NCW

Dodd

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CAPTAIN GARDINER

OF THE

INTERNATIONAL POLICE

BY

ROBERT ALLEN

LC

NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY,
1916

Go

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

PUBLIC LIBRARY
924998

COPYRIGHT, 1916
BY DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY, INC.

PROPERTY
OF THE
NEW YORK
SOCIETY LIBRARY

Digitized by Google
Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	MRS. THORNTON GIVES A DANCE . .	1
II	THE MEN WHO RULE THE WORLD .	13
III	MERRIAM MEETS ALL THE POWERS OF DARKNESS	27
IV	LESLIE SETS OUT UPON A MISSION .	39
V	LESLIE LEARNS MORE ABOUT HIS MISSION	53
VI	MAJOR WILKIE DISPOSES OF A THRONE	70
VII	"FOR THE GREATEST GOOD OF ALL MANKIND"	85
VIII	LIEUTENANT HOOKER KEEPS HIS PROMISE	98
IX	AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR . . .	118
X	HEADQUARTERS IN MANCHURIA . .	134
XI	ONE AGAINST AN ARMY	151
XII	LIEUTENANT HOOKER MEETS AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE	163
XIII	THE MASK IS LIFTED	177
XIV	THE HORSE MARINES	196
XV	THE LAST OF THE *Ariadne* . . .	211
XVI	PEKING	225
XVII	LESLIE SETTLES ONE ACCOUNT . .	239

Digitized by Google

Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CHAPTER		PAGE
XVIII	TABLE TALK	254
XIX	THE TANGLED WEB OF CIRCUMSTANCE	270
XX	MERRIAM CONSIDERS THE ROLE OF VILLAIN	283
XXI	LESLIE HEARS HIS OWN NAME AGAIN .	305
XXII	MERRIAM FINDS HIS LUCK AT LAST .	318
XXIII	THE SHADOW OF THE PAST . . .	333
XXIV	COLONEL SMITH COMES OFF THE ARMY LIST	343
XXV	FROM OUT OF SORROW JOY IS BORN .	358

Digitized by Google

Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Two things greater than all things are,
The first is Love, and the second War.
—Kipling, The Ballad of the King's Jest

Digitized by Google
Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CAPTAIN GARDINER
OF THE
INTERNATIONAL POLICE

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 common-place 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—"

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

A startled little cry from the girl interrupted this unexpected flow of philosophy, and turning hastily to confront the speaker, "Jimmy Merriam!" she cried. "If it isn't just like you to hide away in the dark and scare a body half to death! Why have you deserted me all evening, when you knew—"

She paused suddenly, perceiving that the companion chair to the one occupied by the victim of her tirade also held a male being, whose face and figure, seen dimly in the half light of the veranda, gave no suggestion of one with whom she was familiar. The person addressed as Jimmy Merriam chuckled inaudibly at her temporary discomfiture and, hoisting himself from the chair in which he had been sprawling almost at full length, bowed with exaggerated ceremony.

"Miss Thornton,"—with a sweep of the hand,—"Captain Leslie Gardiner, of the International Police. It gives me great pleasure to make two of my oldest friends known to each other."

The girl extended a slim hand swiftly. "Is it *the* Captain Gardiner that Jimmy is always talking about?" she said with real interest and pleasure in her tone. "Then I am indeed fortunate to have chanced upon this auspicious occasion. Jimmy, you villain, why did you keep such a distinguished guest concealed all this while, when you must have known that I was being bored to death by that horrible herd inside?" She made a comical grimace at the recollection and the Captain laughed sympathetically as he returned the firm pressure of her fingers. Merriam grinned.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"I brought Les out here," he answered, "because I hadn't seen him for nearly six months and I knew that if he once got a glimpse of you, I wouldn't have any chance to talk to him myself."

"Awfully obliged to you for the pretty compliment, Jimmy dear," she returned. "And now that you've said your little say, please run along like a good boy and let me have your chair so that I can find out whether or not Captain Gardiner can tell me anything about you I don't know already. Besides, Mabs has been asking for you for the last half hour."

"Of all base ingratitude!" exclaimed Merriam in righteous indignation, turning towards the door. "Who brought Gardiner here in the first place, I'd like to know? There's a splendid warning for you, Les. Don't put any faith in her seeming favour. Where'd you say Mabs was?" he added as he disappeared behind the curtains.

"In the blue room!" Evelyn called after him, as she settled herself into the chair he had vacated and proceeded to make herself comfortable with subdued rustlings of her silken garments.

"Jim is such a comfort to me," she confided to her companion. "He's always—well, always the same, you know—" She broke off suddenly. "You're laughing at me," she said accusingly.

"Not at all," the Captain protested. "Only I wondered how, by any stretch of the imagination, a person who'd known Jim Merriam for any length of time could say he was 'always the same.'"

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 pres-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

ent 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.

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"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."

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"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,

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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,

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 it 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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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,

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 gentlemen," 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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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?"

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 carven 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 arm-chair 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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 Commis-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

sioner 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.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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-cochère 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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 for-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

tune. "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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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,

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

you'll observe it's not one of *my* failings. But then it's never been my good luck to have the rôle 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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 and 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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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."

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"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

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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."

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 before-hand. 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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"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 oue—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 re-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

assuringly. "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.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 fire-

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

place. 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,

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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,

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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,

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 north-east 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."

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 unterrified 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.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 be-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

fore 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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Yehonala, the daugher 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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 com-

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

panion 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.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 nickle-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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 good-bye!"

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

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 him-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

self 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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 unpitying 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

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 repeat-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

ing 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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"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."

924998

Digitized by Google

Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"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,

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 *bête 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 lady-love into hysterics. At the door he stopped in some

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 mis-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

sion 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.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"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 wirelessed headquarters 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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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."

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 advénture, 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 HNO_8—" "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 impres-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

sion 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 grown-up 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*

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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.

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"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."

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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 al-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY