutant trotted forward and stilled the uproar by bringing the long line to attention. Leslie's sun-blackened face was scarlet under its covering of tan, but he sat his horse like a statue, and only the nervous movement of the fingers that held the bridle betrayed his feeling to the outer world.

When the companies were dismissed, there was another demonstration. Men who had fought under him on the banks of the Sungari and followed him into the death pit at Yentai now crowded about him to wish him God-speed. They remembered the many little things he had done for them, in the trenches, on the march, amid the heat and hurry of conflict. They remembered how he had studied their needs with unwearied patience, how he had watched over them, each one individually, and taught them to feel that although he wore the distinguishing marks of an officer, he was nevertheless their friend and comrade. And they remembered, too, how in the face of danger he had always gone before to show them the way.

"There's some compensation in not being a brass-bound general," said Hopkins to his adjutant, as he watched the scene. "It's worth a good deal to be able to know the men you command and to have them know and appreciate you."

He spoke with the confidence of experience, for he had been a popular battalion commander in his day and was even now honoured with the enduring affection of as many in his regiment as had worn its uniform long enough to estimate him at his real worth. Perhaps that was one reason why the 92nd had earned the reputation of a fighting command, and why the men of the 92nd stayed by their officers when hell itself broke loose and died for them with a cheerfulness that was at once the envy and admiration of less favoured regimental chiefs.

When at length Leslie was permitted to escape from the circle of his admirers, he bore with him the realisation that for all the suffering he had endured, he had received a great reward. In his former service, he had cared little for the adulation of his fellows. If he could gain the cold, official approval of his superiors, he had felt satisfied and never troubled himself to seek the praise of even those in his own department who, while they were compelled to admit that he was an efficient officer, who did his duty well and understandingly, considered him a rather reserved and unapproachable sort of chap who preferred to go his own way and be let alone, and let him alone accordingly. But the ordeal through which he had passed had broadened his sympathies and opened his heart to those about him; and he had learned that to win the love and esteem of even the humblest enlisted man, who gave these priceless gifts only when they had been fully deserved, was distinctly worth while. And in spite of the dark time that lay before him, he found room in his heart for a prayer of thankfulness that the trial had been sent to him and made his life what it had become.

Although the period for preparation was short, his mess gave him a farewell dinner and drank his health amid shouts of approbation; and when he rose to return thanks, the uproar grew so loud and sustained that he might have recited the multiplication table in lieu of making a speech and sat down again in the full confidence and conviction that not a soul present was a whit the wiser.

"My word!" said the captain of K company, reaching for his glass to refresh a throat made dry by prolonged and extravagant use; "I wouldn't miss this for my step and the D.S.M. thrown in." And every one who heard him fully agreed.

At length when the mess servants had cleared away the remains of the feast, when the coffee had come and gone, and the thick tobacco smoke which filled the room had begun to turn stale, Leslie took formal leave of his comrades-in-arms in a voice not altogether under control. A little group of the ones to whom he had been drawn the closest through the bitter months of the war -- Colonel Hopkins, Major West, who had been his senior captain before Yentai, and two or three more -- accompanied him to the station, where the train was already awaiting the signal to depart.

"Good-bye, Ben," said the tall Major; "be sure to look us up when we get back to town."

"Give our regards to the folks at home," added Captain Harris, the adjutant of the regiment; "and tell them we're coming."

And last of all came the voice of Colonel Hopkins, "Au revoir, Colonel! We'll hope to see you again soon!"

Leslie stood on the rear platform of the last car and watched them as the train rolled slowly out into the night, and when at last the station lights blurred and ran together with the rapidly increasing distance, he squared his shoulders grimly and turned to enter the car.

"They're damned good fellows," he muttered to himself; "I wonder what they'll say when they know?"

Through the tiresome days of the lengthy journey that followed, his sorrow at leaving the warm friends he would in all probability never meet again, was swallowed up in the contemplation of his future. He wondered sometimes how she would receive him when he returned to her, disgraced and with his life empty and broken. He would ask her forgiveness very humbly for the sorrow he had caused her, and she would grant it because she loved him and because he, too, had suffered much. He would take her in his arms once more and see again the light quiver in her grey eyes and feel the touch of her soft, warm lips upon his own, and then he would go away. Somewhere in the world there was work for him to do, and if he was faithful in the performance of his task and patient, perhaps after years had passed, men would forget that he had once worn the Police uniform.

And so at last he came to London, and stood at Colonel Villon's door.

Chapter XXIV - Colonel Smith Comes Off The Army List

LONDON. The level rays of the sun, already declining into late afternoon, lighted up the western fronts of the buildings tall enough to emerge from the shadows cast by their neighbours across the street, and flashed in dazzling shafts from their multitudinous windows, until it seemed as though half the city had entered into a common conspiracy and was frantically heliographing messages to accomplices on the distant horizon line. In the streets which ran in such a direction as to permit the warm beams to flood through their entire length, there was an air of spring and of growing things thrusting upwards through the softened earth, and a hint of the long, lazy days to come. Pretty women emerged from their pupal coverings of winter furs and garments of sombre hues, and flamed forth in bright colourings, like so many gorgeous Lepidoptera, bursting from dull cocoons to flaunt gaudy wings in the sunshine. Even the more sober-minded males abandoned the overcoats to which until now they had clung, so as to be provided with a buckler in the event of the retreating forces of winter rallying for a last assault, and boldly defied the cold weather to attempt its worst.

Into the small but richly furnished office of Colonel Villon, situated in the southwest corner of the Federation buildings in Hyde Park, the warm light streamed through the triple Gothic windows, making bright the low-ceilinged interior and lingering with a friendly caress upon the kindly countenance of the stout Intelligence Chief as he sat at his broad desk. On the opposite side of the room, the lean, white-headed form of Admiral Barrows was extended in the most comfortable chair the apartment afforded, and at a little distance from him, another leather-covered chair accommodated the erect figure of General St. John.

"It is indeed kind of you, my friends," the Colonel was saying, "to come to this consultation at my request -- you, who have your time occupied with so many affairs of importance to the Federation. But it is a question of justice which made me desire to talk with you -- of justice to the Federation and to a brave man as well -- and for such a matter, it is necessary that some trouble should be taken, is it not?"

"Oh, don't stop to apologise, Colonel," said Barrows somewhat impatiently; "we know you wouldn't have asked us to come here unless it was something out of the ordinary. What is it you have on your mind now?"

"You have among your officers, my General," Villon went on, addressing himself to St. John, "a certain Colonel Benjamin Smith, who -- you will pardon me for speaking of a matter unpleasant to you -- appeared from nowhere to give you aid at a critical time in the early days of the war, and has since gained for himself much prominence by reason of his service in the Army of Manchuria. See then, it has recently come to my knowledge that this Colonel Smith is, or rather wa --"

"Captain Gardiner, of your own department," interrupted Barrows coolly. "Well?"

"Thousand devils!" cried the astonished Colonel; "you know that, my Admiral? Is it that you are a sorcerer?"

"No sorcery about it," replied the unruffled naval officer. "You remember that you sent this fellow, Smith, down to me when I was planning the Peking raid, St. John? Well, when I talked the scheme over with him, he said things that no one but an Intelligence officer had any right to say. I pressed him a bit, and he admitted that he was Captain Gardiner. I would just about have taken his word for it unsupported, in view of the special information he possessed, but in addition, his incognito had been uncovered by one of my own officers, who had known him before he disappeared."

"Sacred name of a saint!" exclaimed Villon; "and you knew all this last summer -- and told no one!"

"What was the use?" returned Barrows. "I needed the man at the time, and he was a lot

more help to the Federation where he was than he would have been hanging about London, waiting to be court-martialled. Besides, I took a liking to him right from the start, and as long as the other affair was over and done with, I was willing to give him a chance to redeem himself."

Villon looked at St. John, but the General could only gasp helplessly, and his mouth opened and shut in a manner strikingly similar to that usually displayed by a fish out of water. In fact the General was out -- totally out -- of his element, and stranded high and dry upon an arid bank of incomprehension. The Colonel was the first to speak, and he did it with a gesture of ludicrous despair.

"And this could pass under my very eyes and I know nothing of it! Eh, my friends, it is like the good God to humble our presumption, lest we grow overwise and become vain! But that is beside the point. I have learned a part of the history of this Captain Gardiner or Colonel Smith -- whichever you will -- and one may guess the rest. Eh, it is a strange story, though I, who have lived so many years and seen so much, know that in this world anything is possible. But it is necessary to talk this matter over before proceeding further -- yes, that is required. I have sent for the Captain to meet us here." His keen eye detected a rapid glance which his auditors exchanged and he added hastily, "Please to understand me, my friends. I wish the man well, but one must think of the Service."

"Of course -- the Service," agreed St. John dubiously; "but let's do the best we can for the chap."

Villon nodded comprehension and pressed a button under one corner of his desk-top, and in immediate response to the summons, the door of the office swung open and Leslie entered the room. His quick perception took in the men who would pass judgment upon him, even while he crossed the threshold, and the tense superiors.

"Please to be seated, Captain Gardiner," said the Colonel kindly; "we have much to discuss, and you know the old tradition of the Service -- 'Under the colours there are officers and men; outside there are only men.' And we are not under the colours here." Barrows nodded approvingly. With his usual tact, the generous-hearted Intelligence Chief had indicated the unofficial nature of the gathering, and his words conveyed to Leslie the assurance that he was among friends and not before a mercilessly just tribunal. Whatever the outcome might be, the harassed officer felt that the sympathies of his hearers were with him; and he had never needed sympathy more than now.

"I have already told you, my Captain," the Colonel continued, when Leslie had seated himself, "what caused me to have you recalled from the regiment you have served so well. These gentlemen know something of your history, and I, perhaps, know a little more than they; but there is a thing which no one knows but you alone, and that is the true story of the Peking mission, which you will tell to us now. When you have done this, we can better determine what course to pursue, both for your own greatest good and the greatest good of the Federation, which demands of those who serve it not less than the fullest measure of service and devotion."

They were very quiet for a time after Leslie had finished his recital. St. John pulled gravely at his heavy moustache and Admiral Barrows thoughtfully shaded his hard, lined face with his hand. Only Colonel Villon seemed unsatisfied, and plainly debated with himself whether to give utterance to what was in his mind, or remain silent. Suddenly he turned in his chair and faced the younger officer.

"You have not told us," he said slowly, "why, at that time, life had become a thing so precious to you that to purchase it, you were willing to give your honour and good name. These are treasures which most men hold are of greater value even than life itself. We, who know your courage and loyalty, find it difficult to believe that because of lack of courage, you

failed to endure even so terrible a test."

Leslie hesitated, and his face showed paler in the clear light of the fading day.

"I have told all there is to tell," he said at length, though his voice shook a little.

"No, my friend," returned Villon gently, "you have not told all, and though it is with great regret that I lay bare the secrets of your heart, it must be done to show why a brave man should unaccountably become a coward."

Barrows drew in his breath quickly and sat up in his chair, and St. John ceased tugging at his moustache to stare at the speaker with an expression of puzzled interest.

"It is in my mind," the Colonel pursued, "that at some time before he was ordered upon this so difficult and hazardous duty, Captain Gardiner had met with a woman who had become more to him than anything else in the world -- more to him even than his honour and reputation. Is not this so?" He appealed to Leslie directly, and the latter could only bow his head in silent assent.

"Now how the deuce did you learn that?" asked St. John, breaking harshly into the tense atmosphere of the little room.

"It was not I," replied Villon, becoming suddenly apologetic. "The credit is due to my daughter, who in some way known only to a woman, discovered the secret of our friend. But when she had told me, I could understand."

"I guess I can, too," said Barrows; "though Lord knows, it's a long time since -- " He stopped abruptly, as if ashamed of the confession he had not made. "But let's get down to business. What we must decide is whether we ought to pass this affair over, in consideration of Gardiner's subsequent record, or have him court-martialled and broke for cowardice. Is that it, Colonel?"

Villon did not reply to the question immediately. Instead he signed to Leslie, who hastily arose and left the room. When the door had closed behind the accused man, the Colonel turned to Barrows.

"-- For cowardice -- and treason," he said in a low voice. "Yes, my Admiral, that is what I mean."

"By Jove, Villon," exclaimed St. John; "the matter does look rather nasty, put in that light. We might get over the cowardice -- quite excusable under the circumstances and considering Gardiner's record since -- but the other -- I'm not so sure."

"Hold on a minute," said the Admiral. "Let's see just where we stand. How many know of this affair besides ourselves?"

"No one," replied Villon quickly. "All the others believe that Captain Gardiner died -- when the Major did."

"There's that officer of mine," Barrows considered, "who, I suspect, knows all that we do, if not more. But he's Gardiner's friend and can be trusted to keep his mouth shut. Yes, I think the matter rests entirely with us."

"With us -- yes," agreed the Colonel; "and it is for us to determine what is our duty -- what is best for the Federation and the Service. When that is done, we can think of what is best for our friend."

"I'll give you my opinion right away," said Barrows. "As it turned out, what Gardiner did or didn't do, while he was on the Peking mission, had no effect on the final outcome. In fact, his failure to carry out his duty was really a help to the Federation, for if he hadn't felt the necessity of redeeming himself, he wouldn't have been on hand to save St. John, and probably wouldn't have been able to help us in our raid on the Chinese government. And that wholly aside from his work with the army in southern Manchuria, which you'll admit, General, was worth something. Damn it, gentlemen, it's not fair to let a single mistake cloud a good man's whole life, if it can be helped by a little judicious forgetfulness. I'd like to know where

we'd be if our slips hadn't been overlooked, not once, but several times."

"That is my view," assented the Colonel eagerly; "but unfortunately the mistake was made at a most vital moment."

"And the outcome of the Peking mission is too well known to be hushed up without good reason," supplemented St. John, shaking his head. "Damme, Barrows, if we pass the thing over too casually, we'll bring a pretty hornets' nest about our ears."

"Well," said the naval officer, looking at Colonel Villon, "you must have some solution of the difficulty. Let's hear it."

"It is this, my friends," replied the Colonel, taking from the drawer of his desk a red-bound book, on the cover of which was inscribed "International Police Regulations"; "the section of the Code which covers the act of Captain Gardiner reads thus, 'Any officer or enlisted man in the service of the International Federation who shall voluntarily and to his own knowledge give, or otherwise disclose, to an enemy of the Federation, information which will be of advantage to that enemy and prejudicial to the welfare of the Federation, shall be guilty of treason.'" The Colonel looked up from the page. "If we can prove --"

"Prove!" exclaimed St. John; "of course we can! Lookee here," he went on, becoming more and more excited as he spoke, "'Voluntarily give information' -- can any one say that a man under torture gives information voluntarily? 'Prejudicial to the welfare of the Federation' -- as you said yourself, Barrows, it didn't make a damned bit of difference to the cause --"

"Holy blue!" cried Villon, infected with the General's excitement; "it is as he says, our good St. John! Eh, my God, our friend is cleared!"

"It's a quibble, of course," said Barrows with a grin. "Our Judge Advocate General's department didn't foresee a circumstance of exactly this kind. Well, they say the devil can quote scripture to suit his purpose, and I guess we have an equal right."

"But there must be some report on this," St. John objected. "You've got this affair on file, haven't you, Colonel? Won't do any good, you know, for us to hush the matter up and have some bally staff officer dig it out later on."

"I have on file," Villon replied, "that a question has arisen concerning the conduct of Captain Gardiner, while detached on special duty in Peking, and a recommendation that the matter be looked into more thoroughly. And that is all. I have learned by experience that in doubtful affairs, it is often of advantage not to record too much. See now, I will report as follows, 'I have personally investigated the conduct of Captain Gardiner, and find it to be perfectly satisfactory.' That is not regular, but with my name attached, it will be sufficient. You observe that no request for a court of inquiry has been made."

"So that's settled," began St. John, rising, "I--"

"Hold on, General," interrupted Barrows; "it's far from being settled, as I see it. What are we going to do about Gardiner's record as Colonel Smith? We've got to explain his sudden disappearance, and why he turned up in Manchuria under an assumed name, to begin with."

"True enough," assented St. John, sitting down again. "Got to account for Smith somehow."

"My faith," agreed Villon, scratching his ear; "that is well thought of. But how to do it?" And he regarded his fellow-conspirators rather blankly.

"See here," suggested the Admiral at length; "can't you contrive to let the impression get around that Gardiner was really acting under your orders while he was in Manchuria? It's stretching the truth, I know, but when you come right down to it, a good deal of what he did was secret service work beyond any question."

The Colonel nodded energetically and his face cleared.

"We have a designation in our department, my friends, that covers everything. It is, 'Ordered on special secret duty.' An officer so detached is answerable to me alone. He is required to submit no reports, unless I so command. 'He need give account of his actions to

no one but me. If it so appears advisable, he vanishes utterly from the knowledge of men until his service is completed. If he dies, I alone know it. No record is kept of what he does. Often, no written orders are given to him."

"I see," said Barrows. "Then you will explain Gardiner's actions by saying that the Peking business was only a part of the secret duty on which he was ordered, and though that affair leaked out, the rest he managed to keep hidden?"

"That is it, my friend. My record is then complete and satisfactory as it stands. 'Captain Gardiner, ordered on special secret duty, October 21st.' Now I will write, 'Captain Gardiner, returned from special secret duty and verbal report accepted.'"

"And no one will question it?"

"No one, my friend. Eh, there has been talk in the High Commission as to why we Intelligence officers should be superior to all others of the same rank -- why we should be better paid and more highly considered. That is the entire answer, my friend. To render the service we do, we must be the pick of the forces -- men who can be absolutely trusted to work for the good of the Federation, and given a free and unshackled hand, in the sure knowledge that our motives are the highest in all we do. It is for our consciences that we are paid as much as for our knowledge and cleverness. See, my friends, if I did not believe that in saving our good Captain from disgrace and in retaining in our army a brave and valuable officer I was best serving the Federation, no considerations of friendship or former regard would persuade me to consent to this subterfuge or withhold me from this hour signing an accusation and request for a court of inquiry."

"That's the attitude we'd all take, if they didn't insist on red-taping us hand and foot," said Barrows rather bitterly. "Well, I guess that settles the matter."

"Yes," agreed Villon. "The affair is now ended."

He pressed the button in his desk-top again, and stood up as Leslie appeared on the threshold of the doorway.

"Captain Gardiner," said the Intelligence Chief, "we have considered this matter of your conduct in Peking, and it is our belief that nothing further need be done. Neither we nor your conscience can absolve you from all blame; but we believe that your fault should be forgiven, and you may feel confident that you are worthy to serve the Federation in the future as you have been in the past."

Leslie could not speak, but he bowed his head in token of gratitude and the Colonel nodded with an air of great contentment.

"There's one thing more," suggested St. John, looking from one to the other; "His Excellency --"

"And Signor di Conti," added Barrows, staring at the Colonel; "they'll have to know the truth, whatever we may say to the rest of the world."

The Intelligence Chief smiled and took a paper from his desk.

"I consulted with his Excellency before I summoned you, my friends," he replied. "Eh, then, what would you have? It is to him that, sooner or later, all things must come. And here is the final authority which will uphold us in what we have done. You see that the judgment is left entirely in our hands." He handed the document to Barrows, who glanced over it and in turn passed it to St. John. "But his Excellency also said -- and for this reason I know that he will give his whole approval to the decision at which we have arrived -- 'Remember, when you deliberate upon this matter, that it is always better to sacrifice law to justice, and that often the truest way to be just is to be merciful.'"

Barrows looked quickly at St. John and the Colonel, understanding the nature of the glance, beamed upon them both.

"Well," observed the Admiral at length, "I guess Colonel Smith's safely dead and buried, so

let's adjourn."

He rose from his chair with an air of relief and, shaking the Colonel's hand warmly, passed out of the room, pausing on the way only to leave a brief but friendly word of congratulation with the man whose fate he had helped to decide. St. John followed the example of his superior and, when the door had closed behind them, Leslie sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

Colonel Villon remained quiet for an interval, leaning with folded arms against his desk and gazing through the brilliant window at the western sky, now splendid in the garment of crimson and orange, edged with pulsing sapphire, flung over it by the departed sun. Presently he said, without changing his position or apparently addressing himself to any one in particular, "I will have your rank of lieutenant-colonel confirmed in my own department. There are now vacancies which will make this possible. And I grant you leave of absence for two months, commencing with to-morrow. To-morrow, likewise, you will receive notification of where you will be stationed when you return to duty again."

He paused abruptly and contemplated for some minutes the bowed figure in the deep arm-chair. Then he crossed the room quickly, placed his hand for an instant upon the shaking shoulder of the younger officer, and silently quitted the apartment.

Chapter XXV - From Out Of Sorrow, Joy Is Born

THERE was a plentiful throng at the station, for the vacation season had just begun, and dozens of pretty girls in the prescribed white or blue of the seaside anxiously awaited the arrival of other pretty girls on the almost-due train, or more anxiously still, visitors of the more susceptible sex, who usually descended upon the settlement each Saturday morning, clad in gorgeous raiment and bearing propitiatory gifts of extravagant price, destined for the bright-eyed goddesses who came to meet them. There were self-conscious young matrons piloting chubby-legged offspring, and gathering in chattering groups at the most inopportune points they could possibly select, to the angry despair of railroad employees guiding baggage-trucks, and the extreme inconvenience of any one who had any real business to transact within the station building. There was a small clique of elderly gentlemen, adorned for the most part with spurs and riding-whips, who, having nothing else to do, had trotted over from cottages to watch the train come in on the slender chance of it depositing some one whom they knew, or simply as the best means of passing away the time before the bathing hour. Added to all these, a few school and college youths, garbed in the extreme of fashion or the extreme of allowable individual license in dress and haloed with pipe and cigarette smoke, the Oldest Inhabitant, answering to the title of "Captain," and the village inebriate, filled up what vacant spaces the others might have left and lent a charm and variety to the scene observable nowhere beyond the confines of the Atlantic seaboard during the summer season.

"Eve did the wise thing when she decided not to come with us," remarked Tom Hooker, interposing a breakwater of broad back between Mabel and the surging crowd. "This would have been no place for their first meeting."

The girl nodded and absently began to finger one of the buttons on his coat.

"Tommy," she said suddenly; "do you think she's really forgiven him?"

"My dear child," returned the officer in surprise; "how should I know? Can any man read the hidden heart of a woman?"

Mabel shook her head decisively. "But you must have some opinion, Tommy," she insisted.

"She has a good deal to forgive," said Hooker thoughtfully; "but -- Mabs, why do you suppose she preferred to wait for him on the beach instead of in the house, or some other place?"

Mabel lifted her head quickly, and for a long minute they looked into each other's eyes.

"Tommy," she said softly and with something of awe in her golden voice; "I wonder if there's anything that love can't forgive?"

He did not reply directly, but the swift pressure of his fingers upon her furtively-captured little hand left no doubt as to his view of the question; and Mabel smiled contentedly, and turned with him to watch for the first signs of the expected train.

It flashed into view at last, heralded by its penetrating though not unmusical whistle, and came to a halt beside the platform with much grinding of tight-clamped brakes and an all-pervading odour of heated metal, and the crowd swept forward in a body, as though it intended to carry the long line of coaches by storm.

"There he is!" cried Mabel, dancing up and down in her excitement. He had caught the flutter of her handkerchief and pushing his way rapidly through the throng, appeared before them smiling delightedly. She flew to him and kissed him frankly and openly, with an utter disregard for the surprised glances of the bystanders, and then stood aside to make room for her lover. The two men clasped hands and remained silent for a moment, and with the quick intuition of womankind, the girl perceived that she was in the presence of something unknown to her -- something sacred and holy that was engendered only by the friendship of man for man.

"Where's Eve?" asked Leslie, his voice breaking the brief tension of the meeting. "Didn't she come with you?"

Mabel glanced at the streams of people eddying about them and wrinkled her little nose expressively, and Leslie understood.

"She was right," he said.

"Well," observed Captain Tommy Hooker, "I don't imagine you particularly want to prolong the anticipation, so let's get started. By the way," he added, surveying the spotless new uniform which covered the Colonel's tall frame, "is all this grandeur solely to impress us, or had you some ulterior motive in thus arraying yourself?"

Leslie laughed and made haste to explain, "I had to make a formal call on Kepplemann before I came away from New York, and it left me just barely time enough to catch the train. And as I was in something of a hurry to get here, I thought I wouldn't wait over to shift into decent clothes."

"I should think not," replied Mabel, ascending to her place in the waiting automobile; "anyway, you're lots better-looking in your uniform." And she glanced up in some surprise as her lover grinned broadly and Leslie laughed again.

"I don't see anything so funny in that remark," she observed with considerable dignity. "You'll have to sit on the floor, Tommy. The Army must have the place of honour."

"Perfectly natural thing to say, my dear," said Hooker, good-naturedly taking the place assigned to him. "And therein the humour lies, eh, Les? Any baggage?"

"Trunk," answered Leslie briefly. "I'm going to impose myself on you for a whole week, Mabs."

"Better make it two," replied the young woman, expertly avoiding a baker's cart whose single horse-power dozed contentedly in the middle of the road while his master sought refreshment; "we'll send over for your belongings this afternoon."

"You got my letter about Jim?" asked the Colonel, looking at Hooker. The naval officer nodded.

"It's the only blot on our perfect happiness," he returned, meeting Mabel's sympathetic eyes. "It's -- it's too cruel -- after all he'd been through."

"Oh, but it was better so," said the girl earnestly. "He would never have been happy --" She stopped abruptly and concentrated her gaze on the white highway in front of them.

"I suppose it was," assented the Colonel gravely. "It was the kindest thing fate could do for him -- but -- great heavens, Tommy, what wouldn't that man have been, if--"

"God only knows," said Hooker soberly; "he was a true hero, and it's sometimes seemed to me that the hardest thing about the whole business is that so few will ever know and appreciate what he really was. Just we four will be all -- you and I and Eve and Mabs."

"But we'll never forget," said Mabel; "will we, Tommy?"

"I guess not," he returned. "And -- well, I've always been pretty much of a heathen, but I believe he's found his reward."

"I know he has," she corrected in a low voice. They were silent for a short space, while the glaring highroad swept swiftly backwards under the flying wheels of the yellow car; but presently the sailor, who could not bear to behold the joyous face of the woman he loved clouded by even the shadow of a sorrow, changed the subject by asking Leslie if the authorities had as yet assigned him to any particular place or duty.

"Why, yes -- they have, and it's a fairly good one at that," answered the Colonel; "I've been made chief intelligence officer of the United States Atlantic Coast District under Kepplemann. You know the district's been enlarged to include Canada, so that means I'll practically have charge of all the eastern half of the continent."

"Fairly good!" snorted the navy man; "and what might your idea of a real good job be, now?"

Do you realise, my son, that you've about three times as important a post to handle as I have? And I outrank you, too! It's enough to make a man give up the Service entirely and go into the army!"

"Mustn't be jealous, Tommy," said Leslie, laughing. "Before I've been at it a month, I'll probably wish I was back in the Line again. But what have they done for you?"

"Oh, I'm satisfied. First of September I'm to be commandant of the New York airship station."

"And we've picked out the dearest little house on Staten Island," broke in Mabel. "I can hardly wait to begin housekeeping. And there's another in the same street that you and Eve can have. You'll take it, won't you Les? I know you wouldn't be so cruel as to separate a pair of loving sisters, would you? I believe we'd just pine away and die if we couldn't see each other at least once a day."

"Then of course I have no alternative," Leslie reassured her. "Luckily headquarters work doesn't keep one tied to barracks. By the way, when do you two intend to get married?"

"Soon as you and Eve are ready," replied Hooker, taking the answer upon himself. "I wanted to have it done last December, but Mabs absolutely refused to submit to the ordeal until she and Eve could go through it together."

"So you see it behooves you to hasten matters," added the girl. "Eve's already started her trousseau and I'll help her with the rest. And you've really been engaged a good while --"

They turned up the driveway to the cottage and Mabel slowed the car and stopped at the stone steps leading up to the front veranda.

"You'll find her down on the beach. I imagine you know the way. Get out, Tommy."

The naval officer obligingly extricated himself from his cramped position, and the three paused for a moment on the lowest step.

"Isn't it almost worth it?" Mabel asked softly, slipping into the encircling clasp of her lover's arm and looking up half-shyly at the Colonel from under her long lashes.

"I think it is," Leslie answered slowly. "Do you know, I believe that I'm glad, now that it's all over, that I had to go through with it. It was pretty bad for a while, but it made a man of me."

She looked searchingly into his face for a moment and then dropped her eyes again.

"I think you found yourself out there, Leslie," she said; "and -- I know you'll forgive me for saying this -- I'm a great deal happier that you didn't marry my sister before you met the trial." She held out her hand to him. "From out of sorrow comes joy, and in fuller measure for the sorrow that went before."

He waited while they slowly ascended the steps, the girl's dark head resting against her lover's shoulder, and then turned and walked thoughtfully towards the beach. The sky arched blue and brilliant above his head and the bright sunshine, undimmed by a single fleeting cloud, poured hotly down upon him. The sea was bluer than the sky, and the flashing white-caps, born of the clean salt wind, foamed and tumbled on its roughened surface.

She was standing, facing the waves that curled and broke upon the shore and sent long tongues of water shooting up the sand nearly to her feet. The strong breeze whipped the loosened strands of her dark hair and moulded her white dress to the curves of her slim figure, and she shaded her eyes from the glare of sand and sky as she gazed seaward.

For a moment he hesitated, half afraid to break the spell that held her.

Then she turned and saw him.

The End

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"If the riches of the Indies, or the crowns of all the kingdom of Europe, were laid at my feet in exchange for my love of reading, I would spurn them all."

Francois de Fenelon